

Disorientations: Experimental Form in Asian American Literature

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
English in the Graduate School  
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ABSTRACT

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## Abstract

*Disorientations: Experimental Form in Asian American Literature* explores the relationship between unconventional, experimental, avant-garde, or broadly nonrealist aesthetic form in the major works of three seminal writers of Asian American literature — Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (1946) and “The Story of a Letter” (1946), Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* (1982) — and the role that these works played in the foundation and development of an Asian American literary canon and Asian American studies in general. Focusing on how the aesthetic maneuvers and formal conventions of these works are not only shaped and informed by, but directly shape and inform, their political and social commitments, this dissertation traces how these works in turn shaped and informed the trajectory of the Asian American literary and critical traditions which established themselves by mobilizing them. This dissertation argues that these works seek to create languages for diasporic Asian experiences that were previously unavailable and were interdicted by the political and social conditions and historical violences of European and American imperialism and white supremacist racism which informed and made possible those same diasporic experiences by warping recognizable literary conventions and genres, often realist and/or autobiographical; and in doing so both created a new register which not only

registered those histories of violence, but would also provide crucial material through whose deployment Asian American studies and literature would consolidate themselves and their core political commitments and critical vocabulary.

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## Introduction

*Disorientations* focuses on literary and aesthetic form, reading canonical works by major writers that were foundational to both Asian American literature and the discipline of Asian American studies: Carlos Bulosan's novel *America Is in the Heart* (1946) and his short story "The Story of a Letter" (1946), Maxine Hong Kingston's hybrid memoir-becoming-novel *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's genre-defying multimodal work *Dictée* (1982). These works show the violence of *conformity* in multiple senses — that is, the violence of conformity to formal conventions of aesthetics and genre, as well as the violence of conformity to sociopolitical forces of power: to imperialism, colonialism, and cultural assimilation; and in doing so, they show how the different manifestations of violence in these scenes of conformity are indelibly linked.

*Conformity* to the expectations of genre is, implicitly or explicitly, also conformity to the various attendant social and political commitments and assumptions that come with the formal conventions that make up a given genre. These works register the injunction to tell a story that conforms to a certain set of formal conventions, for various purposes: for Bulosan and the protagonists of his stories, it is telling a story that conveys and instills in the reader an anti-imperialist political message; for Kingston and the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, it is complying with the expectations both Chinese and Americans have for Chinese/American women — *and* the violence done by that

injunction; for Cha and the narrator of *Dictée*, it is conforming to the cultural, social, and political imperatives that come with acquiring and wielding a given language. These works tell their stories by *deforming* moments where the story is supposed to conform to what a story “should look like” — and in doing so, they reveal the underlying assumptions and agendas that belie those expectations. They seek to tell stories for which there is no available or given language, and try to tell their stories with a language that is also the interdiction of that same story’s telling, warping and deforming the language in order to show the interdiction and to create a new language. In other words, they register the violence of conformity by deforming the same register they use; and by deforming it, they also create a new register. They register the violence of conformity in their deformity, and in doing so, their deformations create another register — and that other register is the deformities. These texts, in other words, tell the story of their own silencing and the conditions of their own telling.

The three chapters of *Disorientations* follow something like a structure of feeling (à la Raymond Williams) of Asian American literature and Asian American studies: from the pre-emergent in Carlos Bulosan, to where the pre-emergent ruptures into the emergent in Maxine Hong Kingston, to the emergent in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. This dissertation focuses on the work of two major figures in Asian American literature who were instrumental to its canonization, Carlos Bulosan and Maxine Hong Kingston, both of whose work was published before the Asian American movements of the sixties and

seventies and the formation of Asian American studies and canonization of Asian American literature in subsequent decades. I consider how they were canonized--often based on a sociological framework of reading, which deployed social realist models of literary analysis and sociological readings--in order to demonstrate how the politics of canonization influenced the readings of these works. I then turn to a writer who came after the Asian American movement of the sixties and the consolidation of Asian American literature and Asian American studies in the seventies and subsequent decades, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose work deploys experimental and avant-garde forms and styles. I chronicle how the induction of Cha into an Asian American literary canon both registered and fostered an expanding canon and, with it, changing politics of the academic landscape.

The trajectory of this dissertation shows how Asian American studies was born out of the politics of the 1960s, with strongly politicized motivations and goals, such as identity formation and consciousness raising, literary canon building, and discipline legitimizing and institutionalization. Consequently, the early literary criticism focused on sociological and anthropological aspects of an Asian American literature based on the racial identity of the authors and, as a result, privileged realism in its literary canon rather than aesthetic and formal concerns. This privileging influenced not only the choice of literary works that received critical attention and tended to be included on course syllabi, but also, as in the case of Bulosan and Kingston, how those works would

be read. Once the field was established, however, it was possible to turn the focus to more aesthetic and formal concerns and, in the process, to complicate the definition of “Asian American.” That turn was accompanied by the introduction of more obviously avant-garde works into the literary canon, with Cha’s *Dictée* in particular marking the expanding canon.

Each of the works I consider was formative in the development of Asian American studies. Carlos Bulosan reemerged from decades of obscurity and became canonical in Asian American studies in the seventies and eighties, through the efforts of E. San Juan, Jr., whose early work was critical to the establishment and institutionalization of the field. San Juan’s work on Bulosan set the tone not just for Bulosan criticism, but for Asian Americanist literary criticism and Asian American studies in general. Following San Juan’s reading of Bulosan, critical work on the early twentieth-century Filipino author focused on the explicitly politicized aspects in his work, especially on the aspects of his writing that stage critiques of United States imperialism and white supremacy and are thus implicitly anti-assimilationist. Ironically, the political focus San Juan and other early critics in the field favored led to readings that often departed from San Juan’s specific analysis of Bulosan’s politics, which, he argued, were distinctly anti-imperialist. Many critics dismissed Bulosan on the grounds that his critiques of American imperialism and American exceptionalism were halfhearted or ambivalent at best and that he was an apologist for imperialism who

ultimately sought to be part of the same American body politic and society whose racist and imperialist violence he also gruesomely depicted. In any case, regardless of the specific readings of Bulosan, the political criteria for judgment of these works would define not only Bulosan criticism, but set the tenor for early Asian American studies as a field whose ethical commitments deemphasized political ambivalence and ethical confoundment in favor of straightforward “resistance” narratives and overt politicization.

If San Juan’s explicitly politicized scholarship on Bulosan in Asian American studies’ proto-formative years put a premium on political resistance in the field, then the work of the subsequent founders of Asian American studies, such as Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong and Elaine H. Kim, on Maxine Hong Kingston would continue this work by emphasizing the realist and more formally conventional aspects of her writing over its non-realist and experimental ones. Kingston’s fellow writer Frank Chin’s infamous criticism, in the first anthology of Asian American writing, *Aiiieeee!*, that Kingston was a “fake” Asian American writer whose work pandered to racist stereotypes of Asian exoticism and effeminacy would solidify Kingston and *The Woman Warrior*’s place in Asian American studies as an index for debates on cultural authenticity and representation and identity politics that would go on to dominate early conversations in the field. Cha’s *Dictée* would play a pivotal role, in the early 1990s, in shifting critical conversations away from the focus on identity politics that the criticism on Bulosan and

Kingston established. The same critics who started those critical conversations with sociological readings of works like *The Woman Warrior*, notably including Elaine Kim, whose 1984 book, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction fo the Writings and Their Social Context*, was a bellwether of the early sociological focus of the field, turned to explicitly experimental works like *Dictée*, which required focused attention on aesthetics and literary form.

I work backwards from this later focus in my readings of the works featured in this dissertation. By attending to the aesthetics and form of Bulosan's and Kingston's most canonized works, *America Is in the Heart* and *Woman Warrior* respectively, I show how the focus of the early years of the field led to readings that ignored important aspects of both works. While those readings are not uncontested, they nonetheless left a strong legacy that continues to inflect critical readings of them. The first chapter reads *America Is in the Heart* against one of Bulosan's lesser known works, his short story "The Story of a Letter." Critical debates on Bulosan have focused overwhelmingly on *America Is in the Heart* to the neglect of his other writings and, as I have noted, on politics over aesthetic concerns. . In reading the novel alongside "Story of a Letter," however, I offer a reading of the novel that shows how an attention to aesthetics can, in fact, lead to a different reading of his politics as well.

This chapter argues that the practice of reading Bulosan's writings as though they were straightforward nonfiction or sociological data, or through the literary

framework of social realism, were part and parcel of Bulosan's canonization and the institutionalization of Asian American studies. The key characteristics of social realism — political didacticism (the delivery of an unambiguous lesson, or a political position, to be learned); the journalistic style of prose and the aim of "revealing" or exposing the downtrodden conditions of a specific group or groups of people for a specific political purpose (e.g. for the purposes of promoting laborer's rights, as Bulosan did in his lifetime); the assumption of an audience that can understand, be able to decode, and thus be receptive to the message and attendant political imperatives (in Bulosan's case, progressivist pro-labor politics); and the cultivation of an audience that will have taken up the politics espoused by a social realist text after being made aware of them — were especially helpful to the scholars of early, or perhaps more accurately proto-, Asian American studies. The explicit and directed politicization and the identification and targeting of certain audiences, i.e. "Asian Americans," was well suited to and informed early Asian American studies' explicitly politicized orientation as an antiracist, anti-imperialist, and explicitly politicized literary and academic formation. Moreover, reading Bulosan's writing through the framework of social realism was not merely historically accurate (since Bulosan did write in the aftermath of American progressivism's heyday in the twenties and thirties and during American social realism's peak in the forties), but also prescient and has remained so up until very recently in Asian American studies because social realism's defining characteristics of



political didacticism and the identification of receptive audiences and of specific politics that said audience would internalize served a burgeoning Asian American studies' practical need to define a legible and intelligible "Asian American" "subject," "identity," or "position" to coalesce around. That is, critical approaches to Bulosan's writing not only focused on his social realism, but also enacted the principles of social realism in their reading practices.

This chapter takes the existing body of criticism on Bulosan, and the oft-observed tension between his progressive labor-focused politics and what seemed to be his apologism for American imperialism in *America Is in the Heart*, and asks two central questions: 1) what does the "identity," social, political, or otherwise, that is assigned to Bulosan and to his protagonists, which were crafted directly from Bulosan's life experiences, have to do with *how* he is read and received critically and how his writing has been mobilized as a canonical object in Asian American studies? what does it mean and what politics are produced or effected if we identify Bulosan as "Filipino?" "Filipino American?" "Asian American?" or none of the above?; and 2) *what* might the form of his writings transit or convey about those politics? What happens when we pay attention not only to the social realist aspects of Bulosan's writing, and pay attention to the non-realist or even formally "experimental" aspects of his writing?

This chapter "answers" these questions by arguing that the debates in Asian American studies on the status of his politics, i.e. whether they are properly

anti-imperialist or apologetic of imperialism, and the difficulties of assigning an “Asian American” identity or positionality to him and his protagonists, are not failings of his work nor are they unanswered questions that can be “solved,” but are rather built into and engaged in his work through breakdowns of and lapses in social realist form and liminal breakthroughs of the non-realist, the irrational, and the fantastical. This chapter also situates Bulosan within not only the American progressive movements and the social realist literary tradition, but also apposite or adjacent to, or alongside, the concurrent surrealist, avant-garde, and literary “postmodernist” movements which were also nascent during his lifetime. However, this chapter does not seek to argue that Bulosan’s work was not social realist nor does it attempt to prove that he properly belong to the surrealist movement or any other literary avant-garde traditions, but rather points toward lapses of social realist form in his writing which bear similarities to the broad umbrella of “non-realist” literary forms that were also contemporary to Bulosan. These qualities include: the sudden and implausible or simply illogical plot elements that move the story forward when it is at an impasse; the highly implausible and uncharacteristically ambiguous and unresolved *deus ex machina* ending which undercuts the political lesson that is espoused by and should ostensibly be gleaned from the text; and the breakdown of familiar scenes and readily intelligible tropes, such as the education of the savage colonial subject or the worker’s coming into consciousness, into bizarre and incoherence. While critics of Bulosan have historically regarded these

qualities in his writing as stylistic anomalies or bad writing, or simply do not address them at all, this chapter reads their occurrences in both *America Is in the Heart* and “Story of a Letter,” and compares analogous scenes in which the two pieces differ, as lapses of form that convey valuable information about Bulosan’s own politics and ethics as well as the politics and ethics extracted from/through him. If the social realist techniques principles and techniques in Bulosan’s writing, and in criticism of that writing, tend towards explicit politicization through the assumption or assignation of certain identities or sociopolitical positions, including “Asian” or “Asian American,” then the non-realist or para-surrealist moments in Bulosan’s writing not only predict the scholarship on and its contestations over it, but also might provide a critique of the explicit politics and their politicized identitarian formations.

With the second chapter, I moves from the prehistory of Asian American studies and literature into the thick of their nascence with a text on the threshold: Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. I focus on the mobilization of non-realist forms and technique in the liminal space between Asian American prehistory and Asian American post-formation: post-sixties decolonization movements, post-Civil Rights movement, and post-Immigration Act. I show how the early criticism of *The Woman Warrior* read this work as a literal autobiography or memoir or even as an ethnography or ethnoautobiography, similar to Jade Snow Wong’s 1950 memoir, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, which... [characterize it.]. By contrast to these critical works, I show how Kingston

invokes familiar and recognizable forms and tropes that tend toward realist and nonfictive styles, including the memoir, and warps them so that they lose their defining qualities and devolve into incoherence, defamiliarizing them and pointing to the ways they, and their effects, become familiar. I show how the novel proceeds through a series of chapters loosely connected to each other through the repetition of certain stories and plot elements, and to references to the Chinese American narrator and the narrator's Chinese immigrant mother. These chapters share the same basic structure and each are based around a stock plot or well-established trope and form, which become increasingly unfamiliar as they unfold: the first chapter, "No Name Woman," begins with what seems to be the prehistory or the prologue to the narrator's memoir, through the trope of family inheritance or family history. However, where the family inheritance of the memoir is often positive and usually one that the protagonist or narrator can act upon, the "inheritance" that mother of *The Woman Warrior's* narrator gives her is almost a disinheritance: the story of her unnamed aunt on her father's side whose existence no one acknowledges, which the narrator's mother has sworn her not to tell. The fourth chapter, "At the Western Palace," follows the narrator's aunt the and Brave Orchid's sister, Moon Orchid, who moves to the United States from Hong Kong in order to reclaim her husband who had left her when he immigrated to the US long ago. Like the previous chapters, "At the Western Palace" mimes the structure of a familiar trope or genre — in this case the reuniting of the immigrant family — only to devolve its own

defining formal qualities. Moon Orchid fails to reclaim her husband, who has remarried and who brusquely dismisses her, and is institutionalized when she goes insane, recalling the tragic fates of the women from previous chapters. The fifth and final chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, which occupies the final half of the novel, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," finally delivers the memoir promised in the title of the novel and tells the narrator's own life story from her perspective. As a "growing up" story of the ethnic America, or as an ethnic *bildung*, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" could almost be read as a twist on the Asian American mother/daughter story in the vein of Pearl Buck and Amy Tan. But where these canonical examples of the aforementioned genres and narratives end with some resolution, be it the acceptance of one's ethnic identity or integration into a sense of Americanness, or the bridging and reparation of the relationship between immigrant mother and Asian American daughter which was broken by the vicissitudes of immigration and cultural and generational differences, the novel's final chapter and the narrator's "memoir" ends with nothing resolved or accomplished. Instead, the novel reaches its climax when the narrator argues with her mother about all the things she believes her mother wants her to do (including becoming a slave or a wife) and the narrator's mother throws not just the final chapter but the entire novel itself on its head into semiotic crisis when she answers that "[Chinese] like to say the opposite." *The Woman Warrior* then ends with an enigmatic Chinese folktale

about a captive woman whose sad songs translate well to her barbarian captors' instruments.

Again, the argument is not that the critical tradition on *The Woman Warrior* is "wrong" or that its approaches are inaccurate or missing something about the work — in fact, I argue that like Bulosan qua his critics, who were initially focused on his work as sociological and political objects and on the social realist aspects of his writings and biography; the trajectory of the critical tradition on Maxine Hong Kingston might even be seen as a logical consequence of her work. It bears repeating that this dissertation is not an "intervention" in the sense of a "correction," a "debunking," or in any way an attempt to fix or solve "problems" in the Asian American literary or critical traditions. This project does not seek to or "expose" any ostensibly "hidden" agenda or beliefs. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's distinction between paranoid and reparative reading, I seek to read the critical tradition against the work in order to see what the work, specifically the work's *form*, makes possible and which critical conversations and questions it opens up.

*The Woman Warrior*, then, is at the limit; unlike Bulosan, who could not have known what a "Filipino American" or an "Asian American" was, or even what a "Filipino" was in the sense that we would understand it today (i.e. as an independent postcolonial nation-state with a significant diaspora), despite these rubrics being assigned to him; Maxine Hong Kingston could have. In fact, Kingston wrote in the

aftermath of the Asian American movement and the general Civil Rights movement, the decolonization movements in Asia and Africa, and the Immigration Act and *de jure* repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act — political and social vicissitudes which would have made a “Chinese American” person like Kingston possible, and which receive passing mentions in *The Woman Warrior*. In that light, *The Woman Warrior* was prophetic: not only would it inspire scholars who turned to it as an example of Asian American literature, as an account of a, or *the*, Asian American experience, and become one of the most iconic entries into the resultant literary canon; it would also inspire later scholarship that turned away from earlier sociological approaches and toward formal and non-realist aspects of the novel. This chapter briefly examines the trajectory of Asian Americanists such as Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong and Elaine Kim, whose earlier scholarship tended towards what is now considered “identity politics” and literary approaches that emphasized realism and sociological aspects of Kingston’s work and later turned towards less mainstream Asian American writers, including non-realist and avant-garde writers; and argues that this trajectory is a logical consequence, and condition and effect of *The Woman Warrior*’s formal techniques: its invocation and parody of literary styles like the memoir and the *bildung*; its deployment of overdetermined ethnicized and orientalist figures and tropes like Chinese myths, legends, and superstitions which also lose their identifiably ethnic qualities through warping, parataxis, and assemblage.

The third chapter moves to the explicitly or legibly avant-garde by reading Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*. *Dictée* follows its enigmatic narrator and several other women like the narrator's mother and grandmother across nine chapters, each named after one of the Greek muses. The novel assembles a mélange of different modes of writing and imagery, in which the concepts of "Asian" and "American" are put forth and cut, fragmented, warped and assembled in ways that both render them absurd and point to the process by which they become legible, intelligible, and then ossified and naturalized. This chapter argues that Cha arranges fragments of identifiably historical and cultural material in ways that point to their shape and form as signifiers rather than as natural or essential qualities. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the role of the novel's formal experimentation in the reception and publication history of *Dictée*, from its initially lukewarm reception and more than ten years out of print to its resurgence in the nineties among Asian Americanists and ethnic studies scholars as a work of avant-garde Asian American and ethnic literature, and circles back to compare this history to the reception and publication history of Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*.



# 1. Carlos Bulosan

Recently, scholars in the Asian American and postcolonial critical traditions have focused on the question of imperialism in Carlos Bulosan's work, especially on the legal, juridical, and ideological aspects of US imperialism in the Philippines and in general.<sup>1</sup>

Considering the many criticisms of Bulosan's sexism,<sup>2</sup> his universalist socialism, and his erstwhile apologism for imperialism, this recent scholarship has worked towards rethinking his work in fresh and resuscitative ways.<sup>3</sup> Since the critical traditional on Bulosan has focused almost entirely on his semi-autobiographical novel *America Is in the Heart* (1946),<sup>4</sup> this chapter seeks to complicate our engagements with Bulosan's work by

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1. A small sample includes Victor Bascara, *Model Minority Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Allan Punzalan Isaac, *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Meg Wesling, "Colonial Education and the Politics of Knowledge in Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*," *MELUS* 32.2 (2007): 55–77.
  2. For a summary on these debates and a particularly excellent feminist analysis, see Rachel Lee, *The Americas of Asian American Literature: Gendered Fiction of Nation and Transnation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1999). But for a reading of queerness in Bulosan's work see Victor Bascara, "'Within Each Crack/A Story': The Political Economy of Queering Filipino American Pasts," in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, eds. Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 117–136.
  3. Victor Bascara reads Bulosan's semi-autobiographical novel *America Is in the Heart* (1946) as working to uncover US imperialism as the condition of possibility of Asian Americans as inherently contradictory subjects of the US; Allan Punzalan Isaac, similarly, reads Bulosan's novel as showing up Filipinos' ambivalent subjection as colonial subjects ineligible for US citizenship. See Bascara, *Model Minority Imperialism*; and Isaac, *American Tropics*.
  4. Tim Libretti and Martin Joseph Ponce both point out *America Is in the Heart*'s dominance in the scholarship. Ponce supplements *America* with readings of Bulosan's poetry and personal correspondence. See Libretti, "First and Third Worlds in U.S. Literature: Rethinking Carlos Bulosan," *MELUS* 23.4 (1998): 135–155; Ponce, "On Becoming Socially Articulate: Transnational Bulosan," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8.1 (2005): 49–80. This is, of course, not to say that scholarship has never engaged Bulosan's other writings; see also Oscar V. Campomanes and Todd S. Gernes, "Two Letters from America: Carlos Bulosan and the Act of Writing," *MELUS* 15.3 (1988): 15–46, which deals with "The Story of a Letter" as does this essay, although Campomanes and Gernes approach it as a bridge into

reading *America Is in the Heart* alongside his short story “The Story of a Letter” (1946).<sup>5</sup> This chapter focuses on parallel scenes between “The Story of a Letter” and *America Is in the Heart*, focusing on small but critical differences between them. Since the critical tradition has overwhelmingly focused on *America Is in the Heart* to the neglect of Bulosan’s other letters, particularly his short stories; and since his short stories are very similar on the surface to *America Is in the Heart*, with nearly identical plots and many of the same events, this chapter focuses on the differences between the two pieces in order to complicate the critical consensus on Bulosan’s work which critics have largely gleaned from readings of *America Is in the Heart*. Bulosan’s short stories differ from *America Is in the Heart* in crucial ways, namely in their *formal* aspects, which trouble the established Asian Americanist and Philippinist critical conversations which have relied primarily on *America Is in the Heart*. The Asian Americanist critical tradition on Bulosan has historically read Bulosan’s work within the social realist literary tradition, in which Bulosan was actively involved; this chapter argues that Bulosan rose out of obscurity and became an important figure in the establishment and institutionalization of Asian American studies and that *America Is in the Heart* in particular was politically and

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thinking about *America Is in the Heart*. Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973). Hereafter cited in the body as *AIH*.

5. Bulosan, “The Story of a Letter,” in *On Becoming Filipino: Selected Writings of Carlos Bulosan*, ed. E. San Juan, Jr. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), p. 60–65. Hereafter cited in the body as *SOL*.

practically expedient for the purposes of the then-burgeoning field of Asian American literature, in part because the social realist conventions of Bulosan's writing and its overt politicization (which is a central and defining feature of the genre of social realism), alongside Bulosan's own political activism in his personal life which paralleled and was the source material of much of his writing, were especially valuable to a then-emergent academic discipline, Asian American studies, and to its object of study, an also-emergent social and political identity, "Asian American." In other words, the fact that Bulosan wrote during the heyday of literary social realism in the United States and the high point of American Progressivism (usually seen to be the twenties to the forties), and that his writings such as *America Is in the Heart* were thus explicitly political and didactic, in fitting with social realist conventions, made Bulosan an particularly attractive figure in early Asian Americanist scholarship, which itself was part and parcel of a push to promote Asian American studies and Asian American literature as legitimate fields of study and "Asian American" as a coherent identitarian category moored by generally antiracist and anti-imperialist political commitments. By comparing two of Bulosan's writings that are on the surface very similar and which have virtually the same plot, *America Is in the Heart* and "Story of a Letter," and focusing on where they diverge, especially where they diverge *formally*, this chapter seeks to understand the role that the realist styles of Bulosan's writing played in his canonization in Asian American studies and literature, as well as in the formation of those disciplines in general, and to ask how

Bulosan's own writings might also offer a different perspective on the same political maneuvers and commitments in whose service his own writings have been mobilized.

"The Story of a Letter" is striking because its plot so closely resembles *America Is in the Heart's*. Whereas in *America Is in the Heart* the protagonist Allos' acquisition of literacy and formation of class consciousness are ultimately framed as "liberating," culminating in the infamous ending in which Allos concludes that "no man could destroy [his] faith in America, ever," in "The Story of a Letter" the outcome is ambivalent, as the acquisition of literacy and the internalization of class-conscious politics ultimately fail the narrator. This chapter is interested in this failure of political aspirations in "The Story of a Letter" as well as in the concomitant breakdowns of social realist *form*, asking the question: what happens if we suspend the political assumptions of the critical Bulosan tradition or the desire to ascribe a certain politics to Bulosan?

In part due to Bulosan's own labor activism and alignment with the movements of American progressivism, and in part due to early Asian American studies' focus on framing the concept of "Asian America" around the history of white supremacy and American imperialism, Asian American studies has historically focused on demonstrating the presence or absence of an intelligible critique of imperialism in Bulosan's writing. While early Bulosan scholarship tended to read Bulosan's writings as critical of American imperialism, and later Bulosan scholarship has questioned Bulosan's ostensibly straightforward anti-imperialism and argued that his attitude

towards imperialism is more ambivalent, and recent scholarship has discussed the methodological limitations and quandaries of approaching Bulosan through a diagnostic lens that seeks a straightforward answer on Bulosan's relationship to imperialism, this chapter brackets the question of whether Bulosan's writings can be described as properly imperialist or anti-imperialist in order to focus on Bulosan's writings as literary objects. That is, this chapter focuses on the formal aspects of his writing, and on how those formal qualities might determine or influence the kinds of questions that critics bring to bear on the object at hand. Inhabiting the tension in the critical tradition between the problematically anti-imperialist Bulosan and the radically anti-imperialist Bulosan, I argue that Bulosan's anti-imperialism and internationalist socialism reach their limits when confronted by subalternity, and that Bulosan approaches the subaltern in his writing through ellipses and lapses in his otherwise typical deployment of social realist form. By "subaltern" I mean, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formulation, the space of difference from the ("white" Euro-American, or "Western") culture of imperialism or of international civil society, or the "irretrievable heterogeneity of decolonized space." This chapter argues that Bulosan's progressivist and socialist — and ambiguously anti/imperialist — politics and the social realist and journalistic literary styles of his letters are historically and conceptually linked, and that both the social realist and sociological and journalistic forms of his writing, and the progressivist politics of which they are part and parcel, break down and lose coherence when they are

tasked with representing the textures of the everyday social life under imperialism that are in excess of political representation. Simply put, this chapter argues that the ambiguity in whether Bulosan was apologetic for or critical of imperialism is built into his politics and into the politicized conventions of social realism in which he wrote; and that the breakdowns in and lapses of these literary and aesthetic *forms* point to forms of sociality and ethical formations that are apposite to, and in excess of, the political assumptions and imperatives that associated with that form. Rather than resuscitating Bulosan through his stated politics as legibly and intelligibly progressive, socialist, or anti-imperialist, or yet again one-upping him by reemphasizing his positivism or universalism, I submit that he gestures in “The Story of a Letter” at the limits of those politics associated with *America Is in the Heart* that are caught in that contradictory bind, pointing to the interdict of Eurocentrism and racism in said positivist and universalist politics and gesturing to other modes of life inaccessible to such political projects. Eurocentrism and racism structure said positivist and universalist politics, which have social realism as an ostensibly transparent vehicle or a straightforwardly didactic form; where *America Is in the Heart*’s social realism cannot address it, by design, the breaks in social realist form that are non-realist, “surreal,” “experimental,” or “avant-garde” in “The Story of a Letter” gesture towards and beyond these political limits. Breaks in, or departures from, realist form gesture towards the limits of the social and political assumptions and imperatives that are associated with that form. Rather than reading

Bulosan's work as straightforwardly "social realist," "pedagogical," "didactic" or "Marxist," and the aesthetic and ideological elements that do not fit those rubrics as contradictions or failures to be resolved or explained away, this chapter focuses on those lapses as *aesthetic styles* and strategies of literary *form* that gesture to and beyond the "social realist" forms and their attendant politics which are typically ascribed to Bulosan. Breakdowns in and lapses of social realist form, such as improbable and inexplicable moments, and unresolved and even impossible plots, failures of social realist didacticism, and breakdowns into irresolvability and political failure and non sequitur all interrupt Bulosan's ostensibly straightforwardly "realist" texts, and imagine different forms of sociality that exceed social realism and its associated politics.

Bulosan retroactively became formative and central to the canonization of Filipino American and Filipino literature and to the formation of Asian American studies, but he could not have thought of himself as a Filipino American or even as a Filipino national in the contemporary sense (he died in the same year that the Philippines became an independent nation), and certainly not as an Asian American (a concept which came about decades after his death) — those concepts were made possible and prefigured by figures like Bulosan, but they did not exist in his own time; he would have seen himself as a colonial subject and a ward of the American state.<sup>6</sup> In being canonized as a founding figure of Filipino, Filipino American, and Asian

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6. Schueller; see also Bascara, Isaac, and Marr.

American literature, as and a central figure in and even grandfather of the foundation of Asian American studies, he was especially important because his activism and his writing were amenable to — or *made* amenable to — the generally antiracist, anti-imperialist, and leftist politics associated with or even defining of those fields of literature and scholarly study, and even to the people identified in and studied by those fields. That is to say, a certain identity, “Asian American,” framed historically and geopolitically by white supremacist racism and European and American imperialism and defined in large part by antiracist and anti-imperialist political content, and the concomitant commitment to such political programmes, was consolidated through Bulosan’s canonization, even though he himself did not and could not have identified as an Asian American or even as a Filipino American himself. Therefore, the method of this chapter is not to say that the scholarly tradition that reads Bulosan within the social realist tradition and applies social realist reading models, such as an emphasis on political “lessons” or political didacticism; the assumption and cultivation of an audience that can identify the political players and settings (e.g. ‘Asians’ subjected to racism by “whites” in a white supremacist United States) involved in that political parable and a concomitant assumption of how that audience will receive the content of that didactic lesson, and an attribution of certain political content, is wrong, incorrect, or inaccurate. Rather, the method of this chapter is to suspend these critical rubrics and the focus on Bulosan as a political figure and even as a world-historical and sociological entity (e.g. as



a “Filipino American” or even a proto “Asian American” before the formation of “Asian American” as a coherent category) in order to focus on the *form* and *styles* of his writing and to think about what they might generate, achieve, or accomplish, or what effects they have that are not necessarily immediately political, or are a harbinger or proto-formation of a certain political and sociological phenomena and content.

It is interesting that his short stories, which differ from *America Is in the Heart* in small but crucial ways, have been and continue to be largely ignored in the scholarly tradition; and that for the most part most readings of him do not actually read him as an author and his work as art objects: he is read primarily as a sociological phenomenon that happened to write novels; and anything in his work that does not fit this reading practice or the aforementioned social realist or sociological reading models is summarily dismissed. By focusing on Bulosan’s work as aesthetic and representational objects, the chapter argues that Bulosan points to models of social life that are in excess of, apposite, or even inaccessible to politics — including his own politics.

Bulosan’s writings are (correctly) situated in the social realist tradition, and read as such. Debates on Bulosan’s writing have almost always been focused on *America Is in the Heart*, with surprisingly little sustained attention to literary form, and have always focused on his ambivalent attitude towards imperialism, since he seems to explore the racism and the exploitative and often violent conditions of American imperialism yet also offers apologia for it by ultimately predicating his politics not in criticizing and

resisting the mechanisms and dynamics of American imperialism but rather making the promise of “America” available to everyone. Rather than diagnosing Bulosan’s writing as either pro- or anti-imperialist, and reading his work as confirmation for or against a specific politics, my goal is to ask what differently might be learned from Bulosan by focusing on his work as *literary objects*, i.e. by focusing on *form*. Notably, despite his canonical and very important status in the formation of Asian American literature and Asian American studies, there is a general attitude among his critics that his writing is just not very good.<sup>7</sup> Filipino American novelist Jessica Hagedorn positions Bulosan as exactly what the authors and works included in her anthology of Asian American literature *Charlie Chan Is Dead* are against and not; one of the characters in Hagedorn’s novel *The Gangster of Love* calls Bulosan an “overrated, sentimental writer” and a “mediocre poet.” The complaints about his writing tend to be tied to breaks in, or perceived failures to comply with social realist form: his tendency to deploy unrealistic *deus ex machina* endings, his tendency to drag out some passages and plot points and deploy illogical or abrupt non sequiturs in order to move the plot along, his confused or ambivalent

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7. Notably, Campomanes and Gernes imply this by arguing that Bulosan’s short stories were essentially “blueprints” for *America Is in the Heart*, which therefore is the perfected version of otherwise dissatisfactory or lacking earlier writings. Ponce references what is apparently a popular enough opinion that Bulosan’s writing is just not very good by arguing in Bulosan’s defense that it *is* good — his reasoning, interestingly, being that Bulosan’s work essentially performs the contradictions of American imperialism’s promise of universal freedom apropos its racism and violence — that is, that it is the commodity fetish; he then defers to San Juan’s reading of Bulosan. Jessica Hagedorn positions Bulosan as exactly what the letters included in her anthology of Asian American literature *Charlie Chan Is Dead* are against and not; one of the characters in Hagedorn’s novel *The Gangster of Love* calls Bulosan an “overrated, sentimental writer” and a “mediocre poet.”

political messaging (especially considering that his writing is semi-autobiographical), his aggressive and obvious didacticism or “propagandism” despite the aforementioned not entirely clear political messaging. Notably, Campomanes and Gernes, among the only critics to deliver sustained readings of “The Story of a Letter” and among the few to devote sustained attention to Bulosan’s short stories, imply that Bulosan’s writing is not good by arguing that his short stories were “blueprints” for *America Is in the Heart*, which is therefore the perfected version of what is ostensibly dissatisfactory or lacking earlier writings. Ponce references the popular opinion that Bulosan’s writing is just not very good by arguing in Bulosan’s defense that it *is* good — his reasoning, interestingly, being that Bulosan’s work essentially performs the contradictions of American imperialism’s promise of universal freedom apropos its racism and violence in its ambivalent attitude towards American exceptionalism and imperialism — even more interestingly, positioning his argument against a poststructuralist and postcolonialist “preoccupation with language” that is insufficiently political and deferring to a materialist argument that Bulosan’s writing is essentially commodity fetish which represents the commodity mystifications of American imperialism’s promise of universal freedom — and then defers to E. San Juan’s reading of Bulosan. These non-realist breaks in form, I would argue, could be historicized as and read within the traditions of the fantastical and the surreal, and share with art movements like surrealism proper, a commitment to critiques of cultural and political limits, and an

interest in the breakdown of rationality and familiarity in favor of unintelligibility and defamiliarization. These breaks in social realist form, I would submit, rather than being evaluated as “bad writing” or “inadequate,” or being framed as situating Bulosan within non-realist traditions proper, gesture to the limits of Bulosan’s own politics which are circumscribed by social realist conventions and assumptions (journalistic writing, believability, political didacticism, the assumption of an audience that will feel certain modes of sympathy, etc.). Furthermore, these breaks in form might let us imagine the limitations of certain models of Asian Americanist criticism of the formation known as “Asian American literature” and the political assumptions or goals that these critical engagements or disciplinary conventions carry: a tendency to romanticize Asian American resistance (e.g. all the writing determined to prove that Bulosan is a proper anti-imperialist), a tendency to read “Asian Americanist” art objects as “documentarian” or “realist” or like historical documents (à la *Fifth Chinese Daughter*) rather than as representational and aesthetic objects;<sup>8</sup> a tendency to ignore short stories and poetry in favor of the novel, especially of realist and quasi-autobiographical or even anthropological writings; a tendency to ignore literary conventions altogether and read clearly non-realist texts as historical documents; a tendency to assume a certain audience (in particular, an “Asian American” subject or subject-in-training) that will sympathize

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8. Schueller, Tim Marr.

with certain political issues or politicized content in said “Asian American” objects and thus be politicized in a certain way (à la “social realist” didacticism).

“The Story of a Letter” follows the unnamed narrator from his childhood in a small rural town in the Philippines, where his father receives a letter in English that no one can read, on through his journey as he leaves the Philippines for the US and works odd jobs to survive. It describes a similar arc in *America Is in the Heart*.

“The Story of a Letter” begins with a leave-taking. It begins with unnamed narrator’s older brother Berto leaving their small rural town for Manila, eventually ending up in California. He sends his father a letter in English that the family cannot read, partly because they are illiterate. The father seeks out the village priest but he has died. The family must wait for their son Nicasio to return from school because “he [is] the only one in [their] family who could read or write,” although he never returns because he too goes to the US (SOL 60). Bulosan establishes a divide between metropolitan space and subaltern rural space whose non-contemporaneity figures in the circulation of unreadable letters in unintelligible languages. Crucially, the letter is unreadable because it is in English, whereas the village schoolteacher whom the father later approaches only “[knows] only Spanish and [their] dialect” (SOL 62). Of course, that the letter is in English and that the village schoolteacher only knows Spanish are oblique references to the handover of Spain’s colonies to the US after the Spanish–American War (1898). That the local “dialect” is not named where colonial languages

like English and Spanish are points to the undifferentiated space of difference that the narrator and his family occupy vis-à-vis named geopolitical entities like “English” and “Spanish.” From the handover from one imperial power to another, from the Spanish language to the English language, from Spanish to US territorial imperialism, the subaltern and its vernaculars remain unnamed and inaccessible. Translation into the vernacular from colonial European languages fails; translation the other way around, from vernacular to colonial language, is enabled by Berto and Nicasio’s educations, which also interdict the opposite circuit: translation from colonial language to vernacular. At the level of language, the intimate and quotidian enclave of the family is disrupted by the history of Spanish and US imperialism and the dramatic transition into postcolonial Philippine nation-statehood.

“The Story of a Letter” moves through these asymmetrical scenes of translations and readerships thwarted by these vicissitudes of history. A strong thematic of mediation moves the story along, setting up the discontinuity of imperial US and metropolitan Philippine space from rural space. Bulosan figures that discontinuity through the translators like the village schoolteacher and the priest, who cannot bridge the failure of communication and rupture of sociality staged via the narrator and his father’s inability to read, or even find a mediating reader-translator, for Berto’s letter. Here, the mediation that the father and narrator seek from the village priest and the schoolteacher situates them and their rural village in a space of difference from the

dominant, the space of the polity, which is the American polity and being brought into its fold via colonial subjecthood, the space from which Bulosan writes and marks precisely by *beginning* the story with Berto's leave-taking and his unreadable letter. The point is not that Bulosan posits an authentic or untouched proletariat or subaltern space that can be celebrated as such or transformed into a class-conscious proletariat, as E. San Juan, Jr. suggests in his reading of Bulosan.<sup>9</sup> Rather, Bulosan marks subaltern space, here figured as rural space in the Philippines, as already inaccessible to the text, always a bit off the mark, through irresolvable tensions and formal ambiguities.

Subalternity marks the irreducible heterogeneity of decolonized space or alterity from the dominant (especially in the Marxian sense) that does not have access to political speech (especially in the Arendtian sense), which is exactly the shift that happens in *America Is in the Heart* and the rest of Bulosan's short stories. E. San Juan, the critic who revived interest in Bulosan after he was essentially forgotten, and a major figure in the formation of Asian American and Filipino/Filipino American studies, explicitly frames Bulosan's writing as staging the subaltern's introduction into class consciousness. Furthermore, E. San Juan's framework has set the tenor of the critical conversations on Bulosan's work. I argue that Bulosan does not stage the movement from subalternity to dominant as "resolving contradictions" (E. San Juan's words), but

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9. See, for example, "Internationalizing the US Ethnic Canon: Revisiting Carlos Bulosan," *Comparative American Studies* 6.2 (2008): 123–143.

rather as a scene of violence, with ambiguous outcomes. This movement figures in his work (which is different from saying that Bulosan “intentionally” or volitionally means to write it) in breakdowns of realist form.

Subalternity is a crucial concept and conversations on and debates about it in Asian American and postcolonial studies have guided Bulosan studies: subalternity emerged from the Subaltern Studies Working Group (which included Partha Chatterjee and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) and originally began as a question of *historiography* and how to represent those normally excluded from colonial histories and colonialist historiographies. Furthermore, subalternity is grounded in Marxist critique, where it is meant to name the “classes of people who are not a class” who become a class (i.e. the “working class,” or even “Asian American” — in this sense, the line between Marxian class theory and identity politics becomes clear) through the realization of their own conditions — and E. San Juan, who reads Bulosan through this lens, argues that Bulosan’s work represents the process of this coming into consciousness of the subaltern, in part because Bulosan’s work is from the politicized tradition of social realism. For E. San Juan, figures like Bulosan himself and Allos represent a certain kind of subaltern (those excluded from access to American imperialism) who achieve class-consciousness through the acquisition of literacy — and thus become “American,” as Bulosan would put it; or thus become Asian American, as E. San Juan implies: where becoming Asian American is not merely the raw marker of being an “Asian” person in



America but additionally entails an acceptance of the political priorities of the Asian American movement as it emerges from the sixties decolonization movements worldwide and the civil rights movements within the US, the validity of “Asian American” as an identity, etc. The connection that is important to notice here is that, for these thinkers, subalternity, then, marks 1) a space of difference from mainstream civil society, and thus a space that is unrepresented by its politics and is outside the boundaries of the polis; and 2) a space where identitarianism or identity politics does not reach. That is to say, what is at stake in the issue of subalternity across these disciplines, from postcolonial historiography to Asian American canon formation in the case of E. San Juan and his inheritors, is *how to identify or to ascribe an identity to people who do not have any politically meaningful or efficacious identity, which is to say, people who have no way to be recognized politically.*

I agree with San Juan’s call to “decenter the Bulosan canon and begin our critical hermeneutics and evaluations with noncanonical texts.”<sup>10</sup> However, where San Juan calls for decentering in order to solve the contradiction of Bulosan’s sometime apologia for imperialism and his anti-imperialism, and “gloss with concrete historical specifications in order to explain the profoundly antinomic irony and paradox of his

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10. San Juan, “Carlos Bulosan, Filipino Writer-Activist: Between a Time of Terror and the Time of Revolution,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 8.1 (2008): 103–134; p. 121.

[Bulosan's] utopian vision of 'America'" in *America Is in the Heart's* ending,<sup>11</sup> I differ by arguing not to attempt to solve this contradiction but rather to let the contradictions stand. Here, then, I'd like to align myself with Meg Wesling's reading of *America Is in the Heart* in her assertion that "at stake [in *America Is in the Heart*] is an epistemological impasse whose irresolvability provides a critical key to discerning the novel's critique of the imperial occupation of the Philippines, a critique that, superficially, seems conspicuously absent from the text."<sup>12</sup> However, where Wesling focuses on US imperialism's educational mission towards its colonial subjects (like Bulosan would have been, as a colonial ward of the state) to point out that Bulosan points to a contradiction between the United States' stated goals of universal freedom and democracy and its violent and racist imperialist missions that manifest through knowledge acquisition and production, I am more interested in asking how Bulosan's ambiguous stance toward American imperialism might not need resolving, but instead allow us to shift critical focus from the content of his writing to its form and how its formal qualities might circumscribe what Bulosan can and cannot convey politically or otherwise. In other words, a critique of imperialism could only be performed by those who inhabit and are within, that is, are *conscious* of, imperialism and its aesthetic, social, and political forms and conventions—namely, *not* "The Story of a Letter's" illiterate

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11. San Juan, "Carlos Bulosan, Filipino Writer-Activist," p. 108.

12. Wesling, "Colonial Education," p. 59. See also Wesling, *Empire's Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

father or his son, before he gets his education and learns to read. Wesling reads the “productive ambiguity that underpins such contradictions [which] isolate Carlos’s [Allos’ name after he migrates to the US] movement between knowing and not knowing and foregrounds the politics of knowledge that is central to Bulosan’s critical perspective on the imperial conquest of the Philippines” in *America Is in the Heart* in order to center “a profound commentary on the politics of knowledge production as that endeavor was used to justify the colonization of the Philippines within the progressive discourse of the twentieth century.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, to read Bulosan’s work as explicitly and straightforwardly pedagogical comes with the assumption that his writings are socially realist. (Ironically, Bulosan would later be deemed by the very literati who would return his work to relevance and canonize him as a remote precursor of their own work as embarrassing or unsophisticated, partly for this reason.<sup>14</sup>) While Wesling focuses entirely on *America Is in the Heart* in her analysis, “The Story of a Letter” offers a comparable “critical key” to engaging with Bulosan’s text. The union labor activism and socialism so strongly associated with the Bulosan who wrote *America Is in the Heart*, whose political struggle is largely waged on the terrain of the literary, representational, and epistemological, as shown by Wesling, does not catch here. Reading *America Is in the*

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13. Wesling, “Colonial Education,” p. 59.

14. Ponce discusses the criticisms of Bulosan’s stylistic and artistic merits and disagrees with them, see “On Becoming Socially Articulate.” For example, in Jessica Hagedorn’s novel *The Gangster of Love*, a character calls Bulosan an “[o]verrated, sentimental writer” and a “mediocre poet.” See *The Gangster of Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

*Heart* with the remarkably similar, if shorter and simpler, "Story of a Letter," we might be able to imagine the analogous education scenes in both texts in productive resonance and tension.

It is well-known that Bulosan's writings are avowedly semi-autobiographical. Martin Joseph Ponce notes that Allos's education occurs through several figures, with each dropping out from the text or somehow being eliminated so that Allos can teleologically rise up as the book's writer and champion of an "America" of universal freedom.<sup>15</sup> A similar dynamic plots "The Story of a Letter," where various scenes of education eventually produce the literate narrator. Both *America Is in the Heart* and "The Story of a Letter" anticipate their own writing by staging the narrative's progress through scenes of the gradual acquisition of literacy, which enables the "The Story of a Letter's" narrator, *America Is in the Heart's* Allos, and the historical Bulosan from whom the two protagonists are drawn, to write their respective texts. "The Story of a Letter," in a sense, is a story about stories, a lettering of letter-writing. If we read these scenes of education between these two texts not merely as functional plot devices and their narrative breakdowns as stylistic failures or anomalies), but as metatextual commentaries on the conditions of possibility of their own production as literary texts, another view might emerge.

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15. Ponce, "On Becoming Socially Articulate."

Bulosan's writing mimes, in the documentary realist style that he is known for, the anthropologic and documentarian gaze of imperialist knowledge production while parodying that gaze's ostensible objectivity. This dynamic of imperial knowledge production and representation moves through an economy of literal gazes. Feeling an itch to leave his village, the narrator moves to the metropolis Baguio and "worked in the marketplace posing naked for American tourists who seemed to enjoy the shameless nudity of the natives. An American woman, who claimed that she had come from Texas, took [him] to Manila" (SOL 62). The woman, a "romantic painter," has the narrator undress every morning to paint him (SOL 62). "The Story of a Letter," like much of Bulosan's work, moves through a generally masculinist economy of exchange and mobility, not only in letters in European languages but in the cultural formations of imperialism through which those languages transmit.<sup>16</sup> Throughout his work, women are often mere indicators of "bondage" or "freedom," where a sexist dynamic of rescuing and liberating her validates the politics of that dynamic, usually socialism. Women are nearly absent from "The Story of a Letter" except in passing remarks about the narrator living with his mother and sister before moving to Baguio, where he meets the American woman. (This scene has a famous analogue in *America Is in the Heart*.) On one hand, the near-absence of women, especially "Filipina" women, in a text that stages the inaccessibility of subalternity, whose conditions and effects are asymmetrical when it

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16. Lee, *The Americas of Asian American Literature*.

comes to gender, might be read symptomatically as a repetition of woman's irreducible double-erasure in subaltern space. On the other hand, the spectacular objectification of the narrator, *National Geographic* style, for the (presumably white) American woman who paints him—again, the issue of representation—stages the anthropologic gaze of imperial knowledge production. Bulosan positions the semi-autobiographical narrator, and thus himself, as products of that imperial knowledge production as pedagogical subjects of US empire, and thus as producers of its knowledge as well.<sup>17</sup> The historical Bulosan and his protagonists in both *America Is in the Heart* and “The Story of a Letter” are not only objects of that gaze, but agents. The “Filipina” woman's near absence vis-à-vis the story's crucially white American female *agent* of imperial power might mimic that double-marginalization of the racialized woman.

The painting scene reverses an overdetermined story of imperialism, the white male specularization, and thus scientific specification, of the brown female as specimen, into a scene of a white woman painter specularizing a sexualized brown male. This scene occurs right before and enables the hospital scene, since the narrator buys his trip to the US by posing for the woman. The narrator, notably, recalls this moment as absurd—that is to say, ridiculous, even meaningless—and yet, as totally serious: “I had never dreamed of making a living by exposing my body to a stranger. That experience

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17. For people in US colonies and neocolonies as “pedagogical subjects” of US imperialism, see Malini Johar Schueller, “Scenes of Instruction in Internment and Occupation,” paper presented at the Association for Asian American Studies Annual Conference 2012, Washington DC, April 12, 2012.

made me roar with laughter for many years" (SOL 63). It is absurd because it reverses an expected gender dynamic. And yet, that reversal is also utterly serious precisely *because* it reverses an expected gender hierarchy—the narrator remembers pranking girls in his village with his cousin by stealing their clothes while they bathed: "They ran about with their hands between their legs. I thought of this incident when I felt shy, hiding my body with my hand from the woman painter" (SOL 63). Here he identifies with the village girls, feeling shyness at the woman's gaze. This is not just a reversal, but a displacement, of a masculine/feminine white/black opposition. The narrator is at once specularized as feminine in bashfully identifying with the village girls, while doubly classified as irreducibly masculine under the gaze of the American woman who is a *romantic* painter. The narrator feels bashfulness in the scene's present but recalls it as merely laughable. The possibility of violent imperial sexuality is displaced into the mere absurdity, that is to say, *nonsense* of his childhood gendering that manifests in his present-tense laughter. His colonial education comes after and is made possible by posing and thus becoming an object for imperial knowledge, which he now knows to consider banal rather than remarkable. The scene abruptly ends with the narrator matter-of-factly stating that "[w]hen I had saved a little money I took a boat for America" (SOL 63).

The next paragraph's beginning is crucial, because it follows up a comically absurd recollection of bashful seriousness with a forgetting. After he migrates to the US he is hospitalized, where his education in English and "[his] reading [is] started by a

nurse who thought he had come from China" (SOL 63). Forgetting foregrounds the narrator's *re*-education: "I forgot my village for a while. When I went to a hospital and lay in bed for two years, I started to read books with a hunger" (SOL 63). We know that the historical Bulosan was hospitalized and read books then. But rather than reciting his life story and his writings as autobiographical proof of imperialism's violence, he offers the hospital scene as a kind of (re)constitution and (re)configuration of the mind and body, done violence by the culture of imperialism to be (re)made in and by that very culture of imperialism. If the narrator's education is a (re)making of mind and body, it is that which comes before this (re)making that Bulosan gestures at through the illegible vernacular language—that which cannot properly be called a "mind" (that could be subject to conscious-raising and comprehend imperialism) or "body" (which could be subject to imperialism's physical violations and whose violations could be represented as such—as per the infamous scenes of beatings throughout Bulosan's work) in the overdetermined languages of "mind" and "body" upon which imperialism lays its claims. Similarly, in *America Is in the Heart*, Allos also ends up hospitalized and acquires literacy through another series of teachers—here, the white women Alice and Eileen Odell, rather than a nurse. Their relationship is explicitly described as an education: "She [Alice Odell] was directing my education, I felt, and read everything she sent me" (AIH 235). After Alice Odell, who brings Allos books to read, moves away, her sister Eileen continues bringing him books every week, which Allos devours voraciously.



Notably, his education from the Odells is in the language of identification and desire, often sexual:<sup>18</sup> he considers his hospital writing, often in the form of letters but also in poems and essays, as “a definite identification with an intellectual tradition”; “I created for myself an illusion of understanding with Eileen, and in consequence, I yearned for her and the world she represented” (*AIH* 227, 234). Not only does Allos identify with the world she represents and wishes to possess it through her, but he describes this identification through the rhetoric of literacy in the literal sense as well as in literacy in the general sense: “When she [Eileen Odell] left, leaving some books, I imagined I read the words she would have spoken [...] I can say that writing fumbling, vehement letters to Eileen was actually my course in English.” (*AIH* 235). The Odells are Allos’ final major teachers and set the stage for the socialist and union labor activism that take up the rest of the novel. Allos’ self-declared education with the Odells is a kind of subject formation in the culture of imperialism, an acquisition of literacy in the general sense, which literacy in the literal sense is a sign of. The English language, and reading and writing it, stands in here for the comprehension or understanding of social formations of the capitalist, imperialist, white supremacist Euro-American US. (The history of

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18. See Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

institutionalization of English language and literature in universities, and their relationship to imperial governance, is well-known.<sup>19)</sup>

It is never explained why he is hospitalized for so long in any version of this story, in either *America Is in the Heart* or “Story of a Letter” (or any other of Bulosan’s short stories). All versions of the hospital scene across all its iterations in Bulosan’s writing serve as turning points of the overall story, or as “conversion experiences,” in which the “conversion experience” is one from illiteracy to literacy (he literally learns to read while he is hospitalized), but also, from unawareness of certain social phenomena to awareness: he is hospitalized in *America Is in the Heart* after being beaten by white men; he describes how he read political books and history books and that he learned about how to become an American. Every version of this story throughout Bulosan’s work essentially splits the story into the narrator pre- and post-coming to awareness of his status as an American colonial subject.

“The Story of a Letter’s” scene with the nurse (and *America Is in the Heart*’s Odell sisters) parallels the narrator being painted by the American woman, except here the

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19. For an excellent account of institutionalized English language and literature in British imperialism, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). The US emphasized that its educational mission in its colonies was different from Britain’s; although recent work has noted that the US’s educational missions generally worked to create colonial subjects legible and manageable for US governance. It is no coincidence that the US’s first English departments are established in the same years that the US establishes its first universities in Cuba, Hawai’i, Puerto Rico and, of course, the Philippines; see Victor Bascara, “New Empire, Same Old University?: Instituting Neoliberal Education in the American Tropics,” paper presented at The 10th Annual American Studies Symposium: “The Cultures of Empire,” University of Florida, Gainesville FL, March 18, 2011.

narrator becomes an agent, and not only an object, of imperial knowledge through the acquisition of literacy and the English language. Describing Manila where the woman painter takes him as weird and incomprehensible, the narrator notes that the people “speak through their noses”; their language, presumably English, is incomprehensible to the young and still-illiterate narrator, who only receives their speech as nasality, as mere sound (*SOL* 62). The scene effects a metacommentary on the transition, translation even, from child to adult, subaltern to dominant, and thus from illiteracy to literacy, unintelligibility to intelligibility—from a nonsensical recollection of a recollection marked by utter sense, to a forgetting and re-membering (of the “body” and the “mind”) that loops back around to make that layered recollection possible as such. Caught in, and already having escaped, this circuit in that recollection of recollection, is the contemporaneity of the narrator’s subaltern cultural formation and childhood gendering. The narrator in “The Story of a Letter” becomes bonafide diasporic and colonial subject when the nurse misrecognizes the narrator as Chinese, an overdetermined moment of ignorance where “China” stands in for “Asia” or the “Orient,” and the narrator plays along.<sup>20</sup> The hailing into an identity, “Asian,” sanctioned by and having its conditions of possibility in the machinations of Western imperialism, completes the transformation from subaltern to dominant.

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20. Remember that the US’s Chinese Exclusion Act and other anti-Asian immigration laws are still effect in the forties, when Bulosan published both the short story and novel, and around when both texts take place.

In *America Is in the Heart* this translation, accomplished through education and literacy, seems imperialism's triumph. Critics have long been vexed by what seems the novel's ultimately apologetic, even celebratory stance towards US imperialism, its deracinated liberal humanism and its submission to US assimilation. Between "Story's" narrator, *America's* Allos and Carlos Bulosan springs forth a Filipino Frankenstein, unmade and remade in imperialism, harbinger of a panethnic Asian America and an Asian diaspora, caught between the subalternity transmogrified into an imperfect colonial subject in "The Story of a Letter," and the claim for a universal "America" as that perfected copy and graduated student in *America Is in the Heart*. Can the ambiguous, excessive and unresolved ending and forms of "The Story of a Letter," a story itself excessive in the Bulosan canon, unhinge us from *American Is in the Heart's* contradictory Eurocentrism?

Translation—the movement of something from one language to another—is how Bulosan frames the issues of literacy and education. Translation is thus one way that the movement from incomprehension to comprehension that animates Bulosan's writing can be framed; because in a figurative sense it is how social realism frames its relationship to its readership: the political goal of social realism was, historically, to show or document certain conditions, usually bad or undesirable, of certain groups of people to readers, in order to inspire sympathy for said groups of people (e.g. working class laborers, who were the focus on Bulosan's activism) and comprehension of certain

social and political dynamics (i.e. class oppression in the United States) usually in service of certain political ends or even “lessons” (i.e. American progressivism; in Bulosan’s case, labor rights and working class empowerment). Furthermore, translation in a figurative sense fails and produces unpredictable (“unwanted”) results in Bulosan’s writing, especially in his short stories: “Story of a Letter” vs. *America Is in the Heart*. These failures and unexpected or unconventional results figure in Bulosan’s writing in breakdowns of social realist form and in non-realist forms.

If *America Is in the Heart* proceeds by a series of gradations that lead to the novel’s writing and notorious ending, then “The Story of a Letter” proceeds by a series of failures. Remember that the village schoolteacher cannot do with his literacy skills what the narrator and his father want them to do: translate Berto’s letter. The narrator does not even learn from the teacher, and his education doesn’t start until the hospital scene. Bulosan figures this subjectivation into the Western culture of imperialism through a dramatic shift in form: after the narrator spends time in the hospital reading, the language of “The Story of a Letter” shifts from pastoral and familial village life to the alienation of Filipino life in the US, told in the language of rights, individualism and West-accessible politics.<sup>21</sup> The shift from familial life (“the desire to see other places grew

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21. Consider the following passage, which comes after the narrator translates the letter: “I had been brought to the convalescent ward when the Civil War in Spain started some three years before. Now, after the peasants’ and workers’ government was crushed, I was physically ready to go out into the world and start a new life. There was some indignation against fascism in all civilized lands. To most of us, however, it was the end of a great cause” (SOL 63).

[...] I tried to run away a few times, but whenever I reached the town, the farm always called me back”) to the individualistic and alienated life (“I wandered all over Los Angeles for some time, looking for my brothers. They had been separated from me since childhood. We had had, separately and together, a bitter fight to existence”) in the US is marked: the language the narrator/Bulosan uses shifts from a first-person narration focused on family and village life and landscapes, to a pointedly more singular style; the use of clauses beginning with “I” almost doubles (SOL 62, 63). This shift is reflected in the isolation of the hospital where the narrator’s education proceeds in the Enlightenment fashion of self-cultivation, which contrasts sharply with the father’s visiting the village schoolteacher in order to read Berto’s letter. The father’s motive for reading the letter is to bridge a ruptured sociality between dominant and subaltern that opens within their family when Berto leaves (which sets the story in motion) and that the letter evidences.

The narrator attempts to repair this rupture when he translates the letter. He suddenly remembers the letter while in the hospital: “I wrote a letter to Father asking him to send the letter to me for translation. I wanted to translate it, so that it would be easy for him to find a man in our village to read it to him [...] I translated it into our dialect and sent it back with the original” (SOL 63). Notably, like *America Is in the Heart*, in “The Story of a Letter” Bulosan never names the “dialect” that the narrator speaks

though the two colonial languages, English and Spanish, are consistently named.<sup>22</sup> Whereas the languages of the dominant are named in their specificity, the vernacular's non-naming both marks its everyday banality for the young narrator and the village while marking its inaccessible difference from the languages of the dominant—English—in which “The Story of a Letter's” narrator, *America Is in the Heart's* Allos, and the historical Bulosan write. The narrator tells the story of the letter from the first-person in the past tense, *post*-literacy—the story, and the letter that animates it, are always already within civil society, in which the narrator is literate in the general sense (that is, the culture of imperialism is intelligible to and legible for him) and evidenced through literacy in the literal sense (the story is written), and which the father and young narrator are differentiated from. I argue that the withholding of the vernacular's name inscribes the social space where the Philippine vernacular circulates in a space of difference whose unassimilable reality escapes and defies an easy internationalist or universalist interpellation of socialism or even the “America” that Bulosan commits to, however ambivalently, in *America Is in the Heart* in the form of social realist *bildung*. This is not to posit some static, reified subalternity that can be qualified and thus museumified as “rural,” “illiterate” or untouched by the West, but rather, to note that Bulosan posits, through the tropes of linguistic legibility and illegibility and the

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22. In *America Is in the Heart* some Philippine vernaculars are named (like Ilocano, which is presumably Allos' first language, as it was the historical Bulosan's, although this is never stated explicitly) but whenever someone speaks in one they are referred to almost uniformly as unspecified “dialects.”

education that both bridges and ruptures that circuit, that that subaltern space is always already unavailable to the text. Even though the translation is in the father's dialect, rather than in English or Spanish, the father's illiteracy figures the discontinuity of his cultural-social formation with the one that Berto and Nicasio, and now the narrator, are thrust into.

Immediately after, while working the odd jobs typical for Filipinos in the US at the time, the narrator searches for his brothers. He recognizes Berto not through verbal or written language, but through affect: "although I had not seen him for many years [...] There was something in the way he had turned his head towards the bus that made me think I was right" (SOL 64). But the narrator does not establish direct contact with him. This uncertain recognition is repeated with his brother Nicasio: when the narrator does recognize him, it is not through words, but image: "suddenly, I saw a familiar face in the dirty mirror on the wall. I almost screamed. He was my brother Nicasio—but he had grown old and emaciated" (SOL 64–65). Even here, where the two talk, the familiarity they once shared in the Philippines does not guarantee their mutual recognition. Rather than Nicasio's *voice*, it is his worn visage seen in the dirty mirror—again the thematic of transmogrifying mediation, or a translation forced by the pedagogical subject-making requirements of imperialism, willy-nilly coerced commensurability—that catches the narrator's attention and makes him recognize his



own brother. They go to the narrator's hotel, but again, no line of communication is maintained.

Instead, upon returning to his hotel the narrator finds that the letter he wrote to his father asking for Berto's letter and his translation have been returned to him, even though he "had never given his forwarding address to anybody," and the letters are addressed "at a hotel [he] had never seen before" (SOL 65). The "note attached to [the letter] said that Father had died some years ago" and is "signed by the postmaster of [his] town" (SOL 65). At the level of form Bulosan portrays the distance opened between the two: here the father only emerges indirectly through a postmaster's note, a shadowy figure in a phantasmatic and impossible circulation of letters. Though Bulosan has been criticized for *deus ex machina* plots or perceived stylistic deficiencies, the letters' mysterious return is not merely a stylistic or logical inadequacy for realism, but rather a disruption of that journalistic realism that Bulosan is known for. In this dramatic failure, the letter's return and the dead father's inaccessibility figure an obscurity that suddenly breaks through and escapes from not only the narrator's attempts to translate and thus render intelligible his new life for his father, but also interrupts and exceeds the story's own aesthetic and epistemic assumptions and conventions.

In the story's final paragraph, the narrator reads the letter at the same time that "a letter came from the government telling that [his] brother Berto was already serving in the Navy—and the very same day that [his] brother Nicasio was waiting to be

inducted into the Army" (SOL 65). If in *America Is in the Heart*, the sociality of family that the culture of imperialism disrupts is neatly reestablished through that very culture of imperialism, with the brothers coming together in their union labor activism, in "The Story of a Letter," the brothers' admission into the military is at best ambivalent. The narrator finds his brothers, but their family does not stay together and the story ends on their separation. In *America Is in the Heart* the brothers "[find] a release for their desires" to belong to America in joining the US military after the Pearl Harbor attack (AIH 323). Bulosan yokes together Berto's letter and the narrator's translation of it, unsuccessful gestures of familial intimacy, with letters from the government that conscript the brothers in imperial state power, rendering indeterminate the difference between the literacy acquired through education as generative and as violent. If Berto's letter is a failed attempt to establish a line between dominant and subaltern, then the narrator's request for the original letter and his translation of it are failed attempts to rectify Berto's failure. Not only are the narrator and his brothers not better off, but they could not reverse that translation from dominant into subaltern for their father and thus effect that suturing.

There are no simple endings and resolutions to the story. Although Campomanes and Gernes acknowledge that the narrator's education and acquisition of literacy fails to allow the father to read the letter, they miss the fact that, unlike *America Is in the Heart*, there are no simple endings and resolutions to the story's tensions. Their

reading of “The Story of a Letter,” like much Bulosan scholarship, reduces it as epiphenomenal to *America Is in the Heart*. This leads them to conclude that “The Story of a Letter” merely predicts the “scheme of writing” that Bulosan refines in *America Is in the Heart*, in which literacy in both the literal and general senses is an unquestioned good.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, E. San Juan argues that “Allos’s [sic] task was to mediate between this world of subaltern folk and the world of industrialized capitalist modernity” and that the whole lesson of *America Is in the Heart* [...] is none other than the transformation of the Filipino subaltern consciousness [this is a contradiction in terms—if the subaltern had a politically acceptable “consciousness” it would not be, strictly speaking, subaltern] [...] into a critical and cohesively class-conscious intelligence through the process of affiliating with the organized political movement of a multiracial working class rotted in the deracinated peasantry,” and reads his noncanonical texts as corroborating that dynamic.<sup>24</sup> However, I would submit that the reduction of Bulosan’s non-canonical texts to *America Is in the Heart*, or a hard Marxist analytic and politics, misses the effort in “The Story of a Letter” to rethink the universalism and Eurocentrism of Bulosan’s own Marxism as unproblematically empowering, or of “education” as “uplifting.” This is not to posit Marxism in general as inflexibly Eurocentric, or to ignore the ways in which Marxism has been reformulated in various scenarios, including one like Bulosan’s, but

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23. Campomanes and Gernes, p. 19.

24. San Juan, “Carlos Bulosan, Filipino Writer-Activist,” p. 121.

rather to attempt to change the stakes in reading Bulosan from the politics traditionally attributed to him through readings of *America Is in the Heart*, and to read his work otherwise by reading Bulosan negotiating with and gesturing beyond the limits of those politics.

San Juan is *correct* that this would have been the goal of Allos (the diegetic figure) and of Bulosan (the world-historical person), not just because that is essentially stated throughout Bulosan's oeuvre, but also because those are the usual goals of social realist writing—and San Juan is historically faithful and accurate, and analytically sound, to place Bulosan in the social realist tradition and to analyze his work from that perspective. Here, my goal is not to “correct” a “wrong” reading but to examine points in, and aspects of, Bulosan's work that are ignored or summarily dismissed, and ask 1) *why* are they ignored or dismissed?; and 2) by paying attention to them, what might we glean from Bulosan? The answers, for me, being: 1) they are ignored because the reason most people even read Bulosan now is because he has been canonized in Asian American *and* Asian (particularly Filipino) studies and as a progenitor of Asian American and Filipino literature — he was largely forgotten after he died, both in the US and the Philippines, and was not even enormously successful in his own (very short) lifetime; he rose to relevance largely because he fit the model of a burgeoning Asian American literary canon and Asian American discipline: as an ethnic study that arose in the canonization of ethnic disciplines post-sixties (e.g. African American/black studies),

Asian Americanists tended to privilege writings with explicitly political messages—especially anti-imperialist, antiracist, generally left-leaning messages—that directly referenced major Asian American historical events; and Bulosan fit this bill very well. His work was revived largely by the efforts of E. San Juan. Because of the way early Asian Americanists such as Elaine Kim, Gary Okihiro, and Helen Zia, tended to focus on “historical” materials and even had a habit of treating literary objects like historical documents (this is evident in Okihiro’s tendency to reference Japanese literature when it was “about” major events in Japanese American history as though it were an unproblematic primary source, especially internment literature; and in Elaine Kim’s foundational anthology of Asian American literature, which tends to emphasize realist and realist-leaning works over more experimental and non-realist works and is organized not by literary contemporaries, literary schools, techniques, or form but by broad sociological thematics (“assimilation,” “Asian American women,” etc.), authorial ethnicity and demographic (Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, etc.) with little to no serious attention to these literary works *as literature, as art objects*. (This is also how clearly non-realist works and writers, such as Chris Iijima, Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, who were active in non-realist social circles, especially surrealism and the Black Arts Movement, and who identified with non-realist authors and movements, and even non-literary artists like Miné Okubo, who trained with Diego Rivera, were canonized and then bizarrely read as realist writers and artists anyway.) Thus, in moments where

literary and representational form “implodes” or becomes near-impossible to ignore, like the much-criticized *deus ex machina* endings and the farfetched and essentially impossible plot elements in Bulosan’s writing that are either dismissed as “bad writing” or just not addressed at all, the tendency in Asian American studies has been to dismiss them. Again, it is not that I am arguing that these critics’ readings of Bulosan are “wrong” —they are not—but rather that I am more interested in the “failures” and “wrong” moments in his work and what the “wrong” readings that come from them can say, that the “right” (in this case, social realist, sociological, anthropological) readings cannot.

“The Story of a Letter” performs those limits by ending with the quoted letter. In place of the comprehension that education should ostensibly provide, or a comfortably class-conscious camaraderie that an informed politics would rally together, there is only incomprehension, bewilderment—the narrator holds the letter and “start[s] to laugh—choking with tears at the mystery and wonder of it all” (SOL 65):

Dear Father [my brother wrote] [sic]:  
America is a great country. Tall buildings. Wide good land. The people  
walking. But I feel sad. I am writing you this hour of my sentimental.  
Your son—Berto.” (SOL 65; “[my brother wrote]” in the original)

Berto’s letter, in its original English, is at once banal in its brevity, and yet tragic in its illegibility to its intended addressee. After the language of politics of labor unions and civil wars and of the intimate and alienated life of Filipinos in the US, the story ends where it started, with Berto’s still-unread letter. But if in *America Is in the Heart*,

education and literacy allow “a new vista of literature [...] to speak to the people and to be understood by them” in the name of a socialism with a constituency of “a universal brotherhood among men,” in “The Story of a Letter” that education and literacy never accomplish what the father and the narrator set out to do through it—allow the father to read the letter (*AIH* 188, 236). The universal brotherhood eagerly awaited for in *America Is in the Heart* is thwarted in “The Story of a Letter.” Rather than a series of successful lessons that lead to an indefinite but teleological utopian future, there are only series of failures, of ungraspings. But here there is no lost or dead culture to mourn—the father, the story’s primary figure of subalternity, has always already escaped the story’s figuration. The father’s death, whose vague details of happening “some years before” vis-à-vis the careful documentation of Berto’s leave-taking “eighteen years ago” and the letter’s writing “ten years ago,” refuses a mourning in the layers and layers of mediation through which it manifests and reaches the narrator (*SOL* 65). Even the father’s death escapes the attempts to inscribe them.

Rather that obscurity might open other paths, as the father’s mysterious death is not just a passing away but itself a strange translation from father to son, a non-inheritance that gives license to the narrator’s final laugh. That laugh recalls that doubly-folded laugh twisted in on itself when the narrator remembers the woman painter. This laugh—again utterly absurd and yet serious because an expected dynamic of translation,

from subaltern to dominant (colonial education) and vice-versa, fails—marks a failure of language, where the narrator “chokes with tears.”

There are no universal brotherhoods and masses whose consciousness need raising here. The ending is a refusal of triumphalism, a dramatization of the failures of colonial education and literacy, where the subaltern marks its limits and its excess. My argument is that Bulosan tries to mark through his writing precisely that which is in excess of his own writing’s attempts to inscribe it, that which utterly escapes the texts. If Bulosan’s negotiations with, or perhaps tenuous graspings at, the subaltern refuse an origin that can be recovered—thus, rescued and known—from the violence of imperialism that both rends and renders collectivities and the regimes of legibility that bind them together, then perhaps he also opens up an indeterminate futurity with an unhinged politics and knowledge whose ground is pulled out from under them. This uncertainty registers in the narrator’s “laugh [...] at the mystery and wonder of it all” (*SOL* 65). The laugh’s affect is, too, indeterminate—at once a non-linguistic and absurd gesture at the incomplete exchange between his father and brother that he fails to make possible through translation, yet also a laugh that suggests a nebulous hope, or an unreasonable optimism, for a future on the run.



## 2. Maxine Hong Kingston

If, following Raymond Williams' structure of feeling, Carlos Bulosan represents the preemergent of Asian American literature and studies and of Asian American as a coherent social and political formation, then Maxine Hong Kingston is on the threshold where the preemergent breaks into the emergent. Maxine Hong Kingston is perhaps best known in Asian American studies for the success of her first novel *The Woman Warrior*, which won numerous book awards and went on to be one of the most assigned novels in American high schools,<sup>1</sup> as a well as becoming canon in the then-burgeoning fields of Asian American studies and Asian American literature. Kingston wrote *The Woman Warrior* in 1976, in the aftermath of the Asian American movement and the adjacent ethnic power movements which were part of the civil rights movement in the United States. She is known as well for her feud with fellow writer Frank Chin, who famously criticized her as a "fake" Asian whose writing pandered to racist stereotypes of Asian Americans and did not accurately represent the Asian American experience, in part prompting the first published anthology of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeee!*,<sup>2</sup> and setting cultural realness and authenticity as the guiding themes of the critical tradition of

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<sup>1</sup> Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese-American Controversy," in *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives*, 1992: 248–79.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Chin, "Come All Ye Asian Americans of the Real and Fake," in *The Big Aiiieeee!* For more on the Frank Chin vs. Maxine Hong Kingston debate, see also Chin, Frank and Chan, Jeffrey Paul, "Racist Love," in *Seeing Through Shuck*. Ed. Richard Kostelanetz. New York: Ballantine Books, 1972: 65–78.

her work.<sup>3</sup> This chapter reads her work *The Woman Warrior* and argues that the focus on cultural or ethnic authenticity, and on the status of ethnicized aspects of her writing — especially on whether or not they are “orientalist” — has obfuscated the formal aspects of her writing, particularly its more formally experimental and avant-garde elements. These readings and approaches, which often treat her writing as literal autobiographies and sociological accounts (in the vein of Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*) and as historically accurate depictions of Chinese migrants, rather than as aesthetically playful and formally unconventional art objects, were embroiled in the highly politically charged push for the canonization of Asian American literature and the recognition of Asian American studies as a legitimate field of study.<sup>4</sup> While the critical tradition on *The Woman Warrior* has devoted some attention to the aesthetics of the work, early responses to it from figures like Chin as well as from academic critics like Elaine Kim set the tone of the tradition, which privileged politically motivated readings of her work in the service of identity politics. As such, the critical tradition has tended to downplay — or simply ignore — the ways in which her work interrogates, resists, plays with identitarianism.

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<sup>3</sup> Cheung, King-Kok. “The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?” in *Conflicts in Feminism*. Eds. Marianne Hirsh and Evelyn Fox Keller. New York: Routledge, 1990. 234–251.

<sup>4</sup> For works that were formational to the field of Asian American studies that deployed Kinston’s work, see Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*; and Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*.

This chapter examines the formal aspects of her writing in order to show that rather than being straightforward documentations of “the Asian American experience,” or *an* Asian American experience at all, or of objects concerned with authenticity or fidelity to any recognizable culture, Kingston’s work instead delves into diasporic experiences to explore the incoherent, often inchoate, unintelligible ways that people live without — and before — the assignation of an identity. Though Kingston presents *The Woman Warrior* as a memoir, she draws on a mélange of formal conventions of various genres, including folktale and myth, the realist novel and in particular the *bildung*, which trouble its status as a memoir — that is, which trouble its claim to recount the author’s memories of the events of their life, which is also to trouble its claim to be able to represent those experiences at all. In this sense, *The Woman Warrior* could be called a memoir becoming a novel, in that it foregrounds fictionalization and the act of fabulation in its own telling. This chapter asks the question is: how does one tell a story for which there is no available language? Moreover, how does one tell a story in a language which is also the interdiction of that story’s telling? In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston seeks to both create a language in order to represent unrepresentable experiences.

Furthermore, this chapter examines how Kingston pantomimes realist forms associated with the memoir, the autobiography, and the novel, and warps them in various ways in order to test these forms’ openings and limitations, especially in

representing experiences that have no official or recognized validity or cultural, political, or representative lineage. Specifically, the experiences of women and of those in diaspora, especially where they meet, are for Kingston structurally impossible to represent through given realist forms — an impossibility she explores through techniques of narrative and formal warping of realist forms into incoherence, often resembling what might be called the “surreal” or the non-realist “avant-garde,” and through mobilizing “traditional” and “realist” forms only to let them break down into contradiction and unrecognizability.<sup>5</sup> In her story Kingston both shows the mechanisms of violence of assimilation in *conforming* to a given or expected form, and deforms that story in ways that defy those expectations and convention in order to show the violence that injunction to conform does; the work registers the violence of conformity in their deformity, and in their deformation, they also create another register. Finally, this chapter argues that rather than approaching the formal challenges and requirements for representing diasporic — especially diasporic women’s — experiences through explicit depictions of abjection, Kingston’s approach in *The Woman Warrior* is more generative, seeking to forge a language and a tradition out of interdiction and disinheritance in order to tell such stories.

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<sup>5</sup> For an approach to Kingston and to *The Woman Warrior* that is critical of identitarianism, and of the frameworks of identity politics through which it has been read, see King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Joy Kogewa*.

## 2.1 “No Name Woman”

In fitting with *The Woman Warrior*'s promise to deliver a “memoir of a girlhood among ghosts,” the first several pages of the novel report the narrator's mother's version of events, in factual, clinical, even dry detail:

“You must not tell anyone,” my mother said, “what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born.

“In 1924 just a few days after our village celebrated seventeen hurry-up weddings—to make sure that every young man who went ‘out on the road’ would responsibly come home—your father and his brothers and your grandfather and his brothers and your aunt's new husband sailed for America, the Gold Mountain. It was your grandfather's last trip. Those lucky enough to get contracts waved goodbye from the decks. They fed and guarded the stowaways and helped them off in Cuba, New York, Bali, Hawaii. ‘We'll meet in California next year,’ they said. All of them sent money home.

“I remember looking at your aunt one day when she and I were dressing; I had not noticed before that she had such a protruding melon of a stomach. But I did not think, ‘She's pregnant,’ until she began to look like other pregnant women, her shirt pulling and the white tops of her black pants showing. She could not have been pregnant, you see, because her husband had been gone for years. No one said anything. We did not discuss it. In early summer she was ready to have the child, long after the time when it could have been possible. (2)

The narrator's mother then tells that the village, which “had also been counting” the months that the nameless aunt had been pregnant, raided their house on the night that the baby was to be born (2). The villagers slaughtered all of the mother's and aunt's livestock and cornered them inside of their own house. Curiously, despite how violent and gruesome the scene is, and how much detail the narrator's mother dedicates to the various ways in which the villagers ransacked their home and threatened them, even outlining where in their two-winged house the villagers encircled her and the nameless

aunt and going into detail about which parts of the house were set aside for their husbands and future extensions to their families when they returned from the United States (details rendered even more macabre with the knowledge that the pregnant aunt has died and that the husbands never returned to China), and going into *even greater* detail about the things that the villagers destroyed and what they shouted and chanted while they raided the house, the narrator's mother describes the aunt's actual death in vague, anticlimactic terms:

“At that time the house had only two wings. When the men came back, we would build two more to enclose our courtyard and a third one to begin a second courtyard. The villagers pushed through both wings, even your grandparents' rooms, to find your aunt's, which was also mine until the men returned. From this room a new wing for one of the younger families would grow. They ripped up her clothes and shoes and broke her combs, grinding them underfoot. They tore her work from the loom. They scattered the cooking fire and rolled the new weaving in it. We could hear them in the kitchen breaking our bowls and banging the pots. They overturned the great waist-high earthenware jugs; duck eggs, pickled fruits, vegetables burst out and mixed in acrid torrents. The old woman from the next field swept a broom through the air and loosed the spirits-of-the-broom over our heads. 'Pig.' 'Ghost.' 'Pig,' they sobbed and scolded while they ruined our house.

“When they [the villagers] left, they took sugar and oranges to bless themselves. They cut pieces from the dead animals. Some of them took bowls that were not broken and clothes that were not torn. Afterward we swept up the rice and sewed it back up into sacks. But the smells from the spilled preserves lasted. *Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for the water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well.* (3–4; emphases mine)

Rather than telling how the aunt died play-by-play as it happened, in the same way that she tells everything else in the story, the narrator's mother simply says that the aunt gave birth without going into any detail, and that she found the aunt's and the baby's dead bodies in the well, without explaining how they ended up there. And while the

narrator's mother explicitly states from the outset that the aunt killed herself by jumping into the family well, this ellipsis in the mother's version of the story — the actual birth of the baby and the death of the aunt itself — is significant and jarring not only because the lead-up to the aunt's apparently anticlimactic death is so meticulously outlined in comparison, but also simply because the aunt's death is supposed to be the point of the story. The simplicity of the final statement suggests the unrepresentability of the aunt's presumptive shame and despair as well as the uncertainty of her death: her murder by the townspeople or her decision to kill herself and her child. It may be unrepresentable because the mother may not know. But it may also be unrepresentable both because the mother honors the ultimate unknowability of the aunt's thoughts and, perhaps, because she wants to minimize voyeurism. Regardless of the source of the unknowability, the uncertainty is as much the ghost that haunts the tale as the corpses in the well. Uncertainty, that is, haunts the very form of the memoir, which is therefore as much quest as remembrance.

The narrator makes it clear that her mother's story is not satisfactory to her, spending the rest of the chapter musing about her nameless aunt, poking holes into and questioning her mother's version of events. Since the narrator's mother was not supposed to tell her the story or even mention that the aunt had ever existed in the first place, the narrator finds herself with no resources to reconstruct a version of events that is to her satisfaction: "If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or

ordinary, I would have to begin, 'Remember Father's drowned-in-the-well sister?' I cannot ask that. My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts. She will add nothing unless powered by Necessity" (4).<sup>6</sup>

What is curious about this introduction is that while it mimes the memoir form that *The Woman Warrior* promises to deliver — “a memoir of a girlhood among ghosts” — by detailing the ancestry of, or what might even be called a prologue to the story of, the narrator, it works to break the codes of a standard memoir. If the memoir typically details the events of a particular life, usually the life of the writer of the memoir, then “No Name Woman” delivers something like the beginnings of a memoir, following the basic outlines and conventions of the memoir as a genre and form, only to break those conventions in ironic and even oxymoronic ways. Where a memoir is normally about a specific person, usually the writer of the memoir, whose life and deeds would be outlined and clarified, “No Name Woman” struggles to grasp the very existence not of the narrator's life, but rather, of *her aunt's* life, which was extinguished early and whose very existence has been deliberately effaced, only preserved in taboo tales passed down from her mother, which she was admonished not to share and which her mother was never supposed to tell to begin with. The format of “No Name Woman” and the beginning of the ostensible memoir that *The Woman Warrior* is presented as, is

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<sup>6</sup>. See Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, in which Wong explores the thematics of necessity vs. extravagance not just in Kingston's writings but as a major tropological framework in Asian American literature generally.



not only ironic but in its very telling — that is to say, in its *form* — a contradiction: it is a “memoir” about someone else’s life, someone whose life’s vicissitudes are deliberately withheld from both the reader and from the narrator herself, barely fleshed out beyond basic details, and now wholly unverifiable, and whose death (and, from there, life) according to the official record *never even happened and must never be spoken of*. While the critical tradition on Kingston and *The Woman Warrior* has focused on these ellipses as deliberate withholdings of information that impart agency,<sup>7</sup> or as tactics that subvert a masculinist and often additionally white supremacist and colonialist demand for knowledge and self-revelation as an exercise of patriarchal and/or racist power,<sup>8</sup> or have focused on them from a psychoanalytic framework that emphasizes the melancholic structure of racial and ethnic identities,<sup>9</sup> my interest is in the *formal* qualities of these ellipses:

What is perhaps most peculiar about “No Name Woman” is that although it is very explicitly a story that the narrator must never (re)tell, and that her mother should have never told her — *yet which they have both told anyway*, something that the narrator makes clear that she is keenly aware she is doing (“I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her” [14]) — it is also unclear what exactly happened to the narrator’s aunt, or whether anything that the narrator reports happened at all. For the

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<sup>7</sup> King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Joy Kogewa*.

<sup>8</sup> King-Kok Cheung, “‘Don’t Tell’: Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*.”

<sup>9</sup> Anne Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*.

most part, the narrator recounts “No Name Woman” in the same declarative, confident, authoritative, and altogether factual, even clinically factual, tone that her mother did, in fitting with the standard conventions of both the memoir and of realism. Yet flashes of uncertainty punctuate the narrator’s retelling of the events, and she ventures from the straightforward and factual to the speculative:

Adultery is extravagance. Could people who hatch their own chicks and eat the embryos and the heads for delicacies and boil the feet in vinegar for party food, leaving only the gravel, eating even the gizzard lining—could such people engender a prodigal aunt? To be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough. My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family. (5)

The narrator ventures out into the speculative, surmising that “[her aunt] could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex” because “[w]omen in the old China did not choose,” yet follows those speculative threads as though they were established fact: “Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil,” the narrator continues, with the certainty of fact (5). Yet her attempts to reconstruct a history of her aunt are punctuated by moments of uncertainty by a litany of “perhaps”:

*Perhaps* she had encountered him in the fields or on the mountain where the daughters-in-law collected fuel. Or *perhaps* he first noticed her in the marketplace. He was not a stranger because the village housed no strangers. She had to have dealings with him other than sex. *Perhaps* he worked an adjoining field, or he sold her the cloth for the dress she sewed and wore. His demand *must have* surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told. (5–6; emphases mine)

Once the narrator’s mother’s story ends and the narrator’s own exposition begins, the chapter’s form begins to break down, despite the narrator’s otherwise factual tone.

When she tries to flesh out what exactly happened to her aunt beyond the bare bones story that her mother told her, the narrator momentarily shifts from the factual to the speculative (“perhaps”), the indicative to the past subjunctive (“His demand must have surprised, then terrified her”), only to return to the plainly matter-of-fact tone of the indicative, ignoring these speculations’ unverifiability and uncertainty. The narrator even questions the veracity and accuracy of her mother’s story, first poking logical holes into her version (“My mother spoke about the raid as if she had seen it, when she and my aunt [...] should not have been living together at all” [5]), and gesturing towards ellipses and blanks in the story that to her mind do not quite add up (“Her husband’s parents could have sold her, mortgaged her, stoned her. But they had sent her back to her own mother and father, a mysterious act hinting at disgraces not told me” [5]).

As the narrator continues to reconstruct her aunt’s motivations and choices, or lack thereof, for consorting with a man whom she was forbidden to be with, the narration further breaks down into a mix of the speculative and conditional alongside the matter-of-fact and declarative, and into free indirect discourse, mixing what are explicitly stated as the narrator’s thoughts and flights of fancy with unattributed and unqualified information presented as objective fact. The narrator herself briefly addresses her lack of knowledge and the attendant methodological and representative quandaries of trying to tell a story from nothing: “The work of preservation demands that the feelings playing about in one’s guts not be turned into action” (6). And still,

despite the narrator's awareness that the work of preservation is fraught, she continues with her exposition, half-speculation, half-declaration. The entire passage is worth quoting at length:

My aunt must have lived in the same house as my parents and eaten at an outcast table. My mother spoke about the raid as if she had seen it, when she and my aunt, a daughter-in-law to a different household, should not have been living together at all. Daughters-in-law lived with their husbands' parents, not their own; a synonym for marriage in Chinese is "taking a daughter-in-law." Her husband's parents could have sold her, mortgaged her, stoned her. But they had sent her back to her own mother and father, a mysterious act hinting at disgraces not told me. Perhaps they had thrown her out to deflect the avengers.

She was the only daughter; her four brothers went with her father, husband, and uncles "out on the road" and for some years became western men. When the goods were divided among the family, three of the brothers took land, and the youngest, my father, chose an education. After my grandparents gave their daughter away to her husband's family, they had dispensed all the adventure and all the property. They expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection. The heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning. But the rare urge west had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space.

The work of preservation demands that the feelings playing about in one's guts not be turned into action. Just watch their passing like cherry blossoms. But perhaps my aunt, my forerunner, caught in a slow life, let dreams grow and fade and after some months or years went toward what persisted. Fear at the enormities of the forbidden kept her desires delicate, wire and bone. She looked at a man because she liked the way the hair was tucked behind his ears, or she liked the question-mark line of a long torso curving at the shoulder and straight at the hip. For warm eyes or a soft voice or a slow walk—that's all—a few hairs, a line, a brightness, a sound, a pace, she gave up family. She offered us up for a charm that vanished with tiredness, a pigtail that didn't toss when the wind died. Why, the wrong lighting could erase the dearest thing about him.

It could very well have been, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but, a wild woman, kept rollicking company. Imagining her free with sex doesn't fit, though. I don't know any women like that, or men either. Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help.

To sustain her being in love, she often worked at herself in the mirror, guessing at the colors and shapes that would interest him, changing them frequently in order to hit on the right combination. She wanted him to look back.

(5-7)

On one hand, the narrator imagines that her aunt was taken advantage of by a man to whom she could not say no and was thus raped; yet the narrator also imagines that her aunt willfully entered a relationship with a man who was not her husband, *because* she as a woman was not supposed to have that choice: “It could very well have been, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but, a wild woman, kept rollicking company” (7). Here again, the narrator stumbles upon another representative quandary, admitting that “[i]magining her [aunt] free with sex doesn’t fit” (7) and that she has no way of verifying that idea either way: “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she give me no ancestral help” (7).

The operative word here is *imagining* — the narrator must come up with a scenario where there is none in order to make sense of such a fantastical event, and even then, her scenario “doesn’t fit” (7). Even more vexing, the narrator proceeds not only with these speculations and what could only be called imaginative or even alternative histories, which are treated as a facts, but continues under the assumption that *both* alternatives, which are mutually incompatible, are the case. She assumes that her nameless aunt was approached by a man she could not say no to and was thus raped, *and* that she committed the crime of *choosing* whom she loved and wanted to lie with: “perhaps [...] my aunt let dreams grow and fade” (6); “the villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them” (11).

Where a memoir normally provides, or at least claims to provide, trustworthy and accurate exposition on the events of someone's life and their experiences that correlate to "real" events, *The Woman Warrior* starts with life events that are by and large speculative and uncertain. The nature of the relationship between the narrator's aunt and the man who impregnated her is unknown, other than that it was illicit — an important detail that the narrator's mother seems to have not made clear in telling the narrator the story; all that the narrator's mother makes clear and that the narrator can report in confidence is that the aunt "gave birth in a pigsty" (3). The narrator does not know whether the affair that led to her unnamed aunt's death was a consensual romance or a rape, leading her to spend more than half of the chapter's tail end chasing scenarios of *both*. The narrator is not even entirely clear about the most fundamental detail of the story: whether her aunt's death was a murder proper perpetrated by the villagers, as she so strongly suggests and seems to want to believe, or a murder-suicide enacted by her aunt.

After she describes the raw fact that her aunt gave birth to an illegitimate child, the chapter's exposition devolves into a jumble of certainties and uncertainties, established events and unverifiable fabrications, conditionals and indicatives, shifting from the dry and descriptive reportage of facts and events to free indirect discourse and flights of the narrator's fancy, making it unclear whether the narrator is describing indisputable or empirically verified happenings, or the speculations and extrapolations

of her own imagination. Did the narrator's aunt make the ill-fated choice to take a forbidden lover, whether for love or for sex; or was she forced into a situation which she could not resist? All that the narrator can say with absolute certainty is that her aunt got pregnant by a man when she was not supposed to, and that she was punished for it. And when the watchful villagers came to the house where her aunt and her mother lived, two corpses ended up "plugging up" the well. Was the narrator's aunt and her child chased there, and effectively killed by the villagers, even though her mother frames the death as a suicide? Or did her nameless aunt, as the narrator imagines, take preemptive revenge on the villagers by throwing herself and her illegitimate child into the well? In placing the narrator's contradictory and mutually incompatible scenarios next to each other, Kingston begins the novel, presented as a "a memoir of a girlhood among ghosts," not with a stable starting point or a determinate point of reference from which the narrator can draw a line to her own life, in fitting with the traditional memoir form, but with ellipses that point to the uncertainties that belie the narrative form of the memoir.

"No Name Woman," indeed, progressively looks less like a memoir or anything resembling one and more like something entirely different: it ventures from "realist" and representational territory to embrace non-realist and experimental forms. Starting with reported speech from the narrator's mother, it moves to reportage of that information about the aunt from the narrator herself, then ends with what-ifs and

maybes of the narrator's making that fill in the many gaps in the official record of her aunt's infelicitous and unfortunate life. The invocation, and pantomiming of, the "realist" and "memoir" forms lead to an implosion. It is not that Kingston offers a critique of these forms from a vantage point apart from them, but rather that she inhabits them, deploys them, and allows them to do their work — and to break down where they meet their limit, which for her, is where they are called upon to represent experiences that are not acceptable or admissible for a collectively agreed-upon vision of reality, as were No Name Woman's experiences for "the frightened villagers [...] who depended on one another to maintain the real," or when these forms are tasked to give shape to stories that are not meant to be remembered, or are even deliberately effaced from the record entirely, as the narrator's mother makes it clear that No Name Woman was: "It is as if she had never been born" (11; 1).

Furthermore, what is at stake for the narrator, and for Kingston, in testing the limits of — and finding lacking — one's inherited fabulating and literary forms, is not merely whether or not certain representative forms are up to the task of representing a given experience. What is also at stake is, first, making sense of how certain forms' limitations are not a case of mere oversight, accidental or incidental to the form's functioning itself, but rather, that limitation in representative capacity is inherent to and symptomatic of the proper functioning of that form; and second, asking how one whose story which has no given template, would be able to proceed with that representative



inadequacy or that poverty of language. More specifically, the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* explicitly lays out that the stories of women who transgress not just physical *but also social* boundaries, like the narrator's aunt whose transgressions were so unacceptable that not only did she end up dead, but she was also programmatically and deliberately ostensibly condemned to be *forgotten*. By opening her story with the aunt's corpse, the narrator suggests that she is haunted in her own telling by the uncertainties of her position; she depicts her struggle for a place in the culture in which she finds herself—as an Asian American woman—in terms of the all-too-recognizable struggle of a teenage girl:

But, of course, I hexed myself also—no dates. I should have stood up, both arms waving, and shouted out across libraries, “Hey, you! Love me back.” I had no idea, though, how to make attraction selective, how to control its direction and magnitude. If I made myself American-pretty so that the five or six Chinese boys in the class fell in love with me, everyone else—the Caucasian, Negro, and Japanese boys—would too. Sisterliness, dignified and honorable, made much more sense.

Attraction eludes control so stubbornly that whole societies designed to organize relationships among people cannot keep order, not even when they bind people to one another from childhood and raise them together. Among the very poor and the wealthy, brothers married their adopted sisters, like doves. Our family allowed some romance, paying adult brides' prices and providing dowries so that their sons and daughters could marry strangers. Marriage promises to turn strangers into friendly relatives—a nation of siblings.

In the village structure, spirits shimmered among the live creatures, balanced and held in equilibrium by time and land. But one human being flaring up into violence could open up a black hole, a maelstrom that pulled in the sky. The frightened villagers, who depended on one another to maintain the real, went to my aunt to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she had made in the “roundness.” Misallying couples snapped off the future, which was to be embodied in true offspring. The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them. (10–11)

The narrator states that the “[t]he frightened villagers, *who depended on one another to maintain the real*, went to [the narrator’s] aunt to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she had made in the ‘roundness’” (10–11; emphases mine). Much like how the narrator states at the beginning of the chapter, after her mother tells her own version of the nameless aunt’s death after telling the narrator not to tell anyone she has heard the story, that “[her] mother told stories that ran like this one, *a story to grow up on,*” that “she tested our strength *to establish realities*” (4; emphases mine):

Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for the water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well.

“Don’t let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful.”

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities. Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home. Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America.

The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways—always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable. The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence.

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” (4–5)

It is not so much that the narrator abandons the dedication to truth value or to representing “the real,” as much as it is that she pursues those hermeneutic and *formal* principles only to be consistently thwarted — something that the narrator herself points

out each step of the way in "No Name Woman." The telling, transmitting, recollection, and preservation of stories, is laid out as the establishing of the real and of community building, "a story to grow up on" (4). "No Name Woman" immediately establishes the starting point of the novel/memoir/narrator's history, (non-)inheritance, and (non-)lineage as both ones of diaspora and border crossing, since the first several facts the narrator reports from her mother are that her aunt's husband and the narrator's own father set off to the United States from China. These are stories that are (diegetically speaking) meant to give the narrator a story that she can build upon in order to make sense of her own life; and which (formally speaking) tests the representative capacities of the memoir, the novel, or realist form, as a representational object itself. Just as emigrants such as the narrator's mother and father — and No Name's husband — had to "reassert brute survival [...] young and far from home," "[t]hose of us in the first American generations [like the narrator] have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around [their] childhoods fits in solid America" (5).

*The Woman Warrior* starts with an interdiction, as something unspeakable, something she, ironically, cannot tell (2). As such, it is also an act of defiance: she breaks the taboo of speaking of her aunt. She tells her aunt's story and thus acknowledges her existence: "I alone devote pages to her" (2). The very act of that devotion makes her feel "like [she is] telling on her," because it is a crime to simply acknowledge her existence (2), but the narrator embraces her criminality. And while she says that her aunt "gives

[her] no ancestral help," she extends the possibility of her forgotten aunt's life "branch[ing] into [her own]" (6). The narrator is among those offspring of the emigrants who are "always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable," which not only threatens the stability of the emigrants' existence, but threatens an entire social order which turns on those experiences: the experiences of womanhood, the experiences of diaspora, and where those experiences intersect. The narrator's insistence on speaking establishes her inheritance from No Name Woman, who despite never physically leaving China, "crossed boundaries not delineated in space" by breaking the rules, so unacceptable and transgressive that they had to be violently stamped out, deliberately forgotten as though she and her experiences of which her transgressions were a part had never existed at all (5; 6):

After my grandparents gave their daughter away to her husband's family, they had dispensed all the adventure and all the property. They expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection. The heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning. *But the rare urge west had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space.* (5-6; emphases mine)

The first half of the chapter lays out the stakes of both telling the aunt's story and of telling the memoir itself, indeed in telling the memoir as the aunt's untellable story, which is at least in part the source of its metamorphosis from memoir to novel. It starts on the note of impossible inheritance, erasure and (deliberate, violent) forgetting, of the task of making sense of experiences (i.e. diaspora, especially woman in diaspora) which are a *mélange* of known and given templates and also have no set or given rubrics of

their own. It sets the tone for the memoir-turned-novel: as one of telling forbidden and impossible stories for which there are no templates or given forms, and of needing to invent with a language for that experience — in Kingston’s case, “Asian American” or “Chinese American,” particularly Chinese American *women’s* stories.<sup>10</sup> This chapter sets the entire novel’s stake in the role of storytelling in community formation: *how* stories are told — i.e. the *form* that stories take--and how they are transmitted, which shapes how we understand ourselves and the communities we see ourselves as being a part of; and how to give voice and shape to experiences that are foreclosed by inherited and given forms.

## **2.2 “In the Western Palace”**

Brave Orchid’s sister, Moon Orchid, comes from Hong Kong to visit Brave Orchid’s family in the United States. What seems like an ordinary family visit is actually part of Brave Orchid’s plot to reunite Moon Orchid with her long-estranged husband, who had left Moon Orchid in China for the United States long ago and had never come back to reclaim her or to sponsor her so that she could emigrate to the United States and join him there, instead leaving her in China and sending her remittance money. Brave Orchid drags her son and Moon Orchid with her all the way to Moon Orchid’s husband’s office in the city, where they confront him and demand that he reclaim Moon

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the role of allegiance to given cultural formations and norms, especially the role that women play in them, see Leslie Bow, *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women’s Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Orchid as his wife. Brave Orchid's plot, however, fails to help her sister Moon Orchid assert her status as the first wife to her long lost American immigrant husband.

This chapter is the last that focuses on the narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, and rounds out the first four chapters and the first half of the work. Up until the pivotal scene in front of Moon Orchid's husband's office the narrator tells everything in a serious and straightforward tone, regardless of how "fantastical" or "mythological" it may seem; this is one of the only times in the work where the "realistic" and the "unrealistic" are clearly distinguished from each other. More importantly, that distinction is put to the test in Brave Orchid's scheme to get Moon Orchid back her long-estranged husband, and fails spectacularly. It is not just that Brave Orchid's plan fails; it is that the narrator's narratological powers to make sense of the entire episode also break down into comical absurdity and bizzarie.

The chapter sets up (somewhat schematic, and ultimately unstable, as becomes increasingly obvious as the chapter goes on) distinctions among various cultural and social positions and artefacts by assigning them to Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid: distinctions between what is "traditional" and "modern," "Chinese" and "American," and so forth are mapped onto Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid; where Moon Orchid embodies the stereotype of the "traditional Chinese" woman who is delicate and servile and, in Brave Orchid's own words, "the lovely, but useless type" (116), Brave Orchid is the "modern" Chinese emigrant in America who has an education, helps run her

family's laundromat business, and is street smart and savvy about the particular challenges that being a Chinese emigrant in the United States present.

The most salient difference between the two is in their mastery of language, and in how they make sense of the Chinese American emigrant landscape around them. The chapter's narration makes it abundantly clear that Moon Orchid occupies the role of the meek, traditional Chinese woman because she rarely has anything to say of her own, whereas Brave Orchid frequently asserts herself. When Brave Orchid first brings up the topic of finding Moon Orchid's husband, Moon Orchid rejects the idea and says, "But he gives us everything anyway. What more do I have to ask for? If I see him face to face, what is there to say?" (114) "I can think of hundreds of things," said Brave Orchid. "Oh, how I'd love to be in your place. I could tell him so many things. What scenes I could make. You're so wishy-washy" (114).

In a particularly surreal scene, Brave Orchid shows Moon Orchid and Moon Orchid's daughter around Chinatown while they walk to the family's laundromat. On the way, they encounter a panoply of cultural spectacles:

Brave Orchid pointed out the red, green, and gold Chinese school. From the street they could hear children's voices singing the lesson "I Am a Person of the Middle Nation." In front of one of the benevolent associations, a literate man was chanting the *Gold Mountain News*, which was taped to the window. The listening crowd looked at the pictures and said, "Aiaa."

"So this is the United States," Moon Orchid said. "It certainly looks different from China. I'm glad to see the Americans talk like us."

Brave Orchid was again startled at her sister's denseness. "These aren't the Americans. These are the overseas Chinese." (124)

Note that this scene almost seems like a parody of a the idea of a typical busy Chinese street, but there are minor changes that make it, as Brave Orchid tells Moon Orchid, “not [of] the Americans” or of “the overseas Chinese” (124). All sorts of clashes between recognizably “Chinese” and recognizably “American” elements meet here: the children sing “I Am a Person of the Middle Nation” — that is, they are people from China — while they are in the middle of an ethnic ghetto in the United States; people listen to someone chant the *Gold Mountain News* in front of the benevolent associations, where Chinese language and literacy about specifically *American* (the “Gold Mountain”) affairs clash with emigrant children declaring allegiance to a Middle Nation that they have never even seen.

What is most striking about Moon Orchid’s assessment of the spectacle is that what she sees “is the United States” and that while it “looks different from China” (in what way is unclear, since the scene deliberately recalls stock imagery of a Chinese street and is filled with Chinese people), it is nice that “the Americans talk like us.” (124). There are many layers of comical misidentification here, that verge on the plainly absurd: Moon Orchid illogically concludes upon seeing this street full of recognizably “Chinese” accouterments and goings-on, in the middle of an ethnic ghetto (that is, Chinatown) in the United States is somehow both exemplary of the United States and somehow radically different from China. Even more absurd, Moon Orchid, who lives in urban Hong Kong and would thus ostensibly be aware of cultural clashes and mish-



mashes, concludes from what she sees that “the Americans talk like us [the Chinese].” When Brave Orchid, who is astonished by Moon Orchid’s “denseness,” corrects her and says that “These aren’t the Americans. These are the overseas Chinese,” Moon Orchid’s bewildering denseness and inability to make sense of basic cultural signs and signifiers becomes all the more vexing, because Brave Orchid and her family are all “overseas Chinese,” as are Moon Orchid’s daughter and now Moon Orchid herself as well. It is not just that Moon Orchid cannot make sense of overdetermined cultural artefacts like children singing their allegiance to what is effectively a foreign country to them or to people reading and listening to *Gold Mountain News*; it is that she cannot even recognize people who are by definition and by example “her own”: her own people, as fellow overseas Chinese, and more intimately, her own kin. The lines between competence and incompetence and between lucidity and insanity are drawn at whether one can differentiate between “what is American and what is Chinese” — Brave Orchid can navigate this mishmash of competing and overlapping overdetermined cultural signs and make sense of them; Moon Orchid simply cannot, to the point that even what should be her kinsfolk, are unrecognizable to her.

Note that this is where the text shifts, unannounced and without warning, to Moon Orchid’s perspective. Her assessments of everything around her, particularly about Brave Orchid’s children, are based in cultural assumptions about what is “Chinese” and what is “barbarian” or “American,” and do not square with reality or

with what the text presents as Brave Orchid's or her children's points of view. Moon Orchid thinks that Brave Orchid's children are "dumb," but Brave Orchid thinks that Moon Orchid is the one who is simple-minded. Where Moon Orchid finds Brave Orchid's children rude and even "savage," they find her poking and prodding bizarre, irritating, and obnoxious (123):

She hovered over a child who was reading, and she pointed at certain words. "What's that?" she tapped at a section that somebody had underlined or annotated. If the child was being patient, he said, "That's an important part."

"Why is it important?"

"Because it tells the main idea here."

"What's the main idea?"

"I don't know the Chinese words for it."

"They're so clever," Moon Orchid would exclaim. "They're so smart. Isn't it wonderful they know things that can't be said in Chinese?"

"Thank you," the child said. When she complimented them, they agreed with her! Not once did she hear a child deny a compliment.

"You're pretty," she said.

"Thank you, Aunt," they answered. How vain. She marveled at their vanity.

"You play the radio beautifully," she teased, and sure enough, they gave one another puzzled looks. She tried all kinds of compliments, and they never said, "Oh, no, you're too kind. I can't play it at all. I'm stupid. I'm ugly." They were capable children; they could do servants' work. But they were not modest.

"What time is it?" she asked, testing what kinds of minds they had, raised away from civilization. She discovered they could tell time very well. And they knew the Chinese words for "thermometer" and "library." (122-123)

This is a crucial passage — predicting the fight between the narrator and her mother in the next chapter over "Chinese like to say the opposite. Moon Orchid interprets the different customs in which Brave Orchid's children have been raised, most notably their ignorance of the expected Chinese response, which Brave Orchid later explains to the narrator, "That's what we're [Chinese] supposed to say. Chinese like to say the

opposite" (190), to be vanity and stupidity. Also note the *heavy* usage of unironic animalistic terms to describe the children in passages that are from Moon Orchid's perspective — contrast with how she ends up being an "unreliable" figure because Brave Orchid, the "master of talk-story," considers her dumb and not good at speaking, and because she ends up going insane (because she only "has one talk-story").

Also note the almost anthropologic tone of passages from Moon Orchid's POV — she observes what she herself considers "animals" and "away from civilization," even testing it in invasive and bizarre ways that piss off the children, and seem to bewilder Brave Orchid — but she ultimately becomes the caged one (in an asylum) and is the one who is not aware of what everyone else is doing.

"But they enjoy looking like furry animals. That's it, isn't it? You enjoy looking like wild animals, don't you?"

"I don't look like a wild animal!" the child would yell like its mother.

"Like an Indian, then. Right?"

"No!"

Moon Orchid stroked their poor white hair. She tugged at their sleeves and poked their shoulders and stomachs. It was as if she were seeing how much it took to provoke a savage. (123)

Ultimately, Moon Orchid's difficulty communicating with her relatives—her inability to cross, or even recognize, the cultural divide, begins to change her. Moon Orchid's behavior becomes weirder and weirder and more and more at odds with the rest of the family's. She grasps for familiarity through narration, detailing everything and echoing what she sees in raw, dry description, as if she were an anthropologist observing an exotic "savage" tribe. Her way of narrating the world around her is like a

parody of realism, and it is clearly insufficient either to stabilize her or to allow her to communicate with her family. Brave Orchid finds her tiresome, incompetent, and useless and her nieces and nephews find her annoying and weird. Her “social realist” narration turns her relatives into characters in a story and effectively effaces their materiality:

She spent the evening observing the children. She liked to figure them out. She described them aloud. “Now they’re studying again. They read so much. Is it because they have enormous quantities to learn, and they’re trying not to be savages?” (129)

“Aunt, please take your finger out of the batter.”

She says, “Aunt, please take your finger out of the batter,” Moon Orchid repeated as she turned to follow another niece walking through the kitchen. (129)

What is ironic, and even more absurd, is that Moon Orchid starts describing the trivia of her sister and her sister’s family in this way — by describing it factually as it happens, almost in the way that a zoologist would describe animals in a safari (““You enjoy looking like wild animals, don’t you?”” [123]) or an anthropologist would an exotic tribe (““Like an Indian, then. Right?”” [123]), or even in the way that a journalist would describe events to their readership, which is the model of the relationship between the author and reader in social realism — precisely because the children do not respond to her compliments by rejecting them, and “saying the opposite” as Chinese are supposed to. By miming what she thinks is how Brave Orchid’s Chinese American children speak, which is to not say the opposite, and to respond to questions directly, Moon Orchid does not make any more sense of the “savage” “ghost” children before her or the “barbarian” country she finds herself in — in fact, her attempt to do so only makes her seem weirder

and more at odds with them, to the point of comic absurdity. Rather than generating insight into their lives and ways, or helping Moon Orchid make sense of and integrate more smoothly amongst Brave Orchid and her Chinese American children (which Moon Orchid, in an ironic parody of ethnography, regards as uncultured “barbarians” with no manners), this behavior only further distances Moon Orchid from her sister and her sister’s Chinese American children and confuses her even more.

Eventually Brave Orchid decides to set her plan to get back Moon Orchid’s husband in motion, and here the chapter’s form breaks down significantly. Compare the following scene, in which Brave Orchid introduces Moon Orchid and explains her situation with her husband to some of the fellow women in Chinatown, who *joke* about all the extreme and outlandish things that Moon Orchid would need to do in order to get her husband back:

“This is my sister who has come to Gold Mountain to reclaim her husband.” Many of the women were fellow villagers; other might as well have been villagers, together so long in California.

“Marvelous. You could blackmail him,” the women advised. “Have him arrested if he doesn’t take you back.”

“Disguise yourself as a mysterious lady and find out how bad he is.”

“You’ve got to do some husband beating, that’s what you’ve got to do.”

They were joking about her. Moon Orchid smiled and tried to think of a joke too. (127)

Even here, Moon Orchid is characteristically unable to come up with something to say. Even when the topic of her husband and of getting him back is broached to her as a joke, she is at a loss for words, unable to participate in either a serious or jesting discussion of her husband — and thus finds herself yet again unable to make crucial distinctions not

only between what is Chinese and American (as she fails to do when her sister Brave Orchid takes her around Chinatown), but also between the straightforward and the ironic, between dead seriousness (which characterizes Brave Orchid's attitude toward getting back Moon Orchid's husband) and the deadpan but ultimately unserious (which characterizes the local emigrants' attitude toward it).

When Moon Orchid's daughter must return to Los Angeles to see her family because she can only stay with Brave Orchid's family for a few weeks, Brave Orchid resolves to bring Moon Orchid with her so that they can finally confront Moon Orchid's husband, and drags along her son to drive them. In contrast to the straightforward but jesting language in the exchange above between Moon Orchid and the villagers, who give Moon Orchid outlandish suggestions for how to get her husband back, suggestions which mirror Brave Orchid's — "blackmail," "disguis[ing onself] as a mysterious lady," "husband beating," etc. (127) — Brave Orchid offers her equally outlandish ideas while they are driving to the city with absolutely no irony. There is nothing in either her speech, her reported actions, or any extradiegetic material that indicates anything other than complete seriousness.

On the car ride to the city, where Moon Orchid's husband works, Brave Orchid tells a story:

Everybody was only half awake. "A long time ago," began Brave Orchid, "the emperors had four wives, one at each point of the compass, and they lived in four palaces. The Empress of the West would connive for power, but the Empress of the East was good and kind and full of light. You are the Empress of the East, and the Empress of the West has imprisoned the Earth's Emperor in the

Western Palace. And you, the good Empress of the East, come out of the dawn to invade her land and free the Emperor. You must break the strong spell she has cast on him that has lost him the East." (131–132)

This story is a plainly obvious, comically overwrought, allegory for Western imperialism: the evil and power hungry Empress of the West (very literally *the West*, i.e. "white" Europe and the United States) steals the good and righteous Empress of the East's (very literally *the East*, e.g. China, East Asia, or the "orient") husband (Moon Orchid's husband, the immigrant Chinese) and imprisoned him in her tower, which the good Empress of the East must invade in order to vanquish the evil Empress of the West and "break the strong spell she has cast on [her husband] that has lost him the East" (132).

Despite being the sensible sister, all of Brave Orchid's plans for Moon Orchid to take back her husband are completely impractical, outlandish, and heavily embellished in fantastic and figurative language that is at odds with the narrative exposition and even the way that Moon Orchid talks, in raw description. In fact, almost all of Brave Orchid's plans read like the dreams and legends that she talk-stories to her children.

The car ride becomes more and more bizarre, as Brave Orchid concocts more hypothetical scenarios that become more and more fantastical while Moon Orchid resists, Brave Orchid's annoyed son drives, and Moon Orchid's daughter asks to be dropped off at her house first (134). Notice that there is *no* explicit indication, despite the weirdness of Brave Orchid's plans vis-à-vis the seeming normality around her, that anything that she says is unusual, impractical, implausible, or out of the ordinary. As the

party approaches the city to confront Moon Orchid's husband, the form of the narration breaks down significantly. Brave Orchid, who has up until then been presented as rational, practical, savvy, and in touch with the world, concocts wild and outlandish plans to get Moon Orchid's husband to take her back, often wrapped up in highly figurative and metaphorical language and stock tropes of Chinese myth, themselves deployed for tacky, overly obvious allegory. All of this contrasts with Moon Orchid's unusually practical, reasonable protests ("what if he doesn't take me back," "let's go back home") and even Brave Orchid's son's resistance and exasperation. It is at this point that the strangeness of Brave Orchid's narrative styles (and by extension, the novel's) are *explicitly pointed out and presented as "unusual,"* and Moon Orchid's associated narrative styles are *explicitly* pointed out as relatively and comparatively "practical," "realistic," or "reasonable" — which not only goes against the trend established by the chapter and throughout most of the arc of the entire work, but totally confounds the distinctions between the "realistic" and "unrealistic" that Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid are supposed to represent.

On one hand, these contradictory and co-occurring threads might point to a narrative/counternarrative structure in which the text establishes a normative and/or dominant narrative and then a counternarrative against that narrative, often mapped onto identitarian categories (e.g. "Chinese girls are expected to be wives and slaves" → "my mother, who emigrated to the West, therefore tells us stories about Fa Mu Lan and



becoming an educated and respected doctor”), but this is actually not quite the case — in fact, these stories are all often told and presented as “normative” cases, therefore contradicting each other; and the suggested identitarian categories that they might initially seem to represent (e.g. Chinese vs. American) also break down in logical inconsistencies (e.g. Brave Orchid became a respected doctor in both Chinese and Western medicine in China while her husband was away, but lost the ability to practice in the US, where she would ostensibly be freed from ancient Chinese practices and therefore “liberated,” and thus ended up going into the far less lucrative and esteemed laundromat business like many Chinese emigrants). Furthermore, these distinctions break down at the level of form, because formal conventions that might *initially* seem to demarcate “Chinese” from “American” memories (fable, fairytale, nonrealism, lack of stable subjects and perspectives/POVs vs. realism, formal *bildung* structure, straightforward reportage, highly structured perspectivism, etc.) also break down, etc. as they do at the end of “In the Western Palace,” where Brave Orchid’s schemes, articulated through and based in Chinese folktale, not only become increasingly ridiculous (as her son reminds her, and the viewers, by pointing out how impractical and ridiculous they are, and how they will not succeed in restoring Moon Orchid’s husband to her).

When the party arrives at Moon Orchid’s husband’s office inside the skyscraper, the narration shifts to Brave Orchid’s perspective, which is narrated in almost the same

way that the episode of Fa Mu Lan climbing the mountain is — detailing fantastical tactics and plans, fast pace, etc.

Brave Orchid, who had been a surgeon too, thought that her brother-in-law must be a clever man. She herself could not practice openly in the United States because the training here was so different and because she could never learn English. He was smart enough to learn ghost ways. She would have to be clever to outwit him. (137–138)

“Oh, I’m so scared. I can’t move. I can’t do that in front of all those people — like a stage show. I won’t be able to talk.” And sure enough, her voice was fading into a whisper. (138)

“So, a new plan, then,” said Brave Orchid, looking at her son, who had his forehead on the steering wheel. “You,” She said. “I want you to go up to his office and tell your uncle that there has been an accident in the street. A woman’s leg has been broken, and she’s crying in pain. He’ll have to come. You bring him to the car.”

“Mother.”

“Mm,” mused Brave Orchid. “Maybe we ought to put your aunt in the middle of the street, and she can lie down with her leg bent under her.” But Moon Orchid kept shaking her head in trembling no’s.

“Why don’t you push her down in the intersection and pour ketchup on her? I’ll run over her a little bit,” said her son.

“Stop being silly,” she said. “You Americans don’t take life seriously.”

“Mother, this is ridiculous. The whole thing is ridiculous.”

“Go. Do what I tell you,” she said.

“I think your schemes will be useless, Mother.”

“What do you know about Chinese business?” she said. “Do as I say.”

“Don’t let him bring the nurse,” said Moon Orchid.

“Don’t you want to see what she looks like?” asked Brave Orchid. “Then you’ll know what he’s giving up for you.”

“No. No. She’s none of my business. She’s unimportant.”

“Speak in English,” Brave Orchid told her son. “Then he’ll feel he has to come down with you.”

She pushed her son out of the car. “I don’t want to do this,” he said.

“You’ll ruin your aunt’s life if you don’t. You can’t understand business begun in China. Just do what I say. Go.”

Slamming the car door behind him, he left. (139–140)

Notably, it is Brave Orchid’s *son* who points out how absurd his mother’s schemes are, as they go to the city. This is the first, and only, time in the chapter when Brave Orchid’s

ridiculous schemes are discussed as such — by her son, the American-born Chinese. It is also significant that the narrator's voice takes a backseat and Brave Orchid's descriptions of things and invocations of Chinese folktale and myth are presented in more free indirect discourse style and more directly ("Brave Orchid said, 'so and so'" cuts out Brave Orchid's reportage to become simply, "'so and so'" and opts to imply it instead, or have the reader assume it) when Brave Orchid finally decides to take her niece, her son, and Moon Orchid with her to the city to confront Moon Orchid's husband. The more the chapter proceeds, the more deeply it invokes Brave Orchid's voice, and the more absurd it becomes. Brave Orchid's son's remarks, and the failures of Brave Orchid's schemes, make extant to the reader how far from "baseline" the story has drifted and how much the form has broken down.

We now arrive at the sisters' disastrous rendezvous with Moon Orchid's husband. Brave Orchid drags Moon Orchid with her to confront Moon Orchid's husband to remind him that she is his first wife after much cajoling; they arrive at the office where Moon Orchid's husband works and find that he has become a doctor (like Brave Orchid, which she herself takes note of) and that he has a second wife (who is his receptionist and strongly implied to be an American-born Chinese). The second wife tells them that they cannot speak to Moon Orchid's husband and Moon Orchid quails. Brave Orchid has her son go inside and pretend that someone has broken their leg outside. The husband comes out and is confronted by Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid;

he recognizes Moon Orchid and asks her why she is there and tells her that she should leave. Brave Orchid unsuccessfully tries to persuade him to take Moon Orchid in, confident that he would heed their demand (“Chinese business”). Moon Orchid’s husband demands her silence, even her expulsion. He not only categorically dismisses her, telling her that she “can’t belong” (to America, that is) and that she should return to China to continue her old life with the money that he sends her (153). Brave Orchid speaks for Moon Orchid, who stands there silently, for the entire verbal exchange (Moon Orchid only utters one line), and her husband tells her that she “can’t talk to them [his important American guests]. [She] can barely talk to [him]” (153). When Brave Orchid protests that he has made Moon Orchid live “like a slave,” he protests that she has lived comfortably because of him: “You go live with your daughter. I’ll mail you the money I’ve always lent you [...] There wasn’t anything she thought of that she couldn’t buy. I have been a good husband” (152–153).

A key passage uses free indirect discourse to make undecidable the narrator’s access to her mother’s story she is retelling: “Her husband looked like one of the ghosts passing the car windows, and [Moon Orchid] must look like a ghost from China. They had indeed entered the land of ghosts, and they had become ghosts” (153). —limited or not? take as “interpretation” or as “fact?” — He is a Chinese American “ghost” acculturated into American society, unlike Moon Orchid and even Brave Orchid, who cannot speak English and still follows Chinese custom. Moon Orchid’s husband

relegates Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid to a dead, Chinese past by telling them that “[t]he new life around [him] was so complete; it pulled [him] away. [Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid] became people in a book [he] had read a long time ago” (154). Brave Orchid refuses this dismissal while casually accepting defeat, remarking that “[w]e’re all under the same sky and walk the same earth; we’re alive together during the same moment” to her son as they drive away to take Moon Orchid to her daughter’s house in Los Angeles (154).

This scene is pivotal because 1) it ends the first half of the novel, which is largely about and partly narrated by Brave Orchid, and summarizes the structure and tone of the first four chapters; 2) it is the only time that a male character says anything substantive in the entire novel, and the only time that a male character says something that either the narrator or the mother reports secondhand; 3) it is the first time that Brave Orchid’s powers of talk-story and language are shown to be finite and fallible; 4) it is a metacommentary on the uses of language of the novel itself.

This chapter is a story of the failure of two plots: both of Brave Orchid’s plot, or scheme, for her sister to reclaim her husband, and of Brave Orchid’s plot, or story, that she wants to make real by executing that scheme. It is also the failure to resurrect two ghosts: both in the sense of the failure to recreate or change the past, as Brave Orchid fails in her plot to bring Moon Orchid from China to the United States and make her now thoroughly assimilated husband reclaim her as his wife again; and in the sense of

the failure to conform “Chinese business” to the new ways of life in America the ghost country, since Brave Orchid’s framing of her plot as The Empress of the East vanquishing the The Empress of the West to rescue her husband, or her scheme to simply remind Moon Orchid’s husband of his marriage to her back in China, fails simply because not only has the husband become a “ghost,” but Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid *too* “had indeed entered the land of ghosts, and had become ghosts” (153). Multiples senses of “ghost” run together here: whereas “[Moon Orchid’s] husband looked like one of the ghosts passing the car windows, [...] [Moon Orchid] must look like a ghost from China” (154). They are *both* ghosts, but in critically different ways. Moon Orchid’s husband is a “ghost” like the other American ghosts “passing the car windows” — that is, a foreigner to Moon Orchid who had just come from China and to Brave Orchid who mistakenly expects him to honor the customs of “Chinese business.” Moon Orchid is a ghost from China in that she is a foreigner to her now Americanized husband who has become accustomed to a country that is strange and foreign to her.

Moreover, where Moon Orchid and her husband had both become ghosts, in the sense of *foreigners*, to each other, separated by the vicissitudes of migration and assimilation; Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid had become ghosts, in the sense of *people from the past*, or people stuck in the past, trying to relitigate old “Chinese business” in front of a place of business in America, where the old rules do not apply and the old stories do not register. It is not only that Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid had entered the

land of ghosts and become ghosts, in the sense of having entered Brave Orchid's absurd Chinese folktale world to reclaim Moon Orchid's husband which Brave Orchid's own son points out is ridiculous. It is also that in trying to bring up old Chinese business in America they become figments of the past, or bygone characters from a time long past, as Moon Orchid's husband tells them: "You became people in a book I had read a long time ago" (153).

The people standing before the husband are relegated to fabula, to distant and unreal legend and fable. The past is described as story and a construction of language, and those who do not have access to the codes of that language cannot have a story or a place in time — note that the husband tells Moon Orchid to her face that she cannot even speak to him, even though diegetically they are both speaking Chinese, and that she is described as recoiling and shrinking. Brave Orchid, in that light, is a ghost in *all* senses: she is both a ghost stuck in the past, a ghost from China who had become like a character in an old book; *and* as the savvy sister who fails to acculturate Moon Orchid to the ghost country that is America, she is also an American ghost futilely trying to make that old book come to life. Brave Orchid wants to both rewrite the past, and to rewrite it in a *format* that is inadequate. She cannot tell a story with a form that interdicts its own telling, or which has no available or given form with which to tell it: the story of woman in diaspora. The forms of Chinese folktale and of the assimilation story both turn up inadequate to the task of representing the story of women in diaspora, leaving

Moon Orchid at an impasse, without a way to tell her own story (mirroring her descent into insanity at the end of the chapter).

### **2.3 “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”**

“A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” is *The Woman Warrior*’s final and longest chapter, spanning the last half of the novel. It is the only one told from the perspective of the narrator, representing her efforts to claim her voice and her story. The chapter begins with the narrator’s brother and sister talking; the brother recounts the encounter between their mother and Moon Orchid and her husband at the office to the sister, who in turn the narrator claims told her. It is an indirect story, like the mother’s account of No Name Aunt. The account quickly segues into an account of her mother’s cutting the frenum of her tongue when she was a baby, suggesting a materialization of her mother’s injunction not to tell the story of her aunt. It is a meditation on story telling in several ways:

In fact, it wasn’t me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he’d told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs. The hearer can carry it tucked away without it taking up much room. Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it anymore. If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker.

Maybe that’s why my mother cut my tongue. She pushed my tongue up and sliced the frenum. Or maybe she snipped it with a pair of nail scissors. I don’t remember her doing it, only her telling me about it, but all during childhood I felt sorry for the baby whose mother waited with scissors or knife in hand for it to cry—and then, when its mouth was wide open like a baby bird’s, cut. The Chinese say “a ready tongue is an evil.”



I used to curl up my tongue in front of the mirror and tauten my frenum into a white line, itself as thin as a razor blade. I saw no scars in my mouth. I thought perhaps I had had two frena, and she had cut one. I made other children open their mouths so I could compare theirs to mine. I saw perfect pink membranes stretching into precise edges that looked easy enough to cut. Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified—the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue.

“Why did you do that to me, Mother?”

“I told you.”

“Tell me again.”

“I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You’ll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You’ll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it.”

“But isn’t ‘a ready tongue an evil?’”

“Things are different in this ghost country.”

“Did it hurt me? Did I cry and bleed?”

“I don’t remember. Probably.”

She didn’t cut the other children’s. When I asked cousins and other Chinese children whether their mothers had cut their tongues loose, they said, “What?” (151–152)

From the outset, the narrator positions herself against her brother, and everyone else, as an embellisher. Where her brother’s stories are characterized by “bareness,” a variant on Moon Orchid’s realist narration, the narrator’s are “twisted into designs”; she speculates that if she had lived in China, she “would have been an outlaw knot-maker” because she would have made illegal knots that are “so complicated that [they blind] the knot-maker” (151).

For the narrator, the slicing of her frenum represents an act that is both terrible and significant, one that marks her from her siblings (“she didn’t cut the other children’s”). What appears to be an act of cruel punishment for her knot making, however, is in fact a gesture of enabling. Brave Orchid explains to the narrator that she

cut her tongue so that it “would be able to move in any language” so that she would “be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another” (152). The act, in other words, prepares her to become a story teller, and to use her stories — her capacity for language — to bridge two worlds. Whether her mother cutting her tongue was good or bad for the narrator, or whether or not she really cut it at all, is a vexed question:

“Why didn’t you cut my brothers’ and sisters’ tongues?”

“They didn’t need it.”

“Why not? Were theirs longer than mine?”

“Why don’t you quit blabbering and get to work?”

If my mother was not lying she should have cut more, scraped away the rest of the frenum skin, because I have a terrible time talking. Or she should not have cut at all, tampering with my speech. When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. (152)

The narrator’s story telling emerges from what she cannot say. The chapter revolves around several episodes from the narrator’s childhood, which she gradually compiles in a mental list of things she wants to tell her mother, but for whatever reason cannot: “Maybe because I was the one with the tongue cut loose, I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother” (184). Most of the items on her list are juvenile misdeeds like stealing from the cash register at her parents’ laundromat and getting into fights at Chinese school, which the narrator compares to the Catholic confession that the Mexican and Filipino girls at her school attend; the narrator envies “their chance each Saturday to tell even thoughts that were sinful” (184). For the narrator, the story telling is a way of making a place for herself by reshaping the

world. The narrator hatches a plan to whittle down the list by telling her mother one item a day: "If only I could let my mother know the list, she — and the world — would become more like me, and I would never be alone again" (185)

For the narrator, storytelling, or "talk story," is also a way to establish continuity. The ethos of reading off of a list, in the service of telling one's "inner truth" or one's true feelings" which would make them understood to another, resembles the structure of traditional realism, in that it presents a collection of ostensibly objective phenomena whose reportage in itself would convey the reality of a situation — and it fails. The notion that there would be an exhaustive list that would bridge this gap — a generational gap, a cultural gap, a historical gap—is explored, and is something that the narrator initially seems to believe in. But the list only keeps lengthening, rather than shortening, even after the narrator initiates her plan to whittle it down by revealing one item a day.

When the narrator shares the first and most trivial items on her list this plan seems to work, and she feels emboldened "to do a really hard one" (186). However, when she tries to tell more difficult items on her list (the first difficult item being that she prayed to the Mexican and Filipino girls' Catholic God for a white horse), she speaks in a voice that represents her American self and is unfamiliar to her family: "suddenly the duck voice came out, which [she] did not use with [her] family" (186). Contrasted with

the narrator's difficulty communicating what she considers the more difficult and forbidden items on her list, her mother is nonplussed, even annoyed:

On my two nights off, I had sat on the floor too but had not said a word.  
"Mother," I whispered and quacked.

"I can't stand this whispering," she said looking right at me, stopping her squeezing. "Senseless gabblings every night. I wish you would stop. Go away and work. Whispering, whispering, making no sense. Madness. I don't feel like hearing your craziness."

So I had to stop, relieved in some ways. I shut my mouth, but I felt something alive tearing at my throat, bite by bite, from the inside. Soon there would be three hundred things, and too late to get them out before my mother grew old and died. (187)

The narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, describes her daughter's attempts to communicate (mostly very banal) items from her list as "whispering," "madness," and "craziness," reminiscent of the description of the other tragic women who populate the first half of the novel. The characterization of the narrator's speech and communicative abilities, or the ability to "talk story," as a form of craziness structures most of her own descriptions of her own narration throughout the chapter. The violence that motivates the stories is implicit in this response, as it is in the insistence of the stories, which need to be told.

Earlier in the chapter, the narrator states, "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves" (173). As Brave Orchid notes in relation to Moon Orchid's attempts at storytelling: "The difference between mad people and sane people [...] is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over" (148-149). Where the purpose of the narrator's telling her list is to make

her mother and the world “more like [herself]” so that “[she] would never be alone again” (185), Moon Orchid states when she is in the insane asylum that since she and the other insane people there “speak the same language,” they are a family of daughters who “understand one another” and who live together in a world which “[n]o one ever leaves” (149).

When the narrator muses about the necessary role of the crazy woman in society, she very explicitly assigns that role to herself, her language again echoing and alluding to scenes and figures from previous chapters, such as the crazy woman in the village who is stoned during the air raid whom Brave Orchid cannot save from the villagers: “I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be It at our house? Probably me” (177). The stories, then, are at once an expression of the craziness, which is to say the insistence on seeing what others do not and saying what will not, they are also the antidote. But the stories must at once be more than simple repetition, and they must make sense: the knots must be complex and artful, but not so complex they cannot be untied. The stories, in other words, must be interpretations rather than simple reiterations. And they must be world changing. In fact, part of the reason the narrator wants to name off all the items on her list to her mother is not only to unburden herself of the list and to make herself understood to her mother, but to establish a form of continuity between herself and her mother: to make

her mother and the world “more like [herself]” so that “[she] will never be alone again” (185).

While outlining her motivations for telling her list to her mother, the narrator adds: “And I wanted to ask again why the women in our family have a split nail on our left little toe. Whenever we asked our parents about it, they would glance at each other, embarrassed. I think I’ve heard one of them say, ‘She didn’t get away.’ I made up that we are descended from an ancestress who stubbed her toe and fell when running from a rapist. I wanted to ask my mother if I had guessed right” (185). This description uses the language that the narrator uses for No Name Woman running away from the villagers: the parents are embarrassed about a mysterious unnamed woman who “didn’t get away” from something, in the way that No Name Woman did not get away from the mob of angry villagers and was, according to the narrator’s mother, deliberately forgotten because she was an embarrassment to the narrator’s father’s family. Just as in “No Name Woman,” where the narrator speculates whether her aunt had been raped or had freely chosen to commit adultery and whether that was what caused the villagers to chase her out of her home, this ancestress whom the narrator “made up” had been raped and ran away from him.

We come full circle: however, there are key differences between the narrator’s account of No Name Woman in the first chapter (which is, also remember, really the narrator’s account of her mother’s account, which she was already never supposed to

share or tell) and in this chapter. No Name Woman is a figure of *non*-inheritance: she stands in for all that has been cast out of inheritance, not only because she birthed a baby which died (or was killed) and because she too had died (or had been killed), but also because she was completely forgotten and forbidden to be remembered or spoken of (and deliberately so). In “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” the first and only chapter that is about the narrator, however, echoes of No Name Woman resurface, but with her cast as an “*ancestress*” — as someone who is part of a familial and temporal continuity and who has a lineage, of which the narrator and her mother and her other female relatives are inheritors. In that light, the narrator’s question — whether she was right about this hypothetical or conjectural “*ancestress*” — is paradoxical.

“I don’t see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn’t; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along. If we had to depend on being told, we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death” (173). The narrator disputes the notion of a unitary, continuous, recognizably Chinese culture that is stable across time and space, instead positing that “everyone makes it up as they go along” (173). The dismissal of a continuous and stable Chinese culture is also the rejection of a stable personal familial or hereditary lineage, which is also something that one could argue that people “make up as they go along.” This is an argument that the narrator implicitly makes about herself and her relation (or

lack thereof) to No Name Woman, and to all the women in whom No Name Woman echoes.

And like the other tragic and “crazy” women from past chapters, marriage presents the biggest threat to the narrator. Marriage, in fact, is what scares the narrator most, in particular because she sees marriage as a form of slavery. “I did not want to be our crazy one.” (177) Her desire to not be the crazy one is also her desire to not suffer the same fate that other “crazy” woman in her ancestry and in previous chapters of *The Woman Warrior* — marriage, servitude, and tragedy. She sees herself as the “crazy one” of her family and casts her mother’s “cutting her tongue” and what she calls her mother’s attempts to “fix” her voice as attempts to make her marriageable, just as she seeks to reunite Moon Orchid to her first husband, driving her to madness as she does so: “Maybe my mother was afraid that I’d say things like that out loud and so had cut my tongue. Now again plans were urgently afoot to fix me up, to improve my voice. The wealthiest villager wife came to the laundry one day to have a listen” (179). The villager wife is a woman who arranges immigrants’ entry into the local Chinatown community: “She was a woman of such power that all we immigrants and descendants of immigrants were obliged to her family forever for bringing us here and for finding us jobs” (179). When the village wife tells the narrator’s mother to do something about the narrator’s voice, the narrator sees this as part of a plan to “marry [her] off” (180). While describing the villagers’ obsession with marriage and the presumed plan to marry her



off, the narrator brings up an episode in which she stumbles onto a Chinese opera staged in her local Chinatown.

The villagers' peasant minds converged on marriage. Late at night when we walked home from the laundry, they should have been sleeping behind locked doors, not overflowing into the streets in front of the benevolent associations, all alit. We stood on tiptoes and on one another's shoulders, and through the door we saw spotlights open on tall singers afire with sequins. An opera from San Francisco! An opera from Hong Kong! Usually I did not understand the words in operas, whether because of our obscure dialect or theirs I didn't know, but I heard one line sung out into the night air in a woman's voice high and clear as ice. She was standing on a chair, and she sang, "Beat me, then, beat me." The crowd laughed until the tears rolled down their cheeks while the cymbals clashed—the dragon's copper laugh—and the drums banged like firecrackers. "She is playing the part of a new daughter-in-law," my mother explained. "Beat me, then, beat me," she sang again and again. It must have been a refrain; each time she sang it, the audience broke up laughing. Men laughed; women laughed. They were having a great time.

"Chinese smeared bad daughters-in-law with honey and tied them naked on top of ant nests," my father said. "A husband may kill a wife who disobeys him. Confucius said that." Confucius, the rational man.

The singer, I thought, sounded like me talking, yet everyone said, "Oh, beautiful. Beautiful," when she sang high. (180–181)

The narrator then mentions ads in local Chinese newspapers and worries that her parents are placing ads for find her and her sisters a husband (though it is implied that they are looking for people to work at the laundromat): "I learned that young men were placing ads in the *Gold Mountain News* to find wives when my mother and father started answering them. Suddenly a series of new workers showed up at the laundry; they each worked for a week before they disappeared." (180). Eventually the narrator fears that her parents are trying to set her up with "a mentally retarded boy who follow[s her] around" from her Chinese school after he starts spending time at their laundromat (182). This horrifies the narrator, in particular because she fears that her parents and everyone

else considers them similar, especially in intellect: "I studied hard, got straight A's, but nobody seemed to see that I was smart and had nothing in common with this monster, this birth defect." (182)

Eventually the narrator confronts her mother about the boy from Chinese school.

The entire passage is worth quoting at length:

The hulk, the hunching sitter, brought a third box now, to rest his feet on. He patted his boxes. He sat in wait, hunching on his pile of dirt. My throat hurt constantly, vocal cords taut to snapping. One night when the laundry was so busy that the whole family was eating dinner there, crowded around the little round table, my throat burst open. I stood up, talking and burbling. I looked directly at my mother and at my father and screamed, "I want you to tell that hulk, that gorilla-ape, to go away and never bother us again. I know what you're up to. You're thinking he's rich, and we're poor. You think we're odd and not pretty and we're not bright. You think you can give us away to freaks. You better not do that, Mother. I don't want to see him or his dirty boxes here tomorrow. If I see him here one more time, I'm going away. I'm going away anyway. I am. Do you hear me? I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I'm not, I'm not retarded. There's nothing wrong with my brain. Do you know what the Teacher Ghosts say about me? They tell me I'm smart, and I can win scholarships. I can get into colleges. I've already applied. I'm smart. I can do all kinds of things. I know how to get A's, and they say I could be a scientist or a mathematician if I want. I can make a living and take care of myself. So you don't have to find me a keeper who's too dumb to know a bad bargain. I'm so smart, if they say write ten pages, I can write fifteen. I can do ghost things even better than ghosts can. Not everybody thinks I'm nothing. I am not going to be a slave or a wife. Even if I am stupid and talk funny and get sick, I won't let you turn me into a slave or a wife. I'm getting out of here. I can't stand living here anymore. It's your fault I talk weird. The only reason I flunked kindergarten was because you couldn't teach me English, and you gave me a zero IQ. I've brought my IQ up, though. They say I'm smart now. Things follow in lines at school. They take stories and teach us to turn them into essays. I don't need anybody to pronounce English words for me. I can figure them out by myself. I'm going to get scholarships, and I'm going away. And at college I'll have the people I like for friends. I don't care if their great-greatgrandfather died of TB. I don't care if they were our enemies in China four thousand years ago. So get that ape out of here. I'm going to college. And I'm not going to Chinese school anymore. I'm going to run for office at American school, and I'm going to join clubs. I'm going to get enough offices and clubs on my record to get into college. And I can't stand Chinese school anyway; the kids

are rowdy and mean, fighting all night. And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you make up. Ha! You can't stop me from talking. You tried to cut off my tongue, but it didn't work." So I told the hardest ten or twelve things on my list all in one outburst.

My mother, who is champion talker, was, of course, shouting at the same time. "I cut it to make you talk more, not less, you dummy. You're still stupid. You can't listen right. I didn't say I was going to marry you off. Did I ever say that? Did I ever mention that? Those newspaper people were for your sister, not you. Who would want you? Who said we could sell you? We can't sell people. Can't you take a joke? You can't even tell a joke from real life. You're not so smart. Can't even tell real from false."

"I'm never getting married, never!"

"Who'd want to marry you anyway? Noisy. Talking like a duck. Disobedient. Messy. And I know about college. What makes you think you're the first one to think about college? I was a doctor. I went to medical school. I don't see why you have to be a mathematician. I don't see why you can't be a doctor like me." (188–189)

As the narrator and her mother shout over each other, their argument comes to a climax:

"You turned out so unusual. I fixed your tongue so you could say charming things. You don't even say hello to the villagers."

"They don't say hello to me."

"They don't have to answer children. When you get old, people will say hello to you."

"When I get to college, it won't matter if I'm not charming. And it doesn't matter if a person is ugly; she can still do schoolwork."

"I didn't say you were ugly."

"You say that all the time."

"That's what we're supposed to say. That's what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite."

It seemed to hurt her to tell me that—another guilt for my list to tell my mother, I thought. And suddenly I got very confused and lonely because I was at that moment telling her my list, and in the telling, it grew. No higher listener. No listener but myself.

"Ho Chi Kuei," she shouted. "Ho Chi Kuei. Leave then. Get out, you Ho Chi Kuei. Get out. I knew you were going to turn out bad. Ho Chi Kuei." My brothers and sisters had left the table, and my father would not look at me anymore, ignoring me. (189–190)

This is a crucial passage: as the narrator accuses her mother of various things: of not being “charming,” of not being smart enough to do schoolwork or do go to college, of being ugly, etc., and the narrator’s mother denies each claim, their heated exchange ends in the mother saying that she never said anything that the narrator accuses her of saying, until the argument devolves into a dispute over raw facts. When the narrator’s mother denies having ever called the narrator “ugly,” and the narrator replies that she says that all the time, finally Brave Orchid tells the narrator, “That’s what we’re supposed to say. That’s what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite” (190). This statement completely turns not only the argument around, but indeed turns the entire work on its head: when Brave Orchid finally has to explain that “Chinese say the opposite,” everything that the narrator has argued that her mother said, suddenly means exactly *the opposite* of what she claimed: rather than being not smart enough to go to college, to become a mathematician or a doctor, or being only fit to be someone’s wife or a “slave,” as the narrator has described her grievances with her mother, it turns out that all along her mother was telling her that she is smart enough to go to college and pursue her a career, even encouraging her, that she can be more than someone’s wife, and that she is not ugly. But moreover, in this light, not only does everything that Brave Orchid has said in her argument with the narrator or even everything that the narrator has claimed in this chapter that Brave Orchid has ever said take on a completely different meaning than originally presented, but everything that Brave Orchid has told the narrator throughout

the entire work, takes on a completely different meaning. Since the novel begins with the narrator recollecting a story from her mother that her mother said that she must never tell, and since almost the entirety of the first half of the novel is about and originally comes from her mother, it also raises the question of whether or not to trust the narrator's storytelling, and whether to take the work itself at face value or as an instance of "Chinese saying the opposite." When Brave Orchid tells the narrator in the novel's very first sentence, "'You must not tell anyone [...] what I am about to tell you'" (1), should we read that command in light of their argument at the end of the novel as Brave Orchid really telling the narrator not to retell the story and the chapter itself as an act of defiance, or should we now read it as Brave Orchid telling the narrator that she *should*, or *must*, tell the story and the chapter as the narrator's (perhaps unwitting) fulfillment of her mother's wishes? In the various lessons to be learned from the various talk-stories that narrator reports her mother telling her, are we to glean that instead of encouraging the narrator to become a faithful wife (or a "slave"), that instead she has been encouraging her to become the opposite of the other ill-fated women like No Name Woman and Moon Orchid from the last several chapters?

In a sense, in light of this sudden narrative reversal, the narrator's list of items that she wants to tell her mother could also be thought of as a form of "realism," in the sense that the purpose of the narrator's list is to outline or tell some ostensibly calculable or even "objective" truth or a set of facts (which is essentially what the narrator's list is: a

set of facts about herself, many banal, that she wants to tell her mother) that would make herself understood to her mother.

### 3. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

While Carlos Bulosan represents the preemergent of Asian American studies and literature as coherent disciplinary formations and of Asian American as a coherent sociopolitical concept, and Maxine Hong Kingston represents the liminal space where the preemergent breaks into the emergent, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha represents both the emergent and its critique. *Conformity* to the expectations of genre is, implicitly or explicitly, also conformity to the various attendant social and political commitments and assumptions that come with the formal conventions that make up a given genre. The differences in styles and techniques between Bulosan's short stories, such as "The Story of a Letter," and his novel *America Is in the Heart*, which share almost the same plots, betrays an ambivalence in the critiques of American imperialism and its mobilization of white supremacist racism that Bulosan makes in *America Is in the Heart*. As I argued in chapter one, Bulosan changes the less believable and more "unrealistic" or plainly impossible plot points, fantastical elements, and unresolved plot dilemmas that characterize "The Story of a Letter" when he writes *America Is in the Heart*, making the unrealistic elements "realistic," cutting out or explaining away their fantastical elements, neatly resolving their unresolved plot points and their attendant ethical and political quandaries, all of which, notably, produce many of the passages that the critical tradition has debated most hotly and deemed the most poorly written, including the ending. That is to say, for Bulosan, the "normalization" of "Story of a Letter," or what I

have argued is its reformatting within the conventions of social realism for *America Is in the Heart*, is also the normalization of its politics, from ambivalence and irresolvability, to overt politicization and unambiguous, even overwrought, political didacticism. And if *The Woman Warrior* is a memoir of a narrator learning how to become a storyteller from her mother, and *retelling* a story that was always already forbidden to be told, then it is also a novel of a narrator who realizes that she cannot tell her story as a memoir — that is, as a series of ostensibly objective and factual, straightforwardly outlined events of her life — and that she must turn to the powers of fiction and fabulation to tell it. This memoir-becoming-a-novel, moreover, is a document of normalization and *renormalization*, in that the narrator both seeks to *critique* the conditions of a tradition that interdict or foreclose the possibility of telling her own story, and to tell that story and contribute to that same tradition from which she has already been written out. *The Woman Warrior* is as constructive as it is critical, as much affirming as it is oppositional — it is both the rejection and *embrace* of a tradition. As the narrator herself states at the end: the “beginning is hers [her mother’s], the ending mine”; the hybrid work tells a story of a kidnapped poetess, who later brought the songs of her barbarian captors back to the Han, which “translated well.”

All three authors register, in their works, both the injunction to tell a story that conforms to a certain set of formal conventions, for various purposes *and* the violence done by that injunction: for Bulosan and his protagonists, it is telling a story that



conveys and instills in the reader an anti-imperialist political message; for Kingston and the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, it is complying with the expectations both Chinese and Americans have for Chinese/American women. These works tell their stories by *deforming* moments where the story is supposed to conform to what a story “should look like” — and in doing so, they reveal the underlying assumptions and agendas that belie those expectations. They seek to tell stories for which there is no available or given language, and try to tell their stories with a language that is also the interdiction of that same story’s telling, warping and deforming the language in order to show the interdiction and to create a new language. In other words, they register the violence of conformity by deforming the same register they use, and by deforming it, they also create a new register.

*Dictation* is the perfect metaphor for the conformity that the author will go on to deform. Cha portrays the violence of conformity, and the creation in deformity, through the trope of dictation. The novel begins with two paragraphs made up of a series of clauses, one in French and one in English. The second is a translation of the first:

Aller à la ligne C’était le premier jour point Elle venait de loin  
 point ce soir au dîner virgule les familles demanderaient virgule ouvre les  
 guillemets Ça c’est bien passé le premier jour point d’interrogation ferme  
 les guillemets au moins virgule dire le moins possible virgule la réponse  
 serait virgule ouvre les guillemets Il n’y a q’une chose point ferme les  
 guillemets ouvre les guillemets Il y a quelqu’une point loin point ferme  
 les guillemets

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

marks at least to say the least of it possible comma the answer would be  
open quotation marks there is but one thing period There is someone  
period From a far period close quotation marks (1)

The lack of punctuation marks, other than long spaces between the clauses, and words in the place of the punctuation that would appear on a properly formatted page, (“point”/“period,” “virgule”/“comma,” “les guillemets”/“quotation marks”) mimics the dictation that a listener — a secretary, typist, or student — would then transcribe onto a page. It is a literalization of the expectation to conform: the listener is expected to produce exactly what he or she hears.

Although *Dictée* is a work of writing and of print, unlike a typical work of expository writing it does not mime “natural” speech or attempt to “sound natural,” nor does it draw attention away from its own materiality as a work of writing or as a book, or its own process of creation. It begins as though it is outlining the process of its own creation, emphasizing its materiality, or its *form*: caught between French and English, dictation and dictated, and the ephemera of audible speech and the visibility of polished prose, as well as between the neatness of a printed page with standard formatting (proper punctuation, straight lines, consistent margins) that in its standardness and consistency would recede from view and the visual strikingness of two paragraphs in two different languages with no punctuation, from its outset *Dictée* makes its own *formation*, and *deformation*, its point (or, as Cha might ambiguously write, its “point,” French for “period”).

The next section, which is in prose and describes the mechanisms of the narrator (the “she”) moving her mouth to speak, continues the theme of dictation:

DISEUSE

She mimicks [sic] the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking gestures with the mouth. The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter some thing. (3)

The narrator is *dictated to* at first, then dictates back what she hears. This passage further frames the previous section with the two mirror passages in French and English, as an act of dictation, with its use of words that convey reportage and mediation — “mimicks,” “resemble,” “measure the accuracy,” — and its extended descriptions of the physical act of speech and its bodily mechanics: “The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter some thing” (1). There is a diagram in a later section of the work of the anatomy of the throat, with specific focus on the parts of the body involved in speech, such as the larynx, and the parts of throat and face involved in moving the mouth, which further underscores the emphasis in *Dictée* on the format of speech and language and *how* it is produced [74]. The effort that the “narrator” or the “protagonist” makes in this passage, however, is in vain. The language Cha uses to describe this act of dictation and repetition remains as unspecific and vague as the opening coda with the two broken up blocks of text, offering no further clarity:

the speaker merely “*mimicks* the speaking” that “*might resemble* speech”; she “gather[s] both lips and protrude[s] them in a pout [...] that might utter some thing,” though what exactly she is doing with her mouth or what that some thing she is trying to mimic is is totally unspecified, and may not even accede to full words or complete quanta of information. Rather, they are “[b]ared noise, groan, bits torn from words” rather than words themselves, “gestures” made with the mouth rather than fully articulated words and sentences, mechanical movements of the mouth that are not quite speech.

The narrator of *Dictée* goes through several circuits of dictation: the mechanical, rote repetition of basic words and clauses in order to build a base vocabulary, which should slowly build up to a bigger lexicon and more complex syntax. The first several sections contain exercises in translation from French to English and vice-versa, which invoke exercises in a language textbook:

Ecrivez en francais:

1. If you like this better, tell me so at once.
2. The general remained only a little while in this place.
3. If you did not speak so quickly, they would understand you better.
4. The leaves have not fallen yet nor will they fall for some days.
5. It will fit you pretty well.
6. The people of this country are less happy than the people of yours.
7. Come back on the fifteenth of next month, no sooner and no later.
8. I met him downstairs by chance.
9. Be industrious: the more one works, the better one succeeds.
10. The harder the task, the more honorable the labor.
11. The more a man praises himself, the less inclined are others to praise him.
12. Go away more quietly next time.

Traduire en francais:

1. I want you to speak.
2. I wanted him to speak.

3. I shall want you to speak.
  4. Are you afraid he will speak?
  5. Were you afraid they would speak?
  6. It will be better for him to speak to us.
  7. Was it necessary for you to write?
  8. Wait till I write.
  9. Why didn't you wait so that I could write you?
- (8-9)

After the disjointed French and English dictations and the introductory passages in which the narrator of the work struggles to “[mimick] gestures with the mouth” and instead makes bare sounds and wordless noises that only approximate coherent language, as though she were just learning how to speak, these passages then command the reader to write in French and translate into French several English sentences. Most of the sentences that the work commands the reader to write are ordinary declarative sentences; the sentences that the work commands the reader to translate are all direct addresses from one person to another. This shift in the introductory codas of *Dictée* from dictation to raw mechanical movement of the mouth and the body parts involved in speech, miming the process of learning how to generate raw sound, to a textbook-like set of exercises in French and English, altogether document a person's introduction into a foreign language, from passively receiving dictations to acquiring the lexicon and syntax and tools in order to transcribe them, from hearing dictation to being able to reproduce them orally to being able to set them down in writing to being able to translate them between different registers.

The narrator dictates in French and English: both the colonial languages that have ruled over Vietnam and much of Indochina. Like Bulosan, who tracks the effects of the translation from local dialect to Spanish to English in “The Story of a Letter,” and Kingston, who translates from Chinese to English, Cha suggests the violence of conformity through her invocation colonial languages. The violence will become literal later in *Dictée*.

Throughout the work, Cha inserts pages with calligraphy of Chinese logographs (26, 27, 54, 55), including a page with a list of the numbers one to ten with their corresponding common and formal Chinese logographs (154), in between sections in English or French. Unlike the rest of the multilingual passages throughout *Dictée*, these logographs are neither translated nor transcribed phonetically into Roman letters, nor are they framed as exercises of translation or transcription or structured like language lessons from an exercise book or a textbook, as the French and English passages are. These pages of Chinese writing are not even framed as a dictation or an utterance: they are single characters, all basic kinship terms, such as “mother” and “woman,” or simple nouns and abstract concepts, such as “heart,” or a list of numbers, with no additional context. Like the unnamed local dialects of the Philippines in *America Is in the Heart* and “The Story of a Letter,” or the specter of the Chinese language in *The Woman Warrior* which is almost never transcribed phonetically even in personal names — for example, the awkward and unreconstructible translation of the narrator’s mother’s name to

“Brave Orchid” (notably, the only time that the Chinese language is transcribed is when the narrator muses on the meaning of the word “ghosts,” or “Ho Chi Kuei,” which the narrator realizes is a pun between the Chinese words for “ghost” or “spirit” and for “foreigner”)--Cha shows the violence of imperialism and the injunction to conform — in this case, the injunction to conform to the languages of empire, whether French or English, or even Japanese, by denying specificity to the languages that have been subject to this violence.

By emphasizing the painstaking process of learning a first and a second language, by structuring *Dictée* like an extended document of the acquisition of speech, beginning the work with paragraphs of broken up clauses and opaque descriptions of the stuttering physical mechanisms of speech, which return in stops and starts over the course of the work, build up to complete sentences and then paragraphs, and by very literally miming the exercise of learning how to read and write, the painstaking undertaking shown and referenced with entire sections that resemble exercises out of a language textbook or a grammar book, Cha crafts *Dictée* as an extended meditation and itself an example of both the gains and costs of leaning a language, especially the “master’s” language. The various languages of the conquered referenced throughout the work, including Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese, only appear as already translated material, their specific lexicons and contours already inaccessible to the text and available only secondhand, or as visually singular and opaque fragments like the pages

of Chinese logographs that convey “universal” concepts such as kinship (“woman”) or core vocabulary (“heart”). Yet, despite being “universal,” even these concepts do not quite get through: something is lost. Even with photographs and biographical information on the narrator’s mother, or extended epistles between mother and daughter, these stark moments of untranslated and singular objects of language show that the acquisition of a language paradoxically includes a silencing. For Cha, these silences are represented in what does not translate from Chinese logograph to French or English: “mother,” “woman,” “heart.”

The opening sections, and the rest of the work, also plays on the notion of the “disease.” A “disease” refers to a female entertainer or reciter who recites poetry, especially dramatic monologues. The disease is a running theme and leitmotif throughout *Dictée*, and several sections throughout the work start with the word “disease,” as if they are invoking a disease who will monologue the preceding material or as though that material is written like a script for a disease to learn, as in the following:

*Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in Time’s memory. Unemployed.  
Unspoken. History. Past. Let the one who is disease, one who is mother who waits nine  
days and nine nights be found. Restore memory. Let the one who is disease, one who is  
daughter restore spring with her each appearance from beneath the earth.  
The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it stops writing at all. (133; emphases  
original)*



This passage plays on a pun between the English word “disuse” (as in, the falling out of use of something or its becoming obsolete) and the French “disease.” Besides the fact that the word disease and the actual concept are outdated, the pun on disuse and disease, and their connection to “[d]ead words” and [d]ead tongue[s],” which have died “from disuse,” also positions the role of the female orator as one who has been silenced (133). Cha invokes the disease, “one who is mother” and “one who is daughter,” who has also fallen into disuse. This invocation of the figures of the mother and the daughter as female orators of monologues that are “Buried in Time’s memory. Unemployed. Unspoken. History, Past,” as though they were muses, is a critical moment in *Dictée*, because it explicitly connects the figure of the mother and daughter and the forgotten or unspoken female speaker, female orator, or the female storyteller, with the imperative to “[r]estore memory” (133). Throughout *Dictée*’s linguistic exercises, at times almost militaristic in their repetitive roteness, Cha points to what falls into disuse in that regime of language. If the first script and invocation of the disease details the specifically female narrator’s stuttering efforts to learn how to control her own mouth and tongue to make noise — the machinery behind oration — then in the following scripts for and invocations of the disease it is the *specifically female* orator, and more specifically the mother and the daughter, who have also been silenced, i.e. fallen into disuse. For Cha it is the female storyteller or the disease that is forgotten or silenced in the process.

It is, of course, impossible to miss the formal experimentation of *Dictée*; and that has been the focus of the critical treatment, positioning *Dictée* as a groundbreaking work in Asian American literature that represents a paradigm shift away from realist and identity-focused writing. Furthermore, reading Cha not only against the realist and autobiographical Asian American writing from which she represents a formal and critical break, but also against her Asian American peers who also write “experimental” letters, including John Yau, and Mei-Mei Bersenbrugge, and against canonical figures of the avant-garde, such as the Language poets, is characteristic.

In 1994 Elaine Kim edited and published a critical anthology dedicated to *Dictée* and Cha’s other writing *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*.<sup>1</sup> The publication of *Writing Self, Writing Nation* coincided with the publication of a new edition of *Dictée* from Third Woman Press, which also brought *Dictée* back into wider circulation after years of being out of print. The editors such as Kim and the contributors to *Writing Self, Writing Nation* sought to clarify “misconceptions” of Cha’s work and of *Dictée* specifically, explicitly positioning *Dictée* as a paradigm shift in Asian American literature because of its overtly experimental formal qualities and its at best ambivalent and unstraightforward relationship to the so-called identity politics lauded in what was by then an established Asian American

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Kim and Norma Alarcón, eds., *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha* (New York: Third Woman Press, 1994).

literary canon (which also included Bulosan and Kingston). Moreover, Kim and the other contributors of *Writing Self, Writing Nation* positioned the anthology itself as a departure from identitarian-focused reading practices in Asian American studies and Asian American literature, not only because of its focus on *Dictée's* formally experimental and opaque qualities but also because of the choice running throughout the essays contained in the anthology to bracket identitarian concerns and overtly politicized readings in favor of greater attention to literary form, political ambiguity or perplexity, and the beginnings of a shift towards framing Asian American issues and Asian Americanist critical concerns transnationally. (Lisa Lowe, who was a contributor to *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, also published the field-shifting *Immigrant Acts* in 1996.<sup>2</sup>)

(It is notable that the way in which the publication of *Writing Self, Writing Nation* and the republication of *Dictée* (which had largely fallen into obscurity after its initial publication and Cha's death) marked a shift in Asian American studies, is exactly the same way that Bulosan was canonized and became part of and helped shape (also, shape *via its shape* — that is, its *form*) nascent Asian American studies' formation: E. San Juan's work on Bulosan was arguably the driving force behind the republication of *America Is in the Heart*, which had gone out of print and fallen into obscurity for many years prior. That both Bulosan's and Cha's works only came back to print when scholars decided to talk about them corroborates my general argument that 1) these writers/works

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

influenced or even predicted, through their form, their own mobilization by critics and *how* critics mobilized them (as I like to say, “the work knows more than its critic”); and 2) that these works, which are all concerned with the creation of a language where there was none before (and in Bulosan’s case, very explicitly concerned with the creation of a politics for which there was yet no model), succeeded in that mission — their mobilization by Asian Americanists is proof positive of that.)

Timothy Yu reads Asian American poetry, including Cha’s and Language poetry from the seventies and eighties against each other and argues that they “show each other’s limits in their poetic and political projects.”<sup>3</sup> In the wake of *Dictée*’s critical valorization and its canonization as a literary milestone in Asian American literature, the academic commentary on *Dictée* has correspondingly marked it as a milestone in Asian Americanist literary criticism and Asian Americanist academic study more generally. The running theme in the criticism is that *Dictée* is an expedient object of analysis for reconceptualizing various paradigms, historical models, and critical hermeneutics in Asian American studies because of its avant-garde and formally experimental and non-realist qualities, to the point that it has practically been made a ready go-to for this purpose. In fact, the subgenre of *Dictée* criticism within Asian American studies is almost entirely defined by its focus on *Dictée*’s opacity and its status as a paradigm- and

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Yu, “Form and Identity in Language Poetry and Asian American Poetry,” in *Contemporary Literature* 41.3 (Autumn 2000), 422–461.

conversion-shifting signpost. Jennifer Cho reads *Dictée* in order to “reevaluate the accepted linear trajectory of Asian American identity formation in the U.S.,” arguing specifically that *Dictée* “defer[s] historical closure” by challenging the dominant historical narrative of the US as South Korea’s “liberator” and offers a model of transnational social and political kinship based in “a shared sense of loss and cultural grief,”<sup>4</sup> whose primary example in Cha’s work is the mother-daughter relationship, which differs from the traditional panethnic model of Asian American social and political identity that emphasizes racial solidarity over inherited ethnic and national affiliations within a local US context. Sue-Im Lee has noted the “unresolvable tension between realist clarity and postmodern opacity in the representation of an Asian American subject” and argues that *Dictée*’s opacity offers “a hermeneutics of non-compliance.”<sup>5</sup> Examining the “postmodern terms of *Dictée*’s critical valorization” and “the theoretical values underwriting the current suspiciousness of realism and the embattled fate of representational aesthetics in Asian American literary criticism,” Lee questions “the viability of an Asian Americanist reading framework that rests upon a

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Cho, “Mel-han-cholia as Political Practice in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” in *Meridians* 11.1 (2011), p. 36–61.

<sup>5</sup> Sue-Im Lee, “Suspicious Characters: Realism, Asian American Identity, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” in *Journal of Narrative Theory* 32.2 (2002), p. 227–258.

drastic reversal of critical values — away from realist storytelling and the formation of social identity, toward formal incoherence and uncategorizability.”<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the early criticism of Carlos Bulosan, which found his social realist writing, with its overt politicization and political didacticism, expedient at a time when Asian American studies was not yet an established or legitimized field of study and an Asian American literary canon was still undefined, and the later criticism which focuses almost solely on *America Is in the Heart* and the status of anti-imperialist politics in Bulosan’s work; or the early criticism of Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Woman Warrior* which tended to bracket the work’s formally experimental and overtly literary qualities in favor of its more realist portions at a time when Asian American studies was new and its canon still nascent, the criticism on *Dictée* has focused on its opacity and formal experimentation in order to mark a myriad of forms of aesthetic, formal, historical, political, and of course, critical departure from a previously established artistic, literary, historical, political, and academic tradition. This approach is not “wrong” or “incorrect”; it makes sense, given the form and content of Cha’s writing and the time in which she wrote. What is striking about *Dictée* is how the formal experimentation also makes provisions for its future reception: it anticipates and incorporates its own critical reception and deployment, and also provides its alternative. Previous chapters of this

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<sup>6</sup> Sue-Im Lee, “Suspicious Characters: Realism, Asian American Identity, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*.”

project have argued that Bulosan's body of work already included its own critique, in the formal disjunctures between *America Is in the Heart* and "The Story of a Letter"; Kingston wraps up both juncture and disjuncture, or formation and deformation, within the *The Woman Warrior*, in its own tension between memoir and novel, factual storytelling and fabulation.

If the publication of *Dictée* marked a shift in Asian American letters from realism towards non-realist form, as has been noted by many critics, then Elaine Kim's publication and editorship of *Writing Self Writing Nation* is a signpost of that shift. Elaine Kim's role in promoting Cha and other experimental Asian American writers, such as Mei-Mei Brussenbrugge and Myung-Mi Kim (many of whom had not been considered "Asian American writers" or whose work was ignored in Asian American literary studies up until then), and her involvement in *Writing Self Writing Nation* are of particular note, not only because *Writing Self Writing Nation* was the first major work of Asian American literary criticism that made Cha its focus, but also because Kim's early scholarship was foundational to the critical tradition whose protocols scholarship like *Writing Self Writing Nation* challenged. Kim's status as a founder of Asian American studies and someone who set the tone for Asian American literary criticism writ large makes her work on *Dictée* particularly notable. Kim's *An Introduction to Asian American Literature*, published in 1982, privileged realist and autobiographical works of Asian American literature, bracketing or only passingly mentioning non-realist works and

writers; Kim read Asian American literature sociologically, especially by highlighting tropes in the literature it examines and showing how they are documentations, or bare references to, "Asian American" sociological and political phenomena.

*Dictée* manifests an impetus to document phenomena sociologically (which is not the same thing as documenting sociological phenomena) as seen in Elaine Kim's early work, and the methodological maneuvers that such documentation must make, *and* the resistance to or challenging of that documentation, as seen in Kim's later work including her work on Cha, are mimed out. Nearly the entirety of the chapter dedicated to Clio, the muse of history, is framed by the narrator's mother. Interspersed between descriptions of her mother, there is an extended discussion on the history of the Japanese colonization of Korea: "There is no people without a nation, no people without ancestry. There are other nations no matter how small their land, who have their independence. But our country, even 5,000 years of history, has lost it to the Japanese" (28). The first section the chapter ends on musings on memory and nationhood, and its relation to historical record and memory:

This document is transmitted through, by the same means, the same channel without distinction the content is delivered in the same style: the word. The image. To appeal to the masses to congeal the information to make bland, mundane, no longer able to transcend their own conspirator method, no matter how alluring their presentation. The response is precoded to perform predictably however passively possible. Neutralized to achieve the no-response, to make absorb, to submit to the uni-directional correspondance.

Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment



from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion. (33)

Following this section is an excerpt of a letter titled “PETITION FROM THE KOREANS OF HAWAI‘I TO PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT,” petitioning on the behalf of the 8,000 Koreans living in Hawai‘i for assistance from the United States (34). The letter from Koreans to President Roosevelt, after the recap of Japanese-Korean history, then ends with musings on memory and nationhood (38), then a picture of writing of this section, but with revisions — very literally showing the *revisions before the final version* to these musings on nationhood and memory, and on mobilizing around them, but *after* the “final” versions — ends the section on “Clio”/“History,” muse of the books, then begins the section on “Calliope”/“Epic Poetry,” the muse of writing tablets and the stylus. Cha predicts the kind of reception that her work would garner: much like the body of critical work that would turn to her as a signpost of paradigm shifts and subversions of established literary and critical traditions, the invocation to Clio, the “History” chapter of *Dictée*, is both the establishing of a language (very literally, since it begins with mimesis of dictation and translation and textbook-like exercises in French and English) and the writing of a basic history, here the fraught history of Japanese colonization of Korea, then its mobilization into action (the letter to President Roosevelt), then its formal breakdown, as it returns to opacity and reveals objects of revision (the picture of the letter).

The next chapter, the invocation to Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, is a series of epistles to the letter writer's or the "narrator's" mother, which is also a telling of her story. Although the critical tradition on Cha has — rightly — emphasized her *subversion* of traditional literary forms and refusal of identitarian stock stories, i.e. the "ethnic identity novel," ironically, even Cha dedicates an entire section to a mother-daughter story and the mother's sacrifices and struggles — one of the best-established and traditional storylines in Asian American literature. The section "Clio"/"History" begins with a photograph of a woman and the following ekphrasis:

YU GUAN SOON

BIRTH: By Lunar Calendar, 15, March 1903

DEATH: 12, October, 1920. 8:20 A.M.

She is born of one mother and one father. (25)

The relationship between Yu Guan Soon and the narrator or to anyone else is not immediately clear, and does not become much clearer in the rest of the section. The next two pages have two large Chinese logographs, one for "woman" and one for "mother," followed by expository paragraphs which explore the nature of ancestry and nationhood and quotes at length, without attribution, a passage on the Japanese Meiji government's administration of occupied Korea, and proceed by detailing information about Yu Guan Soon's life in early twentieth century Japanese-occupied Korea. The section ends with more unattributed quotes about the Japanese administration of Korea and a letter about Korean rebels who were put down by the Japanese government titled

“SUPPRESSION OF FOREIGN CRITICISM” (31–32). Cha envelops the irreducibly personal and the specific — personal and identifying details of specific persons — in the broader strokes of the political and historic, and shows how their specificity and texture, and their ethical weight, are subsumed into those larger forces of politicization and historicization which mobilize the specific and the personal for their own consolidation and at the expense of the specific and the personal. Between extended quotations detailing the history of Japanese colonialism in Korea, are passages that muse on this relation:

She makes complete her duration. As other have made complete theirs: rendered incessant, obsessive myth, rendered immortal their acts without the leisure to examine whether the parts false the parts real according to History’s revision. [...]

There is no people without a nation, no people without ancestry. There are other nations no matter how small their land, who have their independence. But our country, even with 5,000 years of history, has lost it to the Japanese. (28)

In stating that “there is no people without a nation, no people without ancestry,” Cha argues that the specificity of personhood only shows up in relief against nationhood or broader structures of belonging. The basic identifiers of Yu Guan Soon — her face and her name, her birthdate and date of death, and the banal fact that she has one father and one mother — are pushed aside for more general and abstract meditations on personhood and nationhood and historical details of Korea’s 5,000 years of history lost to the Japanese. It is only after these asides that we learn more about Yu Guan Soon:

Guan Soon is the only daughter born of four children to her patriot father and mother. From an early age her actions are marked exceptional. History records the biography of her short and intensely-lived existence. The

identity of such a path is exchangeable with any other heroine in history, their names, dates, actions which require not definition in their devotion to generosity and self-sacrifice.

In Guan Soon's 16th year, 1919, the conspiracy by the Japanese to overthrow the Korean Government is achieved with the assassination of the ruling Queen Min and her royal family. In the aftermath of this incident, Guan Soon form a resistant group with fellow students and actively begins her revolutionary work. There is already a nationally organized movement, who do not accept her seriousness, her place as a young woman, and they attempt to dissuade her. She is not discouraged and demonstrates to them her conviction and dedication and the cause. She is appointed messenger and she travel on foot to 40 towns, organizing the nation's mass demonstration to be held on March 1, 1919. This date marks the turning point, it is the largest collective outcry against the Japanese occupation of the Korean people who willingly gave their lives for independence.

The only daughter of four children she makes complete her life as others have made complete. Her mother her father her brothers. (30)

Again, almost as if illustrating the point made in previous passages that there is no people without nation, that the "duration" of people like Yu Guan Soon is "rendered incessant" and "obsessive myth," "without the leisure to examine whether the parts false the parts real according to History's revision" (28) — which is to say, that the specificities and verisimilitudes of any particular person's life are subject to the mythologizing, fabulating, even fabricating, forces that underpin the enterprise of History, historicization, or making-history; and not the other way around — *Dictée* reveals or gives nothing about or from Yu Guan Soon that is not directly relevant to her role in the grand narrative of Japanese colonization of Korea, or in the making-of a modern national Korean identity forged through rebellion against said colonization. We only know that she is the daughter of four children and her one mother and one father, which the work makes a point of identifying as "patriots" — again, where simple and

basic information such as kinship come up, even there they are subsumed and qualified for the purposes of History (30). Even though Yu Guan Soon's "actions are marked as exceptional [from an early age]" (30), the passage only ever details them in terms of their world-historical importance rather than anything intrinsic of Yu Guan Soon herself, relating her sixteen birthday to the assassination of Queen Min by the Japanese government and the drama of Japanese colonization — nothing about Yu Guan Soon herself. And finally, and even more perplexing, is that despite all these details, the passage explicitly states that "History records the biography of her short and intensely-lived existence. The identity of such a path is exchangeable with any other heroine in history, their names, dates, actions which require not definition in their devotion to generosity and self-sacrifice" (30). Earlier in this section the work invokes famous female revolutionaries: "She calls the name Jeanne d'Arc three times. She calls the name Ahn Joong Kun five times" [28]; almost as a demonstration of Yu Guan Soon's interchangeability with any other heroine in history, underscoring her *inspecificity*, her exchangeability, her fungibility as an entity whose biography comes seconds and is mobilized in service to history. That is to say, "history records biography" (30).

And interestingly, the end of this section seems to also predict the various ways in which the mother-daughter story would be "dismissed":

They ask you identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you say. As if you didn't know who you were. You say who you are but you begin to doubt. They search you. They, the anonymous variety of

uniforms, each division, strata, classification, any set of miscellaneous property  
uni formed.” (56–57)

The experimental and opaque nature of *Dictée* cannot be ignored, but rather my focus on these *relatively* “traditional” passages is meant to highlight how criticism of *Dictée* has focused *only* on its intelligibly or recognizably “experimental” elements. Here, in these passages in which a daughter dedicates paragraphs about, or epistles to, her mother and grandmother, we finally have the properly formatted, complete and readable sentences with proper punctuation which fall into expository paragraphs, which tell a story with an at least somewhat intelligible series of events, or even a “plot,” the work finally reaches the status of proper speech, or proper writing, towards which the opening chapters and codas strived to achieve. It is here, in the work’s most readily readable and “traditionally” formatted section, which most conforms to the conventions of a recognizable genre, where the opening paragraph’s rote repetition of core vocabulary and fragments of sound, exercises in dictation and translation, find their apotheosis. And it is here, both stages, or s(abo)tages, its own silencing and predicts its own reception: Note that several of these passages are in the first person and a relatively colloquial register, like monologues. These passages are the dramatic monologues of the disease — which have also fallen into disuse.

Like the untranslated Chinese logographs of words like “woman” and “mother,” something do not translate. The “heart” of *Dictée*, these passages in the middle of the work, like the Chinese logographs of the word “heart,” do not get through: again,

something is lost. And like the disease who is also disuse, and is *dis-used*, these relatively straightforward passages are easily lost or disregarded amidst the spectacular experimentation of the rest of the work. In a way, that by emphasizing *Dictée's* experimental qualities, which the majority (but not all) of the criticism on the work does — and to be fair, not “wrongly” so, because again, *Dictée's* experimental qualities are impossible to ignore — these straightforward stories of mother-daughter bonds and women’s lineage and inheritance, are lost in the shuffle: disease falls into disease. And again, the work anticipates this loss.

My point is not merely that *Dictée* marks a shift in Asian American letters and the criticism of it, as has been rightly argued many times, but also that it *predicts* this shift by miming it formally. If Bulosan’s “normalization” of “The Story of a Letter’s” formal conventions (which is, very literally, a story about a letter, and learning how to read and write letters) to *America Is in the Heart's* both predicted *and was instrumental to* the normalization of “Asian American” as a political category and to Asian American studies as a politicized field of study which would draw upon Bulosan’s story in order to legitimate itself, and if *The Woman Warrior's* own push-and-pull relationship between Chinese myth and the conventions of the contemporary novel, and between memoir form and novel form, would both predict *and be instrumental to* Asian American studies’ early years which privileged realist literary form and identity politics even in material that was not necessarily realist or readily identitarian, then *Dictée* marks the moment

where the recognition that other literary forms, as well as other critical forms and approaches, as well as their implicit and explicit politics, were possible.

*Dictée* is also a commentary not just on the violence in conformity to a given form, but also on how canon formation, even as a form of social and political “resistance,” still necessitates acts of violence, on exclusions and silences. In *Dictée*, this violence is most apparent in its oblique references to “ethnicized storytelling:”

It took less time for her to realize that there would be no magical shifting. It did not matter anymore. She wanted to abolish it quickly, the formula, the ritual. All too quickly the form and the skin that resembles a past. Any past. With this, there would be no rehearsals. No more memorization. (139–140)

“The formula” and “the ritual,” the “rehearsals” and the “memorization” refer to the various passages of repetition, recitation, and memorization of phrases (such as the ones in the first chapter); but also, they refer obliquely to the formulae that make up genres of storytelling. “The form and the skin that resembles a past” are overdetermined signifiers of ethnicized difference that take on a distinct storytelling format: “skin” refers to racial difference, and “skin that resembles a past” can mean both the sedimented history that comes to make skin have meaning and convey historical conflict, as the various references to the Korean War and to American imperialism in Korea cited in *Dictée* as evidence.



## Conclusion

This dissertation has focused on the work of two major figures in Asian American literature who were instrumental to its canonization, Carlos Bulosan and Maxine Hong Kingston, whose work was published before the Asian American movements of the sixties and seventies and the formation of Asian American studies and canonization of Asian American literature in subsequent decades, in order to interrogate how they were canonized, often based on a sociological framework of reading which deployed social realist models of literary analysis and sociological readings; and on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who came after the Asian American movement of the sixties and the consolidation of Asian American literature and Asian American studies in the seventies and subsequent decades, and whose work deploys experimental and avant-garde forms and styles. This dissertation has discussed how predominant strains of Asian American studies until relatively recently have privileged realist, especially social realist, works in its literary canon and has deployed realist reading strategies, as well as focused on sociological and anthropological aspects of Asian American literature, rather than on aesthetic and formal concerns, usually with strongly politicized motivations and goals, such as identity formation and consciousness building, literary canonization, and discipline legitimizing, and reformed itself away from identitarian concerns by shifting its focus from realist works such as Bulosan's to explicitly nonrealist and experimental works such as Cha's.

This dissertation follows this shift in reading practices and critical hermeneutics, and their attendant political priorities by tracing their deployment in three major Asian American writer's most celebrated and well-known works and examining what is necessarily missed, sidelined, or bracketed as a result. This project's goal has not been to argue that these critical strategies or reading practices or the political motivations that undergirded them are "wrong," "incorrect," "incomplete," "inaccurate," or necessarily require correction or supplementation, but rather to take these prevailing narrative and critical traditions on their own terms and explore how their source objects' formal qualities makes such critical and political articulations possible, and how these formal qualities specifically shaped those critical and political articulations in particular directions at particular historical moments. Bulosan's self-avowed social realism and Maxine Hong Kingston's hybrid memoir-novel provided critically valuable building materials for proto- and early Asian Americanist scholars seeking to build a canon and a critical field which had heretofore not existed and for which there was not yet a critical vocabulary. The formally realist and biographical aspects of their respective writings, and the political imperatives which those formal aspects belied, were indispensable and indeed *formative* to the critical and literary traditions forged from them.

This dissertation has explored how these works shaped and informed the trajectory of the Asian American literary and critical traditions which established themselves by mobilizing them by focusing on how the aesthetic maneuvers and formal

conventions of these works are not only shaped and informed by, but directly shape and inform, their political and social commitments. These works created new languages for diasporic Asian experiences through techniques of defamiliarization, deformation, and warping of recognizable and established literary genres and formal conventions, especially realist and biographical forms. These new languages of deformation gave expression to buried histories of violence — in Bulosan’s case Spanish and US imperialism, in Kingston’s case Chinese patriarchal society in tandem with the *longue durée* of anti-Asian ideology in the US, and in Cha’s case Japanese imperialism in Korea and the US’s military interventions in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the broad scope of the Cold War — which made those diasporic experiences possible and which are effaced and interdicted in the given forms.

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