Title
Cyborg Dreams in Asian American Transnationality: Transgression, Myth, Simulation, Coalition

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Publication Date
2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
Cyborg Dreams in Asian American Transnationality:
Transgression, Myth, Simulation, Coalition

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Mary Hikyung Song

September 2012
The Dissertation of Mary Hikyung Song is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Finishing this dissertation marks a point in my life where the path that was once steep and narrow now becomes steep and wide. In this economy, the path isn’t getting any less steep. But I recognize now, that the path is actually wide. It is not just me who is on it, but all those who have helped me travel this path.

Thank you, professors at University of California, Riverside. All of you have touched my mind and my heart such that English literature is not only my work but also my love. Your spiritual generosity, your intellectual brilliance, your wise patience, your kind enthusiasm and support — each and every moment you offered helped keep me on this path. I am a reticent person when it comes to praise but as Gertrude Stein was purported to have said, “Silent gratitude isn’t much use to anyone.” Thank you so much, Dr. Traise Yamamoto, for your faith in me that always inspired me to work harder, for your patience that reminded to love this work, and for all your critical examination of my work that reveals your generous spirit to me and shares your brilliant mind with me.

Thank you so much, Dr. Steve Axelrod, for your afternoons on Harlem Renaissance and Beat culture over tea with a cat on each armrest. Your words, warmth and wisdom allowed me to envision and emulate an exceptional standard of scholarship always founded on a love of literature. Thank you, Dr. James Tobias, for taking me under your wing in my eleventh hour and allowing my passion for cyberculture to grow and deepen. Thank you, Dr. Katherine Kinney for convincing me to apply to the UCR English graduate program; I might never have commenced on this path had it not been for your
advice and support. Thank you, Drs. Kim Devlin, Deborah Willis, Carole-Anne Tyler and Susan Zieger for being professors who sparked and nurtured my desire to be a part of such a powerful intellectual community. Thank you, Dr. Rise Axelrod, for helping me grow into a capable and effective educator. Your critique was always wise, and your support always made me feel safe to stand up for my pedagogical convictions. Thank you, Dr. Rob Latham, for your immediate support in my thirteenth hour of qualifying exams. Not only was your generous participation crucial, your input was invaluable. Thank you, Dr. Jodi Kim, for your support and input during my exams. Not only was your intellectual insight helpful, it motivated me to stay committed to this path even when things became difficult. Thank you, Dr. Edward Chang; it was a pleasure to do graduate research for you. Not only did it open my eyes to a broader perspective of Asian American studies, your generous and kind mentorship will never be forgotten.

Thank you, administrators at University of California, Riverside. You have shown me what true professionalism is; you have proven how truly special the institution of UCR is. Thank you, Tina Feldmann. Your no-nonsense business paired with your intuitive emotional support were immeasurably significant to my academic survival. Thank you, Linda Nellany and Susan Brown, your warm and professional support was not missed. Thank you, Kara Oswood, for your patient guidance and academic scrutiny in the production of this dissertation.

Thank you, my dearest colleagues and friends who have not only offered me your intellectual insight, but your generous spiritual support. Thank you, Dr. Valerie Solar Woodward, Dr. Melissa Garcia, Dr. Miriam Neirick, Sarah Shealy, Paul Cheng, Crystal
Brownell, Tanner Higgin, Nan Ma, Sheila Bare, Dr. Jack Beckham, Hank Scotch and anyone else I may have missed who contributed your time, your mind and your friendship in the intellectual formations of this dissertation endeavor. Every beer over Foucault and Derrida, every boba drink and Chinese dumpling had over the politics of our work impacted my fortitude to go on, my inspiration to articulate something meaningful, my desire to share.

Thank you, my husband and my son, Albert and Noah Pasaoa. Falling in love with my Starbuck’s study partner and having our utterly beautiful son not only made it all worthwhile, it was what made finishing this dissertation literally possible. Albert Pasaoa, not only were you a phenomenal daddy, your untiring encouragement, your scholarly attention and your infuriatingly oppositional intellect kept my mind sharp, my work inspired and my heart warmed. Noah Pasaoa, your crying made me the disciplined scholar I always strove to be. Your laughter makes me the happiest mama in the universe.

Thank you, Dr. Donald Song and Susan Song, Dad and Mom, the first people to believe in me, the first people to inspire me, the first people to demand excellence from me, the first people love me. Thank you for your unconditional support. I owe all that I am to your loving guidance. Thank you, Mom, for your fierce courage, your amazing honesty and your mother’s love. Thank you, Dad, for your profound wisdom, your incredible patience, and your magnanimous love.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband and my son, Albert and Noah Pasaoa.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Cyborg Dreams in Asian American Transnationality:
Transgression, Myth, Simulation, Coalition

by

Mary Hikyung Song

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, September 2012
Dr. Traise Yamamoto, Chairperson

By deploying a cyberculture theory of cyborg politics in my literary analyses of Asian American literature, I deconstruct Asian American subjectivity through the trope of transnationality. In the Asian American transnational, I locate four prominent traits of Donna Haraway’s socialist feminist cyborg: boundary transgression, the recognition and re-scripting of myth, simulations of identity, and coalitions of affinity. By adopting the language of cyberculture, I envision Asian American literature as a technologized textual landscape where narrative becomes virtual narrative such that we draw away from the static nature of a representational politics of identity in order to formulate articulations on a simulative politics of identity. Brian Massumi advocates privileging simulations of identity because unlike representations of identity that cannot move into the realm of the virtual due to being entrenched within a static grid of
immobile significations, simulations allow us to imagine mobile concepts like movement, affect and sensation in the discourse of culture and power.

Recognizing the Asian American transnational’s propensity to transgress boundaries just as readily as the cyborg, I examine the transnational’s capacity to recognize, reveal, and contradict hegemonic constructs that sustain the mythology of coherent subjectivity, seamless national identity and the U.S. nation as the democratic ideal. The indeterminate nature of the Asian American transnational limns how the racially-marked Asian American body contradicts, exacerbates and exceeds the circumscriptions of U.S. national identity. In five Korean American novels, I investigate indeterminacy in Korean American narrative and subjectivity such that it demonstrates the Kandice Chuh’s suggestion to deconstruct Asian American subjectivities in order to formulate a more subjectless discourse. By deconstructing a particularized identity such as Korean American identity, I deploy my investigation in a language specific enough to make significantly concrete arguments for deconstructing Asian American subjectivity overall. Finally, I demonstrate the efficacy and cogency in formulating a critical language of affect into the discourse of literary scholarship due to my conviction that affect is not only a crucial space where we might imagine an emergent liberatory politics but that affect is also a critical tool where such a politics of movement and change can indeed materialize.
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Chapter 1: Theoretical Apologetic as applied to *A Gesture Life* by Chang-rae Lee

“This is not just literary deconstruction, but liminal transformation.” (Haraway 178)

Why transport a cybercultural theory of cyborg politics into Asian American literary studies? Another way to pose this question is: Why should Asian American literary studies reconsider Asian American subjectivity? Such a question contends with crucial issues such as embodiment, the material conditions that have organized Asian American identity through the nation-state, and Asian American transnationality.\(^1\) Since “Asian American” is a term that arose out of the civil rights political movements of the 1960s, the diversity of bodies that constitute this political term has greatly expanded. Furthermore, the material conditions that have historically defined Asian Americans are also rapidly dilating into increasingly disparate economic class sectors. Both of these metamorphoses are due to increasing mobilities within what we acknowledge as the Asian American community; these increasing mobilities point to the phenomenon troped as transnationality. By mobilities, I refer to both the physical as well as the metaphysical borders that Asiatically-marked bodies traverse — nationally and globally, internally and externally. In other words, transnationality is a key feature of Asian American subjectivity in that it illuminates both the limitations of a representational politics that cannot take into account its expanding body politic as well as its ability to exceed those limitations into a new permutation of identity politics.

\(^1\) Although the terms “identity” and “subjectivity” are tightly linked, I define identity as the psychological and cultural production that an entity creates to internally recognize as well as externally project. I define subjectivity as that which has been hegemonically-constructed by various nation-state apparatuses and can only exist if properly hailed by institutions of power.
In *Imagine Otherwise*, Kandice Chuh recognizes the critical cogency for Asian American studies to consider postmodern insights about the limitations of representation: “Asian American studies may be seen as a formation of the critical landscape configured by a (poststructural) problematization of referentiality, which facilitates the (postmodern) jettisoning of the authority of the meta-narrative.” (Chuh 5) However, not only does Chuh suggest a need for a critical postmodern lens, she asserts that Asian American subjectivity is a particularly productive space to explore evolving notions of referentiality and multiplicity. She observes how Asian American subjects are racially-marked bodies that exceed the nation-state circumscriptions of the abstracted citizen through their ability to traverse boundaries both geographical and ideological:

I suggest that it is precisely because U.S. nationalism has constituted “Asian America” as a transnational identity that it has power as an analytic in exposing the failures of the U.S. nation-state’s promises of universal equality. …. In this manner, transnationalism might be seen as a discourse that advances investigations of the technologies of race and U.S. national identity formation, or perhaps more pointedly, the technology of race *as* a technology of U.S. national identity. (Chuh 60-1)

Using transnationality as a physical and a metaphysical term, Chuh is careful to clarify that the Asian American transnational paradigm refers not only to the material “cross-border flows of people, capital and cultures” (Chuh 62), but also the “border crossings without literal movement” (ibid) that break new imaginative grounds towards “political and cultural practices illegible in the official discourse of the U.S. nation-state.” (ibid) In

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2 Chuh clarifies her own definitive approaches to poststructuralism and postmodern as: “identifying a particular discursive moment in which referentiality gives way to multiplicity. …. Poststructuralism otherwise generally takes up language itself as its analytic focus, while postmodernism concerns itself more with representation — obviously, there are overlaps between these focuses. (Chuh 153)
this way, Chuh calls for the crucial task to examine as yet unexamined postmodern permutations of hegemonic technologies that work to contain and oppress Asiatically-marked bodies.

In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe applies a materialist critique in her examination of how U.S. nation-state technologies of citizenship based on the abstract liberal subject is predicated on the ideologically paradoxical foundations of national exclusion and material exploitation of the transnational Asian immigrant. Lowe emphasizes the political exigency for Asian American scholars to critically engage in the historical and sociological contradictions that simultaneously disenfranchise the Asian American subject and substantiate the abstract U.S. citizen. Focusing on the material conditions that have systemically excluded Asiatically-marked bodies from national subjecthood, Lowe locates political resistance in the very prefiguration of this racializing technology that constitutes U.S. citizenship:

As the state legally transforms the Asian *alien* into the Asian American *citizen*, it institutionalizes the disavowal of the history of racialized labor exploitation and disenfranchisement through the promise of freedom in the political sphere. Yet the historical and continued racialization of the Asian American, as citizen, *exacerbates* [my emphasis] the contradictions of the national project that promises the resolution of material inequalities through the political domain of equal representation. (Lowe 10)

Lowe elucidates a political potentiality in recognizing Asian American transnationality in that the racialization of Asian American subjects highlights the hypocrisy and racism of the U.S. democratic rhetoric of freedom and equality. Furthermore, Lowe reveals how the ideological sustains the material conditions that perpetuate political inequity for Asian Americans.
In fact, it is in the labor of the transnational Asian female immigrant where Lowe locates an overdetermination of material exploitation, racialization and gendered oppression: “Transnational industry’s use of Asian and Latina immigrant women’s labor in the United States is the current site where the contradictions of the national and the international converge in an overdetermination of capitalism, anti-immigrant racism, and patriarchal gender stratification.” (Lowe 16) Lowe argues that these ruptures between the socioeconomic, historical and political are located on the terrain of the cultural; she then points out the various historical and socioeconomic negations that the phenomenon of U.S. multiculturalism inflicts on Asian Americans by erasing these contradictions that constitute the abstract citizen.

Thus, Lowe also proposes that Asian American studies formulate new constructs of resistance that account for the material and ideological contradictions on which U.S. citizenship has been based. She stresses the need to accordingly adjust to the current globalizing capitalist conditions by recognizing the heterogeneity of Asian American subjectivities, its hybridity of histories, and its positional multiplicities of power. If state apparatuses have historically functioned on the efficacy of orientalizing, racializing and totalizing Asiatically-marked people, Lowe argues that to not disrupt the logic of Asian American essential identity would ultimately work to empower sustain conditions as they are. Based on the awareness that mobility is not always facilitated by choice, Lowe emphasizes how crucial it is to destabilize the legitimacy of boundaries that ultimately forestall informed mobility and transgression. (Lowe 20-4)
In response to Lowe’s observation of the protean constructions of “American” and the inadequate constructions of “Asian” to establish a politically coherent subject position, Chuh points out that the circumscriptions for “American” and “Asian American” subjectivities will only further diverge as globalizing capital and information rapidly destabilize and reorganize former hegemonic constructs of oppression. Accordingly, Chuh urges for Asian American studies to reconfigure its political, social and theoretical underpinnings by “disowning” America because: “National belongingness … does not solve injustice, and seeing America through the critical frame of empire makes that clear.” (Chuh 125) By disowning the nation, Chuh means to disarticulate the linkages between the two terms “nation” and “home”. By home, she means the idealized imagination of a place exempt from states of domination, a spatial locus of ontological equanimity and absolute safety. Chuh contends that such a place cannot exist in the sociopolitical arena of identity formations, but must reside in the realm of political action realized through the power of language.

Recalling Michel Foucault’s assertion to self-reflexively situate oneself apart from the self, Chuh proposes that Asian American studies self-reflexively recognize its idealizations of its own conceptualizations of nation. In order to dismantle the romanticized notion of U.S. exceptionalism, Chuh suggests that we recognize the myth that the U.S. is the one nation in the world where ideals of freedom and diversity exist. Exempting itself from the language of imperial/colonial domination, the U.S. enjoys the freedom of unaccountability from the various forms of social injustice in that it is too “modern” to be associated with the European traditions of imperial/colonial ventures.
Chuh points out how even the U.S. academe has fallen susceptible to this tendency to render the U.S. as its own critically ideal space of freedom and democracy.

In self-reflexively recognizing how Asian American discourse might be borrowing its language of freedom and autonomy from former constructs of sovereign power, Chuh reveals the problematics of such a course recapitulating the logic of centralizing power. In order to instigate methodologies that challenge and disassemble ideological couplings between hegemonic constructs and those of Asian American studies, Chuh proposes to withdraw the over-determined attention given to the subject, both by the nation-state as well as minority discourse. By prioritizing difference in order to foreground the constructed nature of subjectivity, Chuh suggests that “we have not … always paid such critical attention to ‘Asian Americans’ and to ‘Asian American studies’ as ‘subjects’ that emerge [my emphasis] through epistemological objectification.” (Chuh 9-10) Emphasizing that she is not trying to dissolve the subject, Chuh asserts that her goal is to disarticulate the subject as perpetually problematic — a troubled locus of Derridean difference where sedimentations of subjectivity are foreclosed because of its incommensurability with paradigms of binarized power differentials. By a disavowal of investments in a subject wholly integrated with the nation-state, Chuh argues against the conflation of subjectivity with social justice and hopes for methodologies that dismantle subjectivity rather than yearn for that subjectivity in itself as discursive objective.

When Chuh calls for an Asian American “subjectless discourse,” the notion of postmodernism is bracketed as a theoretical approach that has produced anxieties over the threat of dissolving the disenfranchised, othered minority subject. Stemming from the
civil rights movements of the 1960s, Asian American literary and cultural studies have historically focused on the historical social inequities as deployed by technologies of the U.S. nation-state upon the Asiatically-constructed disenfranchised subject. Chuh proposes a postmodernist reconfiguration of Asian American liberal studies that relinquishes its focus on the subject for dismantling the hegemonic technologies that work to subjectify. She argues that the inadequacy of deploying only notions of the unified subject limits Asian Americanist objectives to achieving an ideal that is premised precisely by the very states of domination that Asian American studies seeks to politically resist.

In her seminal essay, “The Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway refers to states of domination as an “informatics of domination”—an evolved system of technologies that has shifted from a politics of representation to a politics of simulation. In 1985, Haraway submitted “The Cyborg Manifesto” for the Socialist Review in order to critique a social feminism that was failing to address the rapidly evolving power infrastructures in a technologically advancing world. Haraway cautions against feminist movements towards “naturalizing” the female body that support an originary truth. Echoing a similar political strategy to Chuh’s, Haraway points out how a belief in originary truth is a myth in itself that arose from the very technologies of domination that sustain sociopolitical oppression today. As metaphor and allegory, Haraway fashions the cyborg as an “ironic, political myth” as both a product and disruption to the informatics of domination that arise from hegemonic narratives of power. She contends for the need to blaspheme against the
mistaken faith in an absolute truth with a capital T — a blind faith that all socialists must
be aware exists — and particularly within — the disciplines of critical theory itself.

The cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a creature of social reality and fiction, the
perversely illegitimate child of patriarchal power systems (capitalism and militarism), a
chimera, of ether and sunlight. In other words, the cyborg defies categorization because
for the cyborg, the truth and legitimacy of borders do not exist. Haraway indicates “three
crucial boundary breakdowns” in her essay in order to instantiate and clarify her
metaphor of the cyborg. The first breakdown is the boundary between human and
animal; it is the first indication for Haraway that erodes the humanist notion of a unique
human condition. The second breakdown is the boundary between organism and
machine; the technologies of textualization are beginning to reveal the very
constructedness of what we think separates man from what he thinks he creates.
Subsequently, the innocence of origins is irrevocably and fatally tainted. Haraway’s final
boundary breakdown is between the physical and the non-physical; modern machinery
and ideology are floating signifiers that jump from hardware to coding imperceptibly. It
is this third boundary transgression where Haraway locates the potency of the cyborg in
that cyborgs are the indistinguishable interchangeability between our constructions of
material reality and the ideologies that we construct around them. “They are about
consciousness — or its simulation.” (Haraway 154) In other words, Haraway’s cyborg is
Chuh’s deconstructed subject with a technologized step-by-step how-to theoretical
manual.
When Haraway states that cyborgs exist as both ideological monsters as well as corporeal bastards and mutants, she not only underscores an ontological anxiety over absolute indeterminacy, she also insists upon embodying that indeterminate nightmare. However, although Haraway’s language acknowledges the apprehension in deconstructed subjectivity, it celebrates embodiment as essential to the ideological transgressions of the Cyborg Manifesto. Haraway’s cyborg is an apt metaphor to work with because her cyborg arises from a socialist feminist move to preclude discourse on the gendered body from recapitulating to centralized systems of power. Ironically, Haraway suggests a fusion of the gendered body to the technological means that centralized systems of power have exerted on the marginalized body. In other words, instead of continuing to uphold the duality between embodied subject and abstracted citizen, Haraway asserts the necessity of wholeheartedly arrogating the machinations that constitute centralized power. She proposes to reject the humanist ideals of individuation and organic being in exchange for the collective and in/organic being. She locates power through a politics based on affiliation over “true” blood and an ontology based on chaos over unity. It is tantamount to remember that embodiment is a fundamental essence of the cyborg.

Thus, explicating the Asian American literary subject as transnational allows for a metaphoric reading of Asian American subjectivity as cyborg because both share key characteristics. Focusing on four features that the transnational and the cyborg share, I will approach five critical Korean American texts that demonstrate the critical efficacy such a framework offers in elucidating a deconstructed Asian American subject. By framing the scope of my discussion with Korean American texts, I seek to reveal how
approaching the deconstructed Korean American transnational ultimately contributes to a better understanding of the indeterminate yet coalitional nature of Asian American subjectivities. The Asian American transnational and Haraway’s cyborg both: (1) transgress boundaries, (2) mix myth and reality, (3) simulate—rather than represent—identity, and (4) coalesce by affinity rather than identity. These four common traits demonstrate how the transnational and the cyborg conflate such that they cooperatively elucidate various points of resistance and agency in terms of the technologies of language, nation-state apparatuses, subjectivities, boundaries and power.

Beginning with Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999), the rest of this chapter will lay the theoretical groundwork for my subsequent investigations of each feature per chapter. Although I explicate Lee’s work with all four traits in this chapter, the following chapters will explore each trait with its own particular Korean American work. In chapter two, I take the literal trope of transnational boundary transgressions of national boundaries and demonstrate how other crucial boundaries of subjectivity are profoundly imbricated in this same space. By examining Ronyoung Kim’s *Clay Walls* (1987) in terms of the national boundaries transgressed, I will also investigate how psychological boundaries as well as class boundaries circumscribe the Korean American transnational. Moreover, I will explore how cyborg politics illuminates the ways these boundaries are both reified, transgressed and/or could be transgressed by both the author and her characters. In chapter three, I approach Haraway’s notion of myth-making by explicating Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha’s enigmatic *Dictee* (1982). By taking Sue Kim’s lens of reading *Dictee* as an equivocal text that is both postmodern and modern, I locate three
myths that Cha’s text explores — the myths of language, historical verity and the coherent subject. Through the lens of equivocality, Cha’s myths become fraught boundaries that delicately negotiate the transgressions of language, truth and subjectivity. Chapter four, then, re-explores the boundaries of language and subjectivity from a different angle in order to limn their contiguous boundaries with power in Susan Choi’s *American Woman* (2003). Choi’s novel narrates the U.S. media narrative of Patty Hearst’s abduction and her Stockholm Syndrome conversion such that it illustrates identity simulation both within the narrative and as meta-narrative. It is this transgression of the boundary between “actual” narrative and “fictional” narrative where I recognize a virtual narrative to simulate identity. Furthermore, by reading Choi’s text as a virtual narrative, I foreground affect as symptomatic of an emergent simulational politics of identity. Finally, in chapter five, I revisit boundary transgressions of virtual narrative such that affect plays a larger role in how I begin locating more specific boundary transgressions. In Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* (1997), I explicate her text such that the contiguous boundaries of in/sanity and in/justice reveal how hegemonic technologies circumscribe the Korean American comfort woman’s marked body. I end this chapter by discussing how the Keller’s narrative transgresses boundaries between life and death such that it illustrates transgressing as the ultimate act in seeking affect and agency.

Theoretically buttressing these chapters will be the aforementioned critical approaches by Lowe, Chuh and Haraway as well as N. Katherine Hayles, Brian Massumi and Giorgio Agamben. Hayles’s critique of the disembodied posthuman cautions against
the dematerialization of information in order to resist the alluring versions of cyber-
techno-language that recapitulate notions of the abstract liberal humanist subject:

Information, like humanity, cannot exist apart from the embodiment that brings it into being as a material entity in the world; and embodiment is always instantiated, local, and specific. Embodiment can be destroyed but it cannot be replicated. Once the specific form constituting it is gone, no amount of massaging data will bring it back. This observation is as true of the planet as it is of an individual lifeform. As we rush to explore the new vistas that cyberspace has made available for colonization, let us also remember the fragility of a material world that cannot be replaced.” (Hayles 49)

Emphasizing the ineluctable nature of information and embodiment, Hayles reminds us of the power that cybertechnologies have deployed to sever and destroy such fragile bodies. It is Hayles’s focus on virtuality and flickering signifiers in relation to cyborg politics and the body that I find most helpful. Postulating an evolution of Lacan’s floating signifiers, Hayles suggests that a major change in the landscape of textual signification as influenced by the technologies of informatics has taken place:

Flickering signifiers signal an important shift in the plate tectonics of language. Much of contemporary fiction is directly influenced by information technologies; cyberpunk, for example, takes informatics as its central theme. Even narratives without this focus can hardly avoid the rippling effects of informatics, for the changing modes of signification affect the codes as well as the subjects of representation.” (Hayles 30)

Connecting Haraway’s informatics of domination to Hayles’s rippling effects on narratives, then, supports the move to drastically recode a identity politics of representation into one of simulation. Hence, Hayles posits narrative itself as a technology of deconstruction; by locating flickering signifiers in writing, Hayles recognizes the narrator as Haraway’s cyborg: “As writing yields to flickering signifiers underwritten by binary digits, the narrator becomes not so such [sic] a scribe as a cyborg
authorized to access the relevant codes. …. In this sense, deconstruction is the child of
an information age....” (Hayles 43-4) It is in this way that I find Hayles’s theoretical
insights profoundly supportive of my thesis to envision the Asian American transnational
as cyborg.

Alongside Hayles, Brian Massumi’s analyses of the virtual greatly facilitates my
own forming articulations on affect, a notion I heavily depend on Massumi to assist in my
own arguments, who in turn derives his insights from the works of Gilles Deleuze and
Felix Guattari. In his Parables for the Virtual, Massumi argues for a theoretical
departure from the representational gridlock of structured discourse. Never relinquishing
the primacy of the body, he advocates the infiltration of supra-spatial notions such as
movement, affect and sensation to account for concrete material conditions of reality.
Massumi seeks an emergent politics through the experiential process of the virtual such
that we might formulate a language better able to induce change itself: “The Kantian
imperative to understand the conditions of possible experience as if from outside and
above transposes into an invitation to recapitulate, to repeat and complexify, at ground
level, the real conditions of emergence, not of the categorical, but of the unclassifiable,
the unassimilable, the never-yet-felt, the felt for less than half a second, again for the first
time — the new.” (Massumi 33) Furthermore, in his postulations of the virtual, Massumi
locates its emergent power in “every medium”, even paintings (ergo writing as well):

If all emergent form brings its fringe of virtuality with it, then no
particular medium of expression has a monopoly on the virtual. Every
medium, however, “low” technologically, really produces its own
virtuality (yes, even painting). …. What matters is the “how” of the
expression, not the “what” of the medium, and especially not the simple
abstractness of the elements that the medium allows to be combined. (Massumi 175)

Massumi’s point is that the virtual should take us into the realm of the experiential and out of the limitations of a spatially-ordered logic of power. Movement, affect and sensation are about reorienting ourselves to a supra-spatial language of change — one that conveys the intensity of the experiential, the processual, the emergent.

Finally, in my discussions that focus on the phenomenon of the camp — a space where boundaries that circumscribe the subject entirely collapse — I refer to Agamben’s work on bare life, sovereign power and the politics of life and death. Taking Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, Agamben reframes this discourse from acknowledging the nation-state’s responsibility in caring for the subject’s body to focusing on the nation-state’s actual absolute power of life and death over the subject’s body.³ Agamben locates the camp to be where a state of exception reveals the absolute power of sovereignty over a subject’s body such that the body can be killed without the verdict of homicide. What is Agamben’s primary concern, however, is that this space of exception is rapidly being less the exception and more often the camp is a phenomenon occurring in our modern technologized existences:

If this is true, if the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime

³ Sovereign power, then, is the power to decide when to implement the state of exception — where the state of exception is the suspension of the law such that the taking of life and the choice of death can be taken from the individual known as homo sacer. Sovereign power exists today as that power which is invested in the current institutions of nation-state apparatuses such as the U.S. government.
that are committed there and whatever its denomination and specific
topography. (Agamben 174)

Agamben cautions of the changing power paradigms where the boundaries that separate
bare life and juridical rule merge “into a threshold of indistinction”, in other words,
where the law ceases to recognize the subject’s life as applicable to its implementations
thereby denying political recognition of the subject and conflating that denial with the
right to live without political recognition. Thus, the camp is a space where boundaries
disappear, thereby rendering the hegemonic constructs and illusions of a Western
subjectivity starkly exposed. Just as Agamben discusses the camps of the Holocaust
during World War II, Chuh examines the U.S. Japanese American internment camps
during this period as well. By investigating multiple literary narratives of the camp in
relation to the Asian American transnational, I seek to examine the very boundaries of
power that separate life from death within the political machinery of the U.S. government
as well as U.S. dominant culture. Because ultimately, the stakes in my thesis is to
contribute to Asian American literary studies new formulations of discourse on the power
differentials that seek to dictate a politics of life and death upon the U.S. subject.

Agamben asserts that the camp is no longer in the confined space of extreme exception.
The camp, where sovereign power becomes most apparent in its ability to take life with
impunity, can be recognized everywhere; as globalization increasingly democratizes the
body politic through biopower, we increasingly relinquish our bodies over to the care of
nation-state apparatuses. In the space of Asian American literary discourse informed by a
cyborg politics of unapologetic boundary transgression, I believe that political
transformation for Asian American subjectivity will emerge.
I. Boundary Transgression: Metonymy in National Boundaries

Transnationals, by definition, transgress national boundaries and thereby disrupt the notion of national identity. Superimposing the figure of the cyborg onto the Asian American transnational, reveals new ways to discuss Asian American subjectivity that resist recapitulating hegemonic circumscriptions in literary analyses. As Lowe points out, national identity has been historically harnessed to the racialized subject through both ideological and material means in order to enforce sociopolitical inequities in relation to the racialized and nationalized body. The transnational undermines state apparatuses that have worked to sustain the myth of national identity as subjectivity. In other words, the mobile identity of an Asian American transnational underscores how that body lies in excess of the constructs of U.S. subjectivity by being both a racialized body as well as a citizen.

Nationalism calls forth patriotism and fidelity to a singular nation — a unified body politic. Historically, this body politic has been unambiguously representative of white, propertied, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual males. By contesting U.S. nationalism, Asian American transnationalism not only disrupts this body politic, it challenges the implicit faith invested in national identity. By questioning whether attaining national identity indeed grants uncontested “American subjectivity” for Asian Americans, transnationalism necessitates a meticulous ontological examination of how individuals, subjectivity and identity are organized through the nation. Furthermore, examining Asian American transnationality also sheds incisive light on the legitimacy of the nation itself in
a postmodern era when globalizing technologies are rapidly restructuring its paradigms of centralized power.\textsuperscript{4}

Haraway refers to this restructuring of centralized power as an informatics of domination that seeks to circumscribe subjectivities according to one master code where all can be assembled, disassembled and reassembled according to the material needs of capital gain. Transnationals interrupt this logic, because like cyborgs, transnational identities cannot be contained within the national imaginary. The myth of national identity cannot account for a racially-marked body inconsistent with the unified narrative of that particular nation. Like a cyborg, the transnational is a glaring contradiction of hybrid identities that cannot fit into the fabric of seamless nationalism. A primary locus of hybridity that the transnational embodies is that of multiple national boundaries. Doc Hata of Chang-rae Lee’s \textit{A Gesture Life} exemplifies this very kind of transnational.

It is important to clarify how my methodology of superimposing the cyborg onto the transnational does not entail conflating the two entities. By superimposing the cyborg on a figure like Doc Hata, I seek to point out how for most of the novel, Doc Hata fails to deploy a cyborg politics of identity. Doc Hata is an excellent narrative example of how the desire for national identity predictably fails to recuperate the crisis of a fragmented subjectivity. Although Doc Hata ultimately emerges from his ontological crisis without

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{4} In terms of the legitimacy of the notion of “nation-state power” in an increasingly globalized suprastructure of power, I contend that regardless of the spatial organization of power, the essence of what I refer to is the dynamic movement of centralizing power. Whether nation-state power is exercised by a bounded singular nation or whether that power disperses and/or migrates to greater degrees of separation from the disenfranchised individual, the import of my argument lies in the notion that this power persists in empowering some and disempowering others.
\end{footnotesize}
having to recuperate subject fragmentation, able to fly above his home and successfully “disown” that home (as Chuh proposes), Lee’s narrative portrays a man lost and without a home precisely because of his faith entrenched in the illusion of home. Hata’s perpetual need to find home is symptomatic of his desperate need for a space bounded by the illusion of a safe and coherent subjectivity behind boundaries such as national boundaries as well as classed and raced boundaries.

*A Gesture Life* reveals how an ethnically-Korean man, born in Japan successfully becomes a Japanese soldier of the Japanese Empire during World War II, only to fall in love with a Korean comfort woman at the camp where he is stationed as a medic-in-training. Framed within the narrative of Doc Hata’s later life in the U.S., Lee depicts the desperately shattered interiority of a man who cannot let go of the power of the image. From the very beginnings of his disenfranchised life, Hata clings to his Japanese national identity as if it is his very lifeline. Although Agamben theorizes the camp as the predominating locus where the boundaries between bare life and juridical power dissolve, for Hata, this boundary dissolved long before he ever reached the camp. Hata effectively kills any identification with his Korean heritage with the complete faith in his ability to subsume his identity into his Japanese identity. In other words, by refusing to acknowledge the transgressive nature of his transnationality, Hata hopes that he might gain access to Japanese subjectivity. However, for Hata, existing in Japan as an ethnic-Korean is already existing in a state of exception where the law is suspended from him thereby exceptionalizing his racially-marked body from the Japanese body politic. Hata’s own description of his early childhood departure from his ghettoized Korean community
explicitly reveals how he equates his Korean identity as one in “twilight” whereas his adoption to a Japanese couple is viewed “as the true beginning of ‘my life’” (Lee 72):

This was when I first appreciated the comforts of real personhood, and its attendant secrets, among which is the harmonious relation between self and his society. There is a mutualism that at its ideal is both powerful and liberating. For me, it was readily leaving the narrow existence of my family and our ghetto of hide tanners and renderers. Most all of us were ethnic Koreans, though we spoke and lived as Japanese, if ones in twilight.” (ibid)

Furthermore, although Hata “readily” departs from his Korean identifications, it is clear that Hata’s opportunity to leave has nothing to do with Hata’s own agency for mobility as a politically-recognized citizen: “Of course, I didn’t leave on my own. … But I was fortunate … and was one of a few boys of my kind to be identified [my emphasis] and enrolled in a special school…. ” (ibid)

Despite his quasi-enfranchisement and illusory “passing” as an adopted Japanese student and eventually soldier of the Imperial Army of Japan, Hata never quite attains Japanese subjectivity in that he is always looking over his shoulder. Haunted by the national boundaries that fail to circumscribe him, Hata floats in a perpetual no-man’s-land of exceptionalized existence. Lee’s narrative reveals Hata’s interiority to be fraught with a language intensely self-censored in order to protect the self from its own abject fears. In Hata’s recollections of his fellow soldier Corporal Endo, he denies even to himself that Corporal Endo is also ethnically Korean in a Japanese soldier’s uniform. When recalling Corporal Endo’s execution for helping a Korean girl escape into the woods, Hata associates both himself and Endo with the Japanese Imperial army: “No matter what Corporal Endo had done, or the blanket necessity of punishment, it was
never a simple matter to conduct an execution of one of our own [my emphasis].” (Lee 229) Even more illuminating of Hata’s fears is when his thoughts continue to justify his inaction to save or even defend Endo in the name of his duty and responsibility to the Japanese Imperial Army: “For I feared, simply enough, to be marked [my emphasis] by a failure like Corporeal Endo’s, which was not one of ego or self but of an obligation public and total — and one resulting in the burdening of the entire society of his peers.” (ibid) What Hata cannot openly admit is that he most of all fears being marked in the same way Endo is marked. It is likely honest enough that it is not about Hata’s ego but it is about his desperate need to assert his total and public obligation to Japanese subjectivity.

As Hata continues his thoughts on his fear of being marked, he circumnavigates the notion of enfranchisement such that he articulates how subjectivity eludes him:

I have feared this [being marked] throughout my life, from the day I was adopted by the family Kurohata to my induction into the Imperial Army to even the grand opening of Sunny Medical Supply, through the initial hours of which I was nearly paralyzed with the dread of dishonoring my fellow merchants, none of whom had yet approached me, or would for several weeks. It must be the question of genuine sponsorship that has worried me most, and the associations following, whose bonds have always held value for me, if not so much human comfort or warmth. (Lee 229)

For Hata, it is a question of genuine sponsorship or in other words, being genuinely sponsored by a system that hails him as enfranchised subject, is what Hata desires most fervently. More than the human affective bonds of comfort or warmth, Hata seeks to access the ideological bonds of nation-state association. Or so he thinks. By the end of the novel, when Hata begins to recognize where his conscious desires fail him, his
grandson, Thomas, helps Hata realize how much he truly desires the human bonds of comfort and warmth.

Prior to Thomas entering his life, Hata’s psychological negotiations remain steadfastly committed to his illusion of a seamless identity. Even when his charade as loyal Japanese soldier utterly fails in the face of his commander, Captain Ono, Hata cannot recognize his relentless dependence on empty ideological boundaries to protect and define him. In a revealing speech to Hata, Captain Ono explains to Hata that he disdains him precisely because Hata is unable to embody is own identity. Even though Ono is aware of Hata’s Korean parentage, he points out that this is simply fodder for claiming victimhood: “Blood is only so useful, or hindering.” (Lee 266) In those succinct words, Ono’s words encapsulate the ideological fallibility in a representational politics of identity. Furthermore, Ono advocates “strong thought and strong action” (ibid), movements Hata is apparently incapable of asserting. In other words, Ono locates agency as the embodied potentiality in movement, of the mind and body. He perceives Hata’s commitment to “fate and gesture” (ibid), terms that can only be mined from an ideological space circumscribed by hegemonic boundaries of the abstract subject. Most explicitly, Ono states: “You, Lieutenant [Hata], too much depend upon generous fate and gesture. There is no internal possession, no embodiment. Thus you fail in some measure always. You perennially disappoint someone like me.” (ibid) Ono keenly dissects Hata’s constructed identity to be founded on nothing more than the desperate attempt to represent a coherent subjectivity. Rather than live an embodied life where he faces the
realities of his own marked and circumscribed body, Hata chooses to cling to the very nationalist narrative myth that erases his body.

II. Myth and Reality: The Power to Recognize, the Power to Connect

Even in his later life in the U.S., Hata continues to cling to the illusion of seamless identity through other means. Since he cannot racially “pass” as part of the U.S. national identity of homogenous and/or invisible whiteness, he opts for the nearest mythologies he can access, the myth of class enfranchisement and his own self-inflicted perpetuation of the model minority myth: “Here, fifty minutes north of the city, in a picturesque town that I will call Bedley Run, I somehow enjoy an almost Oriental veneration as an elder.” (Lee 1) Lee’s narrative begins where Hata has finally achieved the ultimate accomplishment of establishing an incorporated identity: “…everyone here knows perfectly who I am. It’s a simple determination.” (ibid) However, Hata has attained his reputation and identity in exchange for an embodied life that Ono recognized absent from his life. Again, living within the tight parameters of his self-induced stereotypes, Hata’s opening comments reveal how he is actually not a medical doctor but a purveyor of medical equipment. Moreover, it becomes apparent to the reader that Hata never admits to anyone in Bedley Run that he is not ethnically from Japan for such an admission would undermine the efforts of his carefully constructed identity.

Crucial to note is that the mythologies of class and the model minority are also boundaries that transnationality effectively transgresses; however, as we can see, transgressing the boundaries of class and attaining “model”-U.S. citizen status are
effortless for the Asian American transnational. This is because the languages of transgressing these boundaries have been co-opted by the grand narrative of U.S. democratic freedom and equality. Lee’s narrative makes clear Lowe’s contention that the perpetuating force behind the hypocrisy of U.S. democratic ideals lies in its promise of material equality through the disavowal of its own exploitative history of racially-marked bodies. Recognizing how imbricated the language of class and material gains is to the notion of U.S. democratic freedom and equality, reveals how not every boundary transgression is a liberatory move. In fact, just as Sunny, Doc Hata’s adopted Korean American daughter points out, Hata’s illusion that he is an enfranchised member of his white community of Bedley Run is deeply rooted in his reputation as the good “Doc Hata” as well as his large upper-class home, swimming pool and resultant respectable class standing: “…all I’ve ever seen is how careful you are with everything. With our fancy big house and this store and all the customers. How you sweep the sidewalk and nice-talk to the other shopkeepers. You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness. You’re always having to be the ideal partner and colleague.” (Lee 95)

If we approach myth as the recognition of boundaries that hegemonic constructs deploy to circumscribe the subject, the myth that Hata ascribes to is the myth of the

5 Thus we see why it is so alluring for Asian Americans to believe the model minority myth. The myth of national identity promises that if we ignore the U.S. history of material exploitation of racially-marked bodies, we can believe that we have gained material wealth and attained privileged class standing through the merits of our (orientalized) efforts. Subsequently, the national boundaries that circumscribe Asian American subjectivity simultaneously contain and oppress Latino American and African American subjectivities even more viciously and insidiously. By misdirecting Asian American affluence as proof that the American dream applies to everyone, the myth of U.S. national identity is able to deny its history of genocide, slavery, expulsion and exclusion.
home. Hata does everything in his power to create the ideal family and home—although not in terms of the all-American nuclear family, rather in terms of the safety of identity. Hata wants the assurance that appearances can guarantee safety in identity, specifically, national identity and its attending mythologies such as class and status. Hata’s desire directly pertains to Chuh’s suggestion to disown the U.S. nation as home when she asks: “‘Home’ — place or desire? Amid this tangled web of questions and problematics, one thing at least becomes clear: nationalism as framework for Asian Americanist practice, or as framework for driving local identity formations, appears rather awkward.” (Chuh 138) For Hata, nationalism as framework is more than just awkward, as the driving force behind Hata’s identity of empty gestures, it has culminated to Hata’s existential crisis in Bedley Run.

Hata’s crisis lies in his failure to recognize the myth of nation as home. What is actually deeply invested in his need to establish a life of gestures is his inability to recognize this myth where the safety of national identity extends into participating in the myth of class and model minority standing. In so doing, it becomes increasingly clear to Hata how futile these efforts to establish home really are. Thus begins Hata’s metaphoric journey of swimming from one swimming pool to the next in order to ultimately return home, only to find it “locked up and deserted.” (Lee 23) Indicative in this passage that Hata reads from one of Sunny’s dog-eared books is Hata’s suspicion that for all that he has materially and socially accomplished, his home is but a lonely and desolate place. Particularly suggestive of this despair over this suspicion is that Hata nearly burns his house down in the midst of pondering this story among other despondent ruminations.
What consistently lurks at the edges of all Hata’s memories are hints of what is missing from Hata’s mythologies of identity. In the midst of all of Hata’s myths is the marked absence of his body. Repeatedly in his vague memories, Hata’s narrative highlights its own myth of the disembodied subject by intensifying Hata’s need for corporeal connection. The language of Hata’s memories, particularly of Sunny, often reflect Hata’s own inability to emotionally connect to her. And although Massumi cautions against mistaking emotion for affect, I contend that emotion nonetheless correlates to Hata’s inability to affect in that it indicates his inability to connect to himself: “Emotion is the most intense (most contracted) expression of that capture [of affect] — and of the fact that something has always and again escaped. …. That is why all emotion is more or less disorienting, and why it is classically described as being outside of oneself, at the very point at which one is most intimately and unshareably in contact with oneself and one’s vitality.” (Massumi 35) Massumi’s words echo Captain Ono’s in that what Massumi describes as the intensity of emotion as the moment in which one connects to one’s own body, Ono observes as missing when he states of Hata, “There is no internal possession” (Lee 266).

Hata’s and Sunny’s fraught adoptive father-daughter relationship is especially painful in that Hata’s narrative subtly reveals the affectless nature of their relationship such that the house they live in only becomes even lonelier and more desolate the more Hata tries to renovate it. Not only does the house symbolize Hata’s failure in recognizing the emptiness of his myth of identity, it is the space where he fails to acknowledge his own embodied participation with life — especially his fatherhood to Sunny: “Sunny, I’m
afraid, always hated the house.” (Lee 26) After making this observation, Hata’s language that recalls Sunny as the little orphan girl approaching her new home evokes an emptiness that both Hata and house must have emanated and augmented in a positive feedback of frightening unresponsiveness for a little girl in a new place:

I remember first walking Sunny into the foyer, with all that dark wood paneling that was still up on the walls and ceiling, smelling from the inside of rot and dust, the lights fading now and then, and she actually began to titter and cry. I didn’t know what to do for her, as she seemed not to want me to touch her, and for some moments I stood apart from her while she wept, this shivering little girl of seven. (ibid)

Although Hata does eventually hold Sunny, his initial reaction is sadly distant. His assumption that she does not want him to touch her reveals more about Hata’s own resistance to connect than Sunny’s.

When Sunny is ten years old, “more than capable of helping” (Lee 27) clean the house, Hata urges Sunny to practice piano instead and seems to evade in engaging in any physical activity with her. In a conversation where he asks if she has practiced her piano, Hata injures his hand while cleaning a mirror in Sunny’s bathroom. When Sunny dismisses interest in playing piano for helping Hata clean, he deflects her request by insisting that she play more:

“Okay. But can I help you now?”

“No, dear,” I said to her, trying to stay the throbbing in my hand, my arm. “Why don’t you play some more? ….” (Lee 29)

It is no surprise then that despite Sunny’s technical brilliance at piano playing, she eventually abandons it for longer and longer absences with her friends. The passage then segues into the development of a larger rift between Sunny and Hata and the chapter
closes with Hata “accidentally” almost burning down the house. Thus in the context of Hata’s memories, the house as the space that occupies Hata’s myth of identity and Sunny as the entity deprived of Hata’s corporeal involvement in her life collide in a bitter resolution of smoke and flames that Hata is again, unwilling to claim responsibility for.

In another passage that Hata recollects of his communications with Sunny, his narrative conveys the awkward and unnatural manner in which Sunny, himself and his longtime girlfriend Mary Burns cannot seem to form a family. Although he describes Sunny as the one with “no feelings [of family] of the kind” (Lee 58), Hata hints at his own such lack of feeling in his description of Mary’s frustrations with him: “I was simply angry at Sunny, and so finally, I think, was Mary Burns, deeply angry and hurt, and though she never said a word to the girl, it seemed to happen that she was addressing me at the end, looking to me for the reasons why my daughter, after nearly four years, could still be so profoundly unmoved.” (Lee 58-9) Particularly telling is Hata’s own habit of referring to the woman he had a supposed intimate relationship by her first and last name, Mary Burns. Hata’s strained language about his relationship with Mary Burns reflects the inhibited nature of their connections such that even in an argument about Sunny, Hata’s responses are consistently polite. In response to Mary Burns’s very pointed protest in the way Hata treats Sunny, Hata’s emotions clearly do not disorient him:

“…it’s as if she’s a woman to whom you’re beholden, which I can’t understand. I don’t see the reason. You’re the one who wanted her. You adopted her. But you act almost guilty, as if she’s someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you’re obliged to do whatever she wishes, which is never good for anyone, much less a child.”
“This is quite unusual, Mary, to hear, but I’ll think about what you say.”

“For goodness sake, Franklin, you don’t always have to assent!” she said, her voice suddenly rising. I thought she would speak most sharply to me then. But she seemed to hear herself, and I could see the control she was exercising over her face. (Lee 60)

Even when Mary Burns blatantly accuses Hata of inappropriately raising Sunny as a more nurturing parental figure in her life, Hata’s responses are bland and disconnected. Almost hoping Mary Burns would speak sharply to him, however, Hata again reveals a yearning for the kind of affective presence that he seems unable to initiate.

It is not until Hata finally meets Thomas that he is able to start creating a more embodied myth of familial identity that has eluded him his whole life. Finally relinquishing the myth of the abstract national subject and all of its attending representations of enfranchisement, Hata begins to experience what participating in a mythology of hybridity and multiplicity might be. By letting go of the myth of a home of images, Hata is finally able to access the experiential process of a real home in his connections to Thomas and subsequently Sunny:

...I have never before quite felt the kind of modest, pure joy that comes from something like simply holding Thomas’s hand as he leads us through some mall, or watching as he and Sunny orchestrate the pulling of a T-shirt over his head, his sturdy little arms stuck for a moment, wiggling with half-panic and half-delight. (Lee 333-4)

For Hata, Thomas is the zenith of health and hope in the future of Hata’s questionable legacy of tormented disembodied identity. Almost every description of Thomas revolves around his sturdy little body and his boundless energy: “Now, my grandson Thomas, overfilled with energy and pluck, runs up the short beach holding out his inflatable water wings and dumps them in my lap.” (Lee 316) And in the same paragraph, Hata describes
again: “...his stout little figure apparently unaching, unhurt” (Lee 316). What Hata is unable to see his whole life is his need for affective connection, tritely put, affection. What Thomas initiates in Hata’s life is the movement of affect that dispels the myth of a representable identity such that Hata can recognize his own requisite vitality of being. Once Hata begins to recognize this, he is able to participate in the kind of myth-making that incorporates bodies such that they find connection in a celebratory simulation of identities.

In other words, a cyborg politics of the Asian American transnational not only urges us to recognize the mythologies invested in the boundaries that seek to hegemonically-circumscribe subjectivity, it asks us to participate in that myth-making as well. In this way, Haraway points out how the critical tool of deconstructing subjectivity is to both recognize the constructions of nation-state power as well as the constructions we build ourselves: “The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other.” (Haraway 165) Only in that recognition can we begin to tell new versions of mythologies that “displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities” (Haraway 176). Hata is unable to script a new mythology for himself until he begins to recognize the truly inaccessible nature of a hegemonically-constructed narrative of the national subject for a racially-marked body such as his. Although on different conditions of racialization, Hata never quite attains an enfranchised status of national subjectivity in Japan or the U.S. due to the racially-marked status of his body in either nation.
III. Identity Simulation: Image Versus Movement

The primary difference between the simulation versus the representation of identity is that identity simulation entails the process of identity-forming whereas identity representation is limited to the static reliance on the image. Hata’s reflections on his life invested in the static representation of national identity reveal the kind of hollow impotency such a mode of living costs when he says with melancholy: “…I feel I have not really been living anywhere or anytime, not for the future and not in the past and not at all of-the-moment, but rather in the lonely dream of an oblivion, the nothing-of-nothing drift from one pulse beat to the next, which is really the most bloodless marking-out, automatic and involuntary.” (Lee 320-1) However, this passage comes right before Hata realizes he cannot locate Thomas’s small body at the lake they are visiting. Hata’s friend Renny, at the same time Hata is swimming in the lake in search of Thomas, is having a heart attack. In one of the most intensely affective passages that powerfully draws the reader in to physically participate with the events of the narrative, embodiment is the central trope here: “Against my back I can almost feel the thrum of Renny’s heart racing, then arresting, then racing again. …. Some steps away the lifeguards are working on Thomas, and I hear his gasp and hack and he instinctively sits up and looks about. I nod, and he begins to cry.” (Lee 323) Not only is Hata’s narrative fully embodied with an affectively intense desire for life, Hata is himself fully engaged with the bodies around him. Finally, Hata seems to have the fortitude of corporealized will that Captain Ono accused him of failing to possess. When Renny’s girlfriend Liv exclaims that Renny is dying, Hata’s thoughts confirm his newfound resolve to embrace
the bodily involvement required to assert an identity of kinship and agency: “…for there will be no dying for him today, I think, I cannot allow it — in the way a doctor, perhaps once or twice in his career, might not simply abide — and if I have to reach inside of his chest I shall, reach inside and roughly clasp his heart and will it back alive.” (Lee 324)

Thus by relinquishing one particular myth in exchange for embracing many myths of indeterminacy and multiplicity, Hata finds a way to simulate a new identity. Referring to the feeling of “modest, pure joy” (Lee 333) that comes from holding Thomas’s hand, Hata finds the “hope of a familial continuation, an unpredictable, richly evolving to be” (Lee 334) that finally resolves the crisis of his own ontology. Hata comes full circle where his fear of being a marked body transforms into the joy of being a marked body: “For what else but this sort of complication [of his complex connections to Sunny and Thomas] will prove my actually having been here, or there? What else will mark me, besides the never-to-be-known annals of the rest?” (ibid) In stark contrast to Hata’s earlier fear of being marked like Corporal Endo — as the paradoxically racially-marked yet erased body within the indistinct zone of the camp — Hata now celebrates the fact that his connections to Thomas and Sunny mark his body with the indeterminacy of a deconstructed subject.

In other words, in terms of simulations of identity, what becomes most apparent is the need for connectivity. In the face of the kind of ontological erasure that Hata experiences in his life in Japan, Hata flees from embodiment because for him, embodiment is being reduced to a marked body that exists within the zones of indistinction as bare life. Having witnessed the horrors of the marked body being
stripped of subjectivity, Hata craves nothing more than the empty illusion of this subjectivity for most of his life. What is most evident in the absence of his ability to live a life more engaged with his body is the absence of connectivity, where according to Massumi, connectivity is that which indicates the presence of affect: “For affect is synesthetistic, implying a participation of the senses in each other: the measure of a living thing’s potential interactions is its ability to transform the effects of one sensory mode into those of another.” (Massumi 35) In other words, Hata is not able to fully realize his “potential interactions” because he is unable to acknowledge “the effects of one sensory mode into those of another.” (ibid)

Perhaps the most poignant passage of the book is when Hata crouches over the raped and murdered body of K, the comfort woman he has fallen in love with in the camp, and he picks up the remains of her unborn child from the bloodied ground:

Yet I could not smell or hear or see as I did my medic’s work. I could not feel my hands as they gathered, nor could I feel the weight of such remains. And I could not sense that other, tiny, elfin form I eventually discovered, miraculously whole, I could not see the figured legs and feet, the utter, blessed digitation of the hands. Nor could I see the face, the perfected cheek and brow. Its pristine sleep still unbroken, undisturbed. And I could not know what I was doing, or remember any part. (Lee 303)

Almost explicitly, Hata’s narrative articulates the very prohibition of affect in the symptomatic details of his inability to connect to his senses. The tight association between his body, his ability to connect to other bodies, and the intense power of affect emerges from the language of this passage such that it also demonstrates the power of affect as found in narrative to involve the reader as well. Not only does this passage convey the horrors of bare life in that K’s body is destroyed with no recognition of
homicide, it simultaneously transports this ontological denial of life onto the traumatic act of picking up the fragile form of lost life which confirms the monstrosity of the oppression of sovereign power. Lee’s narrative thus becomes the affective narrative that simulates identity by not only telling Hata’s story of empty gestures but challenging us to participate in that narrative as well. Such is the moment of agency and power I seek to locate in the critical tool of affect in literary analysis.

In a dramatic change of narrative, Hata’s intense sensory awareness of Thomas’s small hand in his tragically contrasts Hata’s numb insensibility when he picked up “the utter, blessed digitation of the hands” (Lee 303) of K’s unborn child, when he says, “It seems curious, all these years alone and my rarely thinking twice of the larger questions, perhaps save certain reconsiderations in the last few weeks, but now the simple padding touch of this boy’s fingers seemed to have the force of a thousand pulling hands.” (Lee 219) The plurality of hands that Hata experiences indicates the multiple nature of this connection Hata is feeling. Thomas has not only awakened in Hata a love for his grandson, Thomas has awakened in Hata the multiplicity of being that embraces a connectivity with many other bodies as well as Hata’s own body. In other words, as Hata falls deeper in love with his son, the more Hata is able to embrace the plural and indeterminate nature of his future. Hata now lives a life informed by the body. Hata’s narrative near the close of the novel articulates this informed living when he says: “Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones.” (Lee 356) In this statement, Hata finally embraces his embodied identity such that he can relinquish the myth of home where “Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will
be already on a walk somewhere, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home.” (ibid) Hata’s narrative asserts the power in simulation by limning the requisite corporeality needed to recognize the myth of home, and moreover be able to actually find the almost home where we might rest and revisit.

Hata demonstrates how we need our bodies in order to simulate identity because simulation is about the process of recognizing and re-narrating the myths that help us shape our identities. Since simulation is processual of emergence, and process is accountable to movement, it is able to induce changes in bodies that representation cannot. Hata’s life of empty gestures points to the crippling effect of living a life based on the image — on representation — a void of affect and movement that stultifies the intensity of living. Thus we see how affect and movement are triggers for the connective power of bodies within the medium of narrative. Hayles acknowledges this power in the act of narrativizing by asserting that the significant product of simulation emerges from the connections between creator, virtual world, creatures, computer and viewer. In this case, it is an easy association to argue that we can also locate the meaning that emerges from simulation through the connections between writer, virtual narrative, characters, book and reader:

The conjunction of processes through which we come to narrativize such images clearly shows that the meaning of the simulation emerges from a dynamic interaction between the creator, the virtual worlds (and the real worlds on which its physics is modeled), the creatures, the computer running the programs, and (in the case of visualizations) the viewer watching the creatures cavort.” (Hayles 2005, 196)
In her observation of Sim’s “Evolved Virtual Creatures,” a computer program designed
to simulate the evolution of virtual entities, Hayles underscores that since “[e]mergence is
the desired goal of this simulation” (Hayles 194), the key feature to recognize is the
process of connection or “dynamic interactions” that simulation induces between all
participants involved. In other words, simulation produces the emergent forms of
connections between bodies needed to coalesce on affinity rather than the myth of
identity.

IV. Coalitions of Affinity

When Haraway calls for cyborgs to coalesce on the basis of affinity rather than
identity, she calls for a recognition that “marks out a self-consciously constructed space
that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the
basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship.” (Haraway 157) By drawing
away from blood ties and towards “political kinship,” Haraway evokes Captain Ono’s
words that “[b]lood is only so useful, or hindering.” (Lee 266) Alluding to the ways
blood or racial representation has marked the body, Haraway’s and Ono’s words reflect
the profound limitations in depending too heavily on the static notion of image as
identity. In addition, blood and racial representation draw from the myth of an originary
truth: “An origin story in the 'Western', humanist sense depends on the myth of original
unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans
must separate, the task of individual development and of history, the twin potent myths
inscribed most powerfully for us in psychoanalysis and Marxism.” (Haraway 152)
Haraway points out how cyborgs must recognize the mythology of our cultural constructs and how they work to contain marked bodies. She points to ideological constructs such as psychoanalysis and Marxism that have powerfully influenced the way we group ourselves according the logics of each ideology. Alternatively, Haraway proposes that we recognize these myths and exchange them for scripting our own myths in which we can reorganize and coalesce on our own terms.

In order to imagine a new coalition based on the kind of affinity Haraway defines as “related not by blood but by choice, the appeal of one chemical nuclear group for another, avidly” (Haraway 156), I seek to draw out the critical cogency of deploying affect as that which indicates the kind of affinity Haraway promotes. Massumi advocates affect as a critical tool in that it is a notion abstract enough to break from the embedded structuralism of determinate identity as well as productively diverge into the murky territory of indeterminate identity. If emergence is indeed the goal, Massumi states that it “can only be approached by a logic that is abstract enough to grasp the self-disjunctive coincidence of a thing’s immediacy to its own variation” (Massumi 8). What Massumi describes in this statement is the fragmenting experience of recognizing one’s own indeterminacy. Moreover, Massumi still frames affect squarely within the realm of embodiment in that he acknowledges its autonomy only to the extent that it nevertheless always escapes from a particular body that contains the its own potential for connection: “Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is.” (Massumi 35) Thus, Massumi
frames affect within the same paradigm of connectivity that Haraway does for affinity in that both are potentialities for coalition.

In other words, coalescing by affinity points to the power of affect as it emerges from the transgression of certain boundaries by the marked transnational body. In *A Gesture Life*, the coalescing of affinities is initiated through the affective bonds between Hata, Sunny and Thomas. A hybrid family with every member of obscured and murky origins, the trio forms the kind of group that under other circumstances, could ultimately fail to coalesce. Although Hata divulges some details of his parents’ lives, the majority of his life has been spent denying his origins. For Sunny, it is even less of a choice than a reality that she knows virtually nothing of her parents. And if she does know anything, she chooses not to dwell on it. Furthermore, Sunny clearly chooses not to dwell on the identity of Thomas’s father. In the end, both Hata and Sunny demonstrate how expendable an origin story really is when it comes to the business of living.

What is actually vital in the coalescing of indeterminate and multiple bodies is, again, not the image of an original body, but the experiential knowledge gained from the movement of that body — otherwise known as the affect of the body. For Hata and Sunny, it is clear their history together never drew them any closer as father and daughter. Regardless of the expectations and illusions of their community as well as Hata himself, their affect-less relationship disallowed any long-standing coalition of affinity. In Sunny’s own words, she expresses the sense that Hata never wanted her company, that there was no embodied gravitation of warmth and safety that indicates genuine affection:
But with you, I just didn’t understand. I thought this even when I was very young, why you would ever want a child, me or anyone else. You seemed to prefer being alone, in the house you so carefully set up, your yard and your pool. You could have married someone nice, like Mary Burns. You could have had an instant, solid family, in your fine neighborhood, in your fine town. But you didn’t. You just had me. And I always wondered why. I always thought it was you who wished I had never come, that you had never chosen to send for me.” (Lee 335-6)

Yet what is significant about this passage is that despite their years of estrangement and separation, despite their earlier years void of connection, the narrative draws them ever closer on the merit that Hata and Sunny are sitting there together. Although Sunny has just accurately described Hata’s affectless years of alienation and rejection, the conversation, overall, is a celebration in their present togetherness.

What makes this moment of communion that much more unlikely is the very founding motivations that urged Hata to adopt a little Korean girl in the first place. Inexplicably hoping specifically for a little Korean girl to raise, Hata is disappointed at the first sight of Sunny. With “thick, wavy black hair and dark-hued skin” (Lee 204), Sunny is clearly “the product of a much less dignified circumstance, a night’s wanton encounter between a GI and a local bar girl” (ibid). In Hata’s own words, he adopts Sunny firmly entrenched with expectations and desires based on an “origin story”. When Sunny fails to replicate this particular myth, Hata is once again unable to cope with the schism between myth and reality such that because he failed to connect to the image, he fails to connect to the reality of her physical presence: “I had assumed the child and I would have a ready, natural affinity, and that my colleagues and associates and neighbors, though knowing her to be adopted, would have little trouble quickly accepting our being of a single kind and blood. …. And perhaps it was right from that moment, the
very start, that the young girl sensed my hesitance, the blighted hope in my eyes.” (ibid)

Again we see Hata’s participation in the myth of “natural identification” in his faith and
hope for a natural affinity based on the notion of blood.

When Hata objects that he never once regretted Sunny’s arrival into his life,
Sunny lets his not-so-truthful denial go by saying, “We’re here, aren’t we? Whatever has
happened.” (Lee 336) And with that simple comment, Hata’s narrative articulates the

singular pleasure of feeling connected to another being: affection, affinity:

I let the notion suspend, and even happily, for I’ve long wished to
taste the plain and decent flavor of being with someone who is likewise
content to be with me. It’s a feeling not necessarily happy or thrilling or
joyful but roundly pleasing, one that I am sure most people in the world
know well, and others, like Sunny and me, both orphans of a sort, must
slowly discover, come to learn for ourselves. (ibid)

But perhaps, what Hata might not realize is that it is possibly most conducive for

“orphans of a sort” to readily discover the appreciation of this quiet suspension of

connected contentment. For it is orphans who must directly confront the mythology of
their origins and decide what they will do with such narratives.

By casting off the need to rely on yet another story of original truth, cyborgs can
focus on their need for “…embracing the skilful task of reconstructing the boundaries of
daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts.”
(Haraway 182) In other words, the cyborg task of forming coalitions of affinities refers
to more than just bonding with other variable bodies, but also bonding with all the other
recognized and unrecognized parts that constitute our hybrid beings. By being acutely
aware of how multiply mythologized our identities are, the better we are able to
recognize those being organized along the logic of power and domination. Rather than
being distracted with notions of blood, that have nothing to do with the business of resisting centralized power and its attending hegemonic technologies, cyborgs can coalesce on the abstract-but-embodied phenomenon of simulated connection.

By abstract-but-embodied phenomenon, I refer to a much needed development of the critical language of affect. Thus I conclude this chapter with the hopes that I might formulate a discourse of deconstructive Asian American subjectivity articulated through the framework of the transnational as cyborg. In deploying a cyborg politics of identity, I seek to demonstrate the efficacy in formulating a critical language of affect to the discourse of Asian American literary scholarship. In the process of this investigation into the mythologies that sustain, contain and oppress racially-marked bodies, I hope to inspire a language that finds a way out of the hegemonic logic of centralized power — emergent from the political confines of representation and into one of simulation. Summarily and simply put, I strive to reveal the connection between border-jumping and coalition-making in order to empower border-jumpers and coalition-makers on the basis of political kinship.
Chapter 2: Boundary Transgression in *Clay Walls*

Examining the Asian American transnational through a postmodern lens reveals how Asian American subjectivity exceeds the hegemonically-bound circumscriptions of identity. This excess becomes apparent when we observe how the transnational transgresses boundaries within various technologies of centralized power such as nationalism, patriotism, machoism, colonialism and sovereignty. Haesu, Ronyoung Kim’s protagonist in *Clay Walls*, is a type of Asian American transnational figure who literally crosses national borders between the U.S. and Korea, and while doing so, her journey highlights the various other boundaries that intersect national boundaries. Kim’s novel not only demonstrates how national boundaries work to construct identity, it illustrates socioeconomic boundaries as sites of contestation between the state and the disenfranchised as well as how they are contiguous with boundaries of racialization and power. Finally, Haesu negotiates psychological boundaries between patriarchy and domesticity as contiguous with the psychological boundaries that delineate mother, political activist, wife and self. Kim’s Korean American transnational subject deconstructs identity thereby revealing the boundaries that are ineluctably transgressed in the process and progress of ontological survival. Haesu demonstrates transnational fluidity such that the Asian American deconstructive subject exemplifies Donna Haraway’s cyborg.

Observing how modern technology reorganizes the ways in which we signify sociopolitical relations, Haraway deploys the metaphor of the cyborg to envision a postmodern permutation of ontological significance. When she states that “The
boundary-maintaining images of base and superstructure, public and private, or material and ideal never seem more feeble” (Haraway 166), she refers to the destabilizing effects globalization and technology have had on the notion of boundaries. Haraway’s cyborg illuminates a deconstructive understanding of the subject such that we recognize the myth of these boundaries and how marked bodies necessarily transgress these boundaries. By imagining a cyborgian identity politics, Haraway asserts to dismantle the binarized logic that separates and marginalizes: “Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.” (Haraway 182) Instead, she proposes that by realizing our abilities to transgress these “boundary-maintaining images” (Haraway 166), marked bodies can resist the ways in which centralizing power seeks to contain and oppress. Subsequently, a cyborgian reading of Ronyoung Kim’s novel, Clay Walls, limns a boundary-transgressive subjectivity that forecloses the kinds of interpretations that recapitulate patriarchal, nationalist and racist narratives.

Clay Walls begins with Haesu’s first job in the U.S. as a maid. Born into upper-crust Korean aristocracy, Haesu disdains her job and the U.S. overall. Kim’s novel is about a woman’s journey both geographical and ideological. Raising her family in the U.S., Haesu resents the country that refuses to accept her or her native-born American children. Haesu’s struggles with her husband and her fight for her children in the U.S. reveal the boundaries that seek to constrict her into a tight domestic sphere that threatens to choke the family with sexism, racism and blind patriotism. Kim’s narrative reveals how it is impossible for Haesu to fit into the hegemonic circumscriptions ascribed to her
various roles as woman, immigrant and patriot. Kim’s narrative illustrates Korean American transnationality through the historic lens of pre-World War II that simultaneously substantiates Korean American subjectivity as well as underscores Korean American transgressions of any such stable subjectivity. Haesu overcomes psychological turmoil as well as material struggles against state and cultural oppression such that she demonstrates the plural and fluid nature of Korean American transnationality.

I. National Boundaries: Laughing at Uniforms and Crying Over Painted Turtles

National boundaries refer to the geographical borders of a nation, and nationalism refers to how identity is imbricated with those borders. Clay Walls reveals how profoundly identity is aligned to state ideologies. Giorgio Agamben explores this national inculcation through his notion of homo sacer as derived from Michel Foucault’s biopolitics. Agamben argues that homo sacer is man as politicized identity; we have come to the point where we cannot conceive of our lives as separate from the power of sovereignty. The cogency of recognizing the transnational is that it reveals this ontological blind spot; it begs the question exactly why is it so horrific to confront the idea of a “man without a country”. It is this kind of anxiety that underlies Korean American transnationality in Clay Walls. Kim’s novel reveals the complicated nature of the transnational in examples such as Haesu’s confusion with her attraction to Captain Yamamoto, a man who has not only shamefully relinquished his ties to Korea but married a Japanese woman as well. Kim problematizes the idea of the heroic political
refugee in Chun, who is actually a man running from the colonial Japanese government in Korea, not in political resistance, but rather miserably, only from mistaken identity. Questioning the ties between national loyalties and our senses of wholeness and agency, Kim incorporates into her narrative the historic plight of the Japanese American No-No boys. Haesu’s story is about a woman not only finding political refuge from her colonized home nation, but returning to her home nation only to realize it is not her home anymore. Examples like these reveal how *Clay Walls* is aptly titled in reference to Haesu’s realization of how easily walls can crumble away with the tides of time, politics and the heart. Kim strives to disassemble the preconceptions of the national citizen by not only destabilizing assumed fidelity to nationalist rhetoric but by questioning the very legitimacy of nationalist rhetoric itself.

Much of Kim’s novel is about destabilizing fidelities. She makes it clear how little committed Haesu is to being an American. On the other hand, Haesu naively trusts that her American-born children are fully-recognized national citizens — until she tries to enroll them in the Edwards Military Academy. Haesu decides to enroll the boys in a private academy due to racist harassment at the boys’ public school, thinking “Boys attending private schools would surely come from good homes …. They would come from families that did not use words like ‘chink’.” (Kim 49-50) However, in her conversation with Colonel Leland-Admissions Officer, with much difficulty, she finally realizes that being American in the U.S., is not a color-blind identity:

“The school was established for Anglo-Saxon Protestant boys,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “Presbyterian.”

He gave her a puzzled look, “Anglo-Saxon,” he repeated.
She cleared her throat, “I don’t understand.”
“It means. . . it means we, that is, the Academy does not accept
orientals.”
She smiled. “No, not my sons. American-born. Right here in Los
Angeles.”
“Mrs. . . . uh . . . Please try to understand,” he said, impatience in
his tone. “Anglo-Saxon, uh . . . Caucasian.” He seemed to be searching
for the right word. “White,” he said, finally. (Kim 51)

Haesu’s confusion simultaneously highlights her foreign-status as a non-native English
language speaker as well as underscores the patent hypocrisy of U.S. nation-state rhetoric
of liberal democracy. In Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics, Lisa
Lowe connects the Asian American national and cultural dilemma of perpetual
foreignization with the current politics over the U.S./Mexico border when she states:
“Asian Americans, with the history of being constituted as ‘aliens,’ have the collective
‘memory’ to be critical of the notion of citizenship and the liberal democracy it upholds;
Asian American culture is the site of ‘remembering,’ in which the recognition of Asian
immigrant history in the present predicament of Mexican and Latino immigrants is
possible.” (Lowe 21) Pointing out how nation-state technologies work to represent a
democratic ideology while racially marking bodies in order to maintain centralized
power, Lowe’s statement aptly relates to Kim’s passage between Haesu and the private
school admissions officer. Due to Haesu’s confusion caused by an implicit trust in U.S.
democratic ideals more than any linguistic barrier, Colonel Leland is forced to bluntly
point out the actual racist and exclusionary policy by which the U.S. institution is
founded upon.¹

¹ It is interesting how thirty years after this book has been published, the underlying
cultural notions of this conversation have not changed when we observe the hot debate
Outraged at the injustice and hypocrisy, Haesu relates her discovery to her fellow Korean patriots in the political group she is secretary to, the Koreans for Progressive Reforms (KPR). Confiding to the men of this group, Haesu is surprised by their nonchalant acceptance of disenfranchised status despite their thorough understanding of the conditions of that disenfranchisement. Min, the group’s intellectual whom Haesu admires the most, offers a mini-lesson in U.S. race politics when he states, “Intentional separation of the non-privileged from the privileged. Power to be perpetuated in the hands of those who can afford it.” (Kim 55) When Haesu points out that she has the money for tuition for the private academy, he clarifies: “I’m talking about the kind of money and power you and I will never have. We are not part of their system, their institutions. If money doesn’t keep us out, other reasons have to be invented.” (Kim 55).

around the U.S./Mexico border politics and “anchor babies” — babies born to Mexican parents in the U.S. The above conversation hearkens the racist dilemma of the U.S. nation-state as it quibbled over the definition of what constitutes being “white”. For example, in the 1923 case of “United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind”, Mr. Bhagat Singh Thind was granted citizenship by the District Court of Oregon over the objection of the Naturalization Examiner at the federal level. Federal Justice Sutherland quibbled as such:

Mere ability on the part of an applicant for naturalization to establish a line of descent from a Caucasian ancestor will not ipso facto to and necessarily conclude the inquiry. ‘Caucasian’ is a conventional word of much flexibility, as a study of the literature dealing with racial questions will disclose, and while it and the words ‘white persons’ are treated as synonymous for the purposes of that case, they are not of identical meaning, idem per idem. (Nakanishi et al 42).

Consequently, in answer to the primary question “Is a high-caste Hindu, of full Indian blood, born at Amritsar, Punjab, India, a white person within the meaning of section 2169, Revised Statutes?” (ibid 41), the answer was No. (ibid 45) on the grounds that “it is not likely that Congress would be willing to accept as citizens a class of persons whom it rejects as immigrants.” (ibid 45).
Through Min’s trite lesson on U.S. politics for Haesu, Kim’s narrative reveals how U.S. citizenship is a constructed and labile identity. Despite the rhetoric of democracy, the national boundaries that protect the U.S. citizen does not encompass those who are not explicitly “white” — where even “Caucasian” is not a sufficient term to rely on. Furthermore, Min points out how, if not materially, U.S. nation-state apparatuses will culturally ensure this technology of exclusion. Ironically, it is precisely this kind of phenomenon that refers to the current trend of liberal multiculturalism that aptly describes new cultural permutations that sustain centralized power.

Kim’s narrative thus articulates the kinds of issues that Lowe analyzes as the paradox of democratic rhetoric with U.S. material and cultural productions:

As the state legally transforms the Asian alien into the Asian American citizen, it institutionalizes the disavowal of the history of racialized labor exploitation and disenfranchisement through the promise of freedom in the political sphere. Yet the historical and continued racialization of the Asian American, as citizen, exacerbates the contradictions of the national project that promises the resolution of material inequalities through the political domain of equal representation. (Lowe 10)

Despite the amassed wealth Haesu and her husband have transiently attained for their children, Clay Walls narrativizes the transformation from alien to citizen as attained through “racialized labor exploitation and disenfranchisement” based on a promise of equality that never quite materializes. Ultimately, the family’s wealth quickly disintegrates through the indifference and corrupt changing hands of the government as well as the gambling habit of Chun, Haesu’s alienated husband. Kim’s narrative then also illustrates how the paradox of rhetorical democracy ultimately works to sustain the material and cultural conditions required to centralize racialized power.
With deliberate irony, Kim depicts the political double standards of Haesu’s revolutionary group organized against Japanese occupation of Korea. Portraying the problematic nature of being Korean American in the U.S. alongside the fraught nature of Korean citizenship itself, the groups’ identifications emphasize the destabilized subjectivities of being Korean and American in the U.S. When Lee advises Haesu to let go of the issue of the racist private school policy in deference to “larger” issues such as “the recognition of Koreans as separate from the Japanese” (Kim 56), Kim illustrates the multiply-bound nature of Korean American subjectivity. Haesu’s angry response to Lee’s advice foreshadows why the group ultimately dissolves due to its inability to resolve the different boundaries that circumscribe its collective identity: “Forget the school? Is that all you have to say? You can’t just leave it at that. … Be realistic? …. All your cries for freedom has to do with the Japanese. They’re thousands of miles away! (Kim 56). Haesu’s contradicting stance on what counts as the more important political issue reveals how national boundaries are not stationary in that which national boundaries circumscribe the Korean American subject cannot be assumed. Lee emphatically states, “The school is a small matter. Discrimination as it affects the rights of citizenship for ‘orientals’. That’s the issue. And, most important to us, the recognition of Koreans as separate from the Japanese. We can’t waste our time with these puny isolated incidents.” (Kim 56) Such a statement highlights the transnational nature of the Korean American. Furthermore, Lee’s revealing statement also highlights the intersecting boundaries that transnationality brings to the foreground.
In other words, by examining how the transnational transgresses national boundaries, other tightly-imbricated boundaries become increasingly apparent. Haesu and Lee’s argument reveal how Korean American subjectivity is not a concretely definable terrain where even the boundaries themselves are contested spaces. It is this dilemma that reflects the need to critically frame the indeterminate nature of subjectivity in Asian American studies. Kandice Chuh contends in *Imagine Otherwise*, for an identity politics of undecidability that resists this kind of subjective containment: “Undecidability rather than identity provides the grounds for unity, and identifying and contesting the forces that control intelligibility, that affiliate meanings, emerge as crucial tasks for Asian American studies.” (Chuh 83) Not only does the altercation between Haesu and Lee highlight how domestic aspects of citizenship often become subordinated to the public aspects of nation-state politics, Haesu’s thoughts limns how they are also often contiguous to gender boundaries: “[Haesu] could not understand why the men could not see it. They were men of history who had been disenfranchised and persecuted by an enemy of freedom.” (Kim 54) Immediately after this exchange, the men eagerly ask Haesu if she has food, to which her reaction is to realize that she burned away the coffee she was already making. This passage then, is an example of how the boundaries of nationality are inextricably entangled with a myriad of other constructs we imagine to constitute identity. Haesu, as Korean American transnational, is not only about her contested positionality along national lines, but also along class and gender lines.

In answer to the kind of subordination of the private domestic sphere that Haesu inhabits to the more public patriotic rhetoric the men are concerned with, Haraway’s
cyborg proposes a recognition of Haesu’s domestic sphere as precisely the loci where political revolution can take place: “No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household.” (Haraway 152). In other words, Haesu’s transnationality limns more than just the contested boundaries of the nation, but also the overlapping spaces of the home, community and gender as well. Throughout the novel, Haesu’s obsession with dressing her boys in U.S. military uniforms has become a trope for the futility of the raced body as incorporated into the U.S. nation-state. In her grim determination to defy U.S. institutionalized racism, despite the rejection from Edwards Military Academy as well as Chun’s pessimistic disdain for her “domestic” pursuits, she goes ahead and fits her young boys, Harold and John, into military uniforms and takes studio pictures of them in their uniforms. Years later, when Harold, Haesu and Faye are celebrating Harold’s acceptance into the U.S. Air Force, the tiny cap Harold perches on his head whilst drunk becomes an even more bittersweet metaphor for not only U.S. institutionalized racism, but its wartime hypocrisy as well. When Haesu gasps between laughter, she says of the cap, “It’s so small for you. It’s just a toy. …. You’ll have a real one now.” (Kim 269) Her statement reveals the hope that all her suffering for Harold to be an officer in the U.S. army be reduced to “toy” status — that a “real” military cap could make it all go away. As it turns out, Harold’s acceptance is a misunderstanding; for although he did indeed score in the top ten percent of the examinees for officers’ training, he is still not white. Moreover, the uniform cap locates a poignant signifier of how so many women have toiled within the domestic sphere against nation-state
apparatus that continue to oppress their children. Haesu’s labor over embroidering thousands of handkerchiefs for her childrens’ survival depicts the kind of cyborg labor that Haraway asks us to notice and critically deploy.

On Haesu’s ocean-crossing trip to Korea, Kim delves more deeply into the trope of the uniform as patriotic façade with Captain Yamamoto, Kudara and a painted turtle. Opening chapter two with a description of Captain Yamamoto’s attire as “Dazzling in his white uniform, his bronze skin glowing under his gold-braided cap” (Kim 68), Kim introduces a man who appears to be all about the military charm found in a uniform that Haesu is attracted to. In fact, even before she discovers that Captain Yamamoto is not Japanese but Korean, Haesu is clearly attracted to the captain in that she notices his dazzling white uniform and glowing bronze skin. Kim subverts multiple tropes of appearances that repeatedly question what we implicitly trust as symbols of national fidelity. In the case of Captain Yamamoto, he is clearly more than what meets the eye, and moreover, he is clearly more to Haesu than she would like to admit.

Like Mark Twain’s Huck Finn who is torn between racist cultural conditioning and his genuine affection for Jim, Haesu fights against her attraction to Yamamoto even though he wears the uniform of those who have colonized her country. Despite the cultural conditioning that she must vilify and despise “traitors” who are not ardent patriots of Korean independence, she is nonetheless attracted to the captain, drawn to his class standing and apparent educated background — qualities Chun does not have.

Aside from her own elitist biases, Kim does not hesitate to portray Haesu’s own patriotism as a nationalistic tunnel-vision that is blind to its own stifling ideology.
Furthermore, Kim juxtaposes every conversation between Haesu and Captain Yamamoto with a growing underlying sexual attraction Haesu and the captain begin to share. Yet their conversations reveal increasingly disparate ideology viewpoints that starkly highlight the problematic nature of national fidelity. In their first conversation, the captain attempts to share his skepticism of national pride and perhaps his ambiguous identity when he states: “The sea swallows everything. It is impossible to plant a flag on water. Not so on land. Men plant their flags in the ground and begin the battle. We are born to our nationality by fate. Why should one be considered better than another?” (Kim 77). When Haesu asserts that Japan is to blame for the national animosity, Yamamoto responds with an infuriatingly equitable response, “True. But, if they had the opportunity, are not Koreans capable of such acts?” (ibid). Kim not only constructs Captain Yamamoto’s uniform as reminder of facades the individual bears in the name of nation-state power, but Yamamoto himself is metaphorically aligned with the fluidity of the sea.

Just as Haesu is uncomfortable with the motion of the sea at the beginning of the trip, she is abrasive to the captain’s ideological fluidity as well. Resentful of his third-person reference to Koreans as “they”, Haesu reminds Yamamoto that “We cannot remain dispassionate or indifferent where our country is involved.” (ibid). His response even further clarifies his removed position on patriotism itself when he says, “Nor can any national of any country. Those unresolvable commitments again.” (ibid).

Yamamoto’s language indicates his distaste for patriotism such that any form of ardent fidelity to any nation is an undesired obligatory dilemma when he repeats his expression
“unresolvable commitments” from his earlier position as captain of the ship: “As for being on land, I hate being on land. Entanglements, unresolvable commitments, a web of illogical complications. Because of what happens on land I am forced to be an impersonator at sea” (Kim 76). Kim does not hold back from the uncomfortable situation she presents of a man without a country. For the Korean national, this is easily akin to betraying a country hostilely invaded by another. A historically insulated country due to its geographical vulnerability to both China and Japan, Korean nationalist rhetoric has always been vehemently patriotic about both its geographical, demographic and ideological solidarity. Obtusely, Haesu pursues her insistence that patriotism is a given duty to one’s country when she replies, “Unresolvable only if one is not free to exercise his nationalism.” (Kim 77).

It is perhaps in no other conversation more than this one that Kim’s recognition of the transnational nature of Korean American subjectivity is most apparent. Haesu’s patriotic attitude is one that is even prevalent to this day, whereas Yamamoto’s unpopular but apt observations on the stifling nature of national fidelity reveal Kim’s insight on transnationality. Yamamoto is the quintessential transnational in that he is unrepresentable within the paradigm of national identity. To Haesu, who views herself as “one hundred percent Korean”, the notion of transgressing the boundaries of national identity escapes her. But through the captain, Kim allows her reader to recognize how troubling this kind of facile delineation of identity becomes when applied across the board. In fact, although Haesu does not herself recognize the limitations of national identity, Kim repeatedly portrays how Haesu indeed perpetually bleeds into the excess
spaces of such subjectivity in the realm of the home, the political and the spiritual — through Haesu’s own difficult positionality of a Korean transnational in the U.S. (whether she wants to admit it or not).

In their next conversation, Captain Yamamoto is surprised to discover that Haesu has never been to the Diamond Mountains: “But that’s impossible! It is the most spectacular sight in Korea. Every Korean has been there.” [my emphases] (Kim 85). Haesu must explain that she left Korea quite young, to which Yamamoto further emphasizes an implicit challenge to her “authenticity” as a “true” Korean when he says, “You’re the first Korean I have met who has not been to the Diamond Mountains.” (ibid). By challenging Haesu’s positionality as the “truer” Korean, Kim presents the conundrum of who is the “truer” Korean when she further reveals that Yamamoto has actually lived in the Diamond Mountains. Moreover, when Yamamoto discloses his father’s name, “Park Chon Tak”, Kim implies that the name carries political prominence in that the father had commanded his son to forget his name. Haesu wonders then, if the father had died at the hands of the Japanese, indicating her impression that Park Chon Tak could have been a political resistor. Whereas Haesu is a political refugee from Korea, she is more so an attenuated patriot due to the mistaken identity of Chun as a political resistor than any other profound political impetus on her part. Thus, Kim seems to imply how frivolous this question of national “authenticity” really becomes in the context of patriotic façade under the trope of uniforms.

Kim does not shy away from the ontological contradictions that arise when dealing with national identity. This is apparent in Yamamoto’s following statement that
“[My father] was a tormented man. After he gave up his name, he seemed never at peace.” (Kim 85). One could infer that such a statement contends for a fidelity to our original names, an allegiance to a certain ethno-national identity. Yet Yamamoto himself has given up his name, but appears to be quite comfortable with his self-assigned alignment with the sea—a nation-less allegiance that ultimately rests with his Japanese wife and particularly his daughter Momo. On the other hand, Kim almost seems to deliberately de-emphasize the idealization of home when he says, “My homecoming is quite an ordinary occurrence, like any man coming home from work.” (Kim 85) He continues to emphasize the significance of home within the terms of family: “Although lately, with Momo growing so rapidly, it has become an extraordinary event for me. Each time I return, I scarcely recognize her.” (ibid). As if to hail Chuh’s proposal to “disarticulate ‘nation’ from ‘home’” (Chuh 124), Yamamoto’s words echo Chuh’s proposal to deconstruct the nation (ibid). Although Imagine Otherwise was published sixteen years after Clay Walls, Kim precisely captures Chuh’s call to investigate the instability of national identity: “I want to suggest that Asian Americanists conceptually disown ‘America,’ the ideal, to further the work of creating home as a space relieved of states of domination. …. To work at imagining this home in the present tense means concertedly dismantling those materially inscribed, epistemological constructs that make it seem inconceivable.” (Chuh 124-5) For Haesu, dismantling the constructs that seem to define home as locus of ontological security founded on national identity is an impossible project. Yet Kim makes it clear how it is just as impossible for Haesu to inhabit this
idealized place of safety, and, in fact, how dangerously alluring Captain Yamamoto as unanchored identity is for her.

Pondering on what Mrs. Yamamoto/Mrs. Park must look like, Haesu imagines the captain’s wife in a nationalized sense, “a kimono of silk threads that had been woven in a garden of flowers” (Kim 86). In this romanticized notion of national identity, Haesu’s fantasy progresses on to her own sense of national identity: “[Haesu] too should be in silk, airy gauze flowing freely in the night air because Korean skirts are full and unconstrained.” (ibid). Immediately after conjuring this mental image, Haesu suddenly feels oppressed by her Western attire: “Haesu suddenly felt the weight of her burgundy velvet dress as it hung plainly over her. Her arms seemed bound by the long sleeves buttoned tightly at the wrist.” (ibid). Dwelling on this notion of national identity troped as the clothes we wear, Haesu feels trapped; realizing how little her Western garb actually brings her any Western promise of autonomy and equality, the allure of Yamamoto’s ontological freedom instantly disappears: “The dress resembled one Greta Garbo had worn in a movie. ….. It now struck her that the dress made her no closer to being Garbo than the Captain was to being John Gilbert. Notions of a love affair had suddenly become silly, the stuff of Hollywood films and Elena’s fantasies.” (ibid). Kim’s narrative reveals the incommensurability between ethnic identity and national identity as measured via the external facades we choose to wear. Kim illustrates how participating in a romanticized rhetoric of national identity elides the realities of “home” as Chuh seeks to define it, for we see how the more Haesu fantasizes about kimonos and Korean skirts,
the more her infatuation with Captain Yamamoto (and his notions of fluid transnational identity) decreases.

The illusion of appearances as troped in the uniform is further exacerbated with Haesu’s patent distaste and distrust of Kudara. Acting as Yamamoto’s foil, Kudara, also Korean by ethnicity, functions as an arm of the Korean nation-state. Acting in covert espionage to uncover traitors like Yamamoto, Kudara wears a steward’s uniform in order to substantiate national identity rather than insubstantiate it as Yamamoto does. Somehow, this counteracting energy from Kudara puts Haesu off. Instinctually, she does not trust Kudara. Kim never justifies this distrust, and in fact seems to highlight Kudara’s noble work as patriotic countryman as well as his protective paternal role over her sons. But one must wonder why Haesu does not trust a man patriotically working to reestablish the Korean nation-state. As the boys are playing poker with the men “down below”, Kudara is so upset with the Japanese men for taking the Korean boys’ money, he forgets himself and admonishes the boys in Korean — ultimately jeopardizing his work as covert spy:

Kudara came below and saw what was happening. He stormed into the middle of the huddled group and cursed at the men. He told the boys, “They’re taking advantage of you. Take your money and get out of here!” The men gaped at him with bewildered expressions on their faces. Harold and John picked up their money and started for the stairs. As they scrambled onto the deck, Harold reached for John’s arm and pulled him close. “He was talking Korean,” he said. (Kim 93)

Despite repeated incidences where Kudara protects the boys “down below” in crew quarters, Kim’s narrative from Haesu’s point of view surrounding Kudara are dark and foreboding.
Even when Kudara finally discloses his Korean identity to Haesu, she continues to express distaste for him. When he triumphantly approaches her about the captain being discovered as Japanese, she “pulled her arm away” (Kim 95). Her verbal reply is sarcastic: “And you? A Japanese posing as a Korean?” (ibid). When Kudara explains that his deception differs from the captain’s, Haesu remains repulsed:

“No, no” he protested. “I too am Korean. The purpose of our pretense, however, differs. The Captain for his own benefit and I for my country.”

She backed away, about to excuse herself. He took a firm grip of her arm and spoke rapidly but quietly. He told her that he was a member of a certain leftist group. …. She had long admired the work of the organization to which Kudara belonged. It had been so disruptive to the Japanese that the organization was outlawed and forced underground. But Kudara’s revelation did not allay her dislike for him. (Kim 95-6)

Kim never offers a coherent articulation for why Haesu so intensely dislikes Kudara other than the following conversation where Haesu desperately but lamely tries to defend the captain. It is clear in the narrative that even Haesu herself is unclear as to why she feels defensive for the captain rather than in accord with Kudara. However, when Kudara calls the captain a traitor and “worse than a Japanese” (Kim 96), Haesu attempts to assert that he is a father and a husband. She struggles with her instinctive sympathy for Yamamoto’s situation in collision with what she deems “appropriate”: “She had never been in a situation of real espionage to know what the appropriate response should be.” (ibid) For what Haesu deems appropriate would be what she considers acceptable in the eyes of the nation-state of Korea. Here we see Kim aligning Kudara with the priorities of the nation-state and Yamamoto’s priorities with the domestic sphere. Thus, both the realms of the political and domestic collide in Haesu’s struggle to identify herself. Her
struggle in the context of the transnational and how these boundaries intersplice one another is particularly apt in that it takes place as she is literally crossing the Pacific Ocean.

In terms of dignity and humanity, then, Kudara’s response is starkly inappropriate as it is rather callow to snicker while inferring the torture and killing of a man with a family:

He snickered. “That doesn’t stop the Japanese from torturing and killing Koreans,” he reminded her.

“Torture and killing? But you say you’re Korean. He is Korean too.” She was desperate for the right words to save the Captain.

“He wants to be Japanese. We will treat him accordingly. I wanted to thank you. You have been most helpful.” He tried to form a camaraderie with her, to share the unexpected bounty of uncovering a traitor. (ibid)

Yet, Haesu never feels or reciprocates any such camaraderie with Kudara. Kim indirectly reveals how Haesu has been influenced by Yamamoto and his views more than she realizes, when Haesu articulates her adaptation to the rocking of the sea — a metaphor for Yamamoto’s own sense of fluid identity. Right before meeting with the captain a final time, she reflects that “The Captain was unlike any man she had ever met. There was a certain daring to his duality, she had to admit.” (Kim 83). And when he inquires, “Does the sea still bother you?” (Kim 85), Haesu finally responds, “Not at all. It’s beautiful.” (ibid).

II. Psychological Boundaries: the Trouble with Being Male

Foregrounding Asian American subjectlessness in Kim’s novel precludes the pitfalls of a representational politics that recapitulates the centralization of power.
Although not explicitly postmodern by aesthetic standards, *Clay Walls* indeed deconstructs Korean American subjectivity such that it effectively resists sedimentation of the subject. Using Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, Phillip Brian Harper locates a classic postmodern subjectivity in Oedipa Maas. Explicating Pynchon’s narrative for Oedipa Maas as fragmented and multiple, Harper compares Pynchon’s “major” literary style to Maxine Hong Kingston’s “minor” literary style. Harper’s primary argument then, is that Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* demonstrates how minor literary narrative reveals a deeper understanding of the postmodern condition. He argues that the kind of ontological uncertainty found in work like Pynchon’s is particularly and profoundly developed in alternate ways in work like Kingston’s. Subsequently, I argue that Kim’s novel narrates a sort of ontological uncertainty that compellingly conveys the fragmented and indeterminate nature of subjectivity. Furthermore, like Kingston’s work, Kim’s work showcases the transnational nature of Asian American subjectivity such that it effectively deconstructs identity thereby resisting any coherent narrativizing of identity.

It is a more evidential task discussing Haesu’s resistance to coherent subjectivity due to Kim’s emotionally descriptive language of Haesu. Kim opens her novel with a portrayal of a defiant immigrant woman outraged at taking imperious cleaning tips from a white woman about cleaning a toilet. On the other hand, Kim offers less emotionally evident narrative around Haesu’s husband, Chun. Narratively consistent with Korean cultural assumptions about the “strong and silent” male figure, Kim uses Western eyes to depict an emotionally-detached, uncommunicative husband to Haesu. Kim’s narrative around Haesu explicitly reveals how appearances are not what they seem. Although
Captain Yamamoto appears Japanese, he is actually Korean. Although it appears that the Japanese are the villains, it is Kudara who is actually rather sinister in his inhumanity towards Yamamoto. Fascinatingly, Kim continues this thematic, although in a less obvious manner with her character development of Chun. Kim’s narrative surrounding Chun does not immediately offer explanations for his deplorable behavior towards Haesu; rather, Chun’s character itself is incoherent and emotionally-reticent such that the reader is greatly distanced from him.

However, in the second section of Kim’s novel, her narrative turns, and Chun’s character begins to reveal the kind of ontological uncertainty that echoes Harper’s explications of postmodern subjectivity. Kim provocatively addresses a postmodern ethos in her writing in that she does not avoid contradictions and ambiguities that intuitively might appear to collapse the conventional sense of character development. For example, although it might be easier to understand and accept Haesu’s internal turmoil and her changes of heart, it is more difficult to comprehend why a third-person objective narrative actually switches from being unsympathetic to a character to being sympathetic. But this is precisely what happens when Kim portrays a profoundly unlikable characterization of Chun in section one of her novel, then switches to language that sympathizes with him in her second section. It is in this manner that the language of affect emerges from Kim’s narrative such that Chun’s character demonstrates the elusive nature of affect more than her narrative of Haesu. This is not to say Haesu’s character is less affective but that the language Kim deploys around Chun make it easier to discuss the power of affect and it’s autonomous nature. It is helpful to understand the autonomy
of affect since according to Brian Massumi, affect opens a framework of discourse that departs from representational models of critique:

Approaches to the image in its relation to language are incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level, however that level is defined (linguistically, logically, narratologically, ideologically, or all of these in combination, as a Symbolic). What they lose, precisely, is the expression event — in favor of structure. Much could be gained by integrating the dimension of intensity [my emphasis] into cultural theory. The stakes are the new. For structure is the place where nothing ever happens, that explanatory heaven in which all eventual permutations are prefigured in a self-consistent set of invariant generative rules. Nothing is prefigured in the event. It is the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, of rules into paradox. (Massumi 26-7)

Hence, the ontological uncertainty that Harper refers to becomes the intensity that conveys Chun’s incoherent subjectivity. By focusing on Chun’s affective character development, I seek to frame an analysis of Kim’s work that moves away from structured representation and towards the intensity and paradox of Korean American subjectivity.

Introduced at the beginning of the novel through Haesu’s eyes, Chun is an uncouth, uneducated country bumpkin who inappropriately finagles an engagement to a higher-classed Haesu through the white missionary he works for in Korea. Shackled to a man beneath her class and upbringing, Haesu is further persecuted in that Chun is mistakenly identified as political protestor and the two must flee to the U.S. Kim’s most blatant characterization of Chun as oppressor is when he rapes Haesu regularly in the first section of her novel. In her second section, we discover that as a young man, Chun was an aspiring student — a point significant to an author who clearly esteems education. Even more surprisingly, Kim portrays Chun as a romantic at heart — as opposed to the hard, unemotional boar of a man in the beginning:
Chun imagined himself in the center of the dancers, singing in a voice
craggy and provocative. He saw himself break into a dance, moving with
such elegance that the girls would find him irresistible.

He couldn’t help it. He ran home and behind the house where no one
could see him, he heard the drums and he danced. (Kim 138)

The fascinating aspect of Kim’s second section is that she goes to great lengths to
counteract the highly negative portrayal of Chun in the first section. Read from Chun’s
perspective, she reveals a sensitive man, devoted to his family, unable to communicate
due to the oppression of a patriarchy that dictates men to be stoic. Where Haesu likely
thinks Chun is being cheap for disallowing a piano, Kim reveals the true situation of
bankruptcy that Chun is unable to articulate to Haesu. Subsequently, his inability to
confide to her cripples the family. Nonetheless, Kim reveals the romantic at heart:

Chun stood up. “There’s no one to call, Haesu. You’ll have to
give up the piano.” He got his cap walked out the door.
He felt miserable as he drove down 37th Place, the motor chugging
and the exhaust popping. It would be nice to come home to music, he
thought. Who knows? The children may have a talent for it.

It would be nice to satisfy Haesu — money or no money, he
thought. (Kim 140)

The last line of this passage reveals Chun’s feelings of insecurity and implies his own
reasoning for his apparent abuse of Haesu in that he is unable to satisfy her. The passage
also implies Chun’s subversive reasoning that he gambled away the family’s entire
savings just because he had wanted to buy something nice for Haesu. Although this only
depicts Chun’s cowardly handling of his own inadequacies, in this section, Kim presents
his thoughts in such a way that sympathizes rather than condemns him. Furthermore, by
conveying the intensity of Chun’s internal turmoil, Kim redirects the onus of moral
judgment from the individual to a culturally oppressive system of patriarchy that not only victimizes women but men as well. As much as it is an odious thought to find excuses for a rapist, Kim problematizes her narrative such that her reader must contend with the boundary that separates facile appearance from the complexity within. Moreso, Kim chooses no less an intense space to do so than at the image of a rapist.

Again, consistent with Chun’s self-sympathetic internal landscape, Kim’s narrative describes Chun’s affair with Loretta Lyu as that of a man taken advantage by the more predatory seductress:

Loretta Lyu walked into the kitchen as if it were her own. At the sound of the icebox door closing, Chun pulled his robe tighter about him and waited to hold the front door open for Loretta. …. … He didn’t know how the thought occurred to him but the purpose of her visit was beginning to dawn on him. She saw it happening and smiled. (Kim 145)

Most significantly, Kim directly addresses Chun’s initial portrayal as a rapist; in the throes of sex with Loretta, he recognizes the animality of his violation of Haesu: “Chun had never experienced anything like it. He now knew what Haesu meant when she accused him of raping her.” (Kim 146). Although Chun’s internal reflections do not absolve him from his violent actions to his wife, they reveal a pathetic mode of living in the U.S. devoid of anything closer to the love and vulnerability revealed in his personal relations in Korea.

Kim’s second section narrative then, places great attention conveying a more humane and vulnerable man. Rather than the explicitly oppressing positionality of the violent spouse, adulterating husband, irresponsible family man and emotionally-detached father, Kim repositions Chun as a man struggling under the weight of cultural patriarchy,
corrupt Korean nationalism, and racist U.S. hegemony. Psychologically unhinged by the pressures closing in on him, Chun explodes in the home at his wife and children when even the domestic sphere seems to be a hostile place for him: “Chen [sic] flew into a rage. He picked up the bowl and threw it against the wall.” (Kim 154) Rather than reassert Chun’s malcontent disposition, Kim asserts a startling humanity in Chun that reminds us that Chun is indeed capable of love and vulnerability:

> When he realized what he had done, Chun wanted to cut off his hands. He wished he could turn time backwards and undo what he had done. ‘Don’t be scared,’ he told Fay, his voice quavering. ….. His remorse was overwhelming. He wished he could take his children into his arms and beg their forgiveness but he told himself that doing so would embarrass everyone and undermine his authority. (ibid)

Juxtaposed to such passages of the angry adult, Kim narrates Chun as a young man in Korea and the various forms of Western oppression that begin even in Korea. Kim sets up Chun’s boyhood narrative such that it appears that Western forces enter his life in various ways that save him. Reverend McNeil rescues Chun from the fate of a third-son’s poverty by taking him in as his student-apprentice; Reverend McNeil again rescues Chun from political persecution by smuggling him out of the country when pursued by the Japanese colonialist police. However, Kim also reveals how Reverend McNeil is repeatedly a figure of oppression in Chun’s life. The most patent example of orientalist condescension is in the starkly contrasting reactions when the Reverend catches Chun reading a book versus Chun sitting in the Reverend’s chair. With indulgent benefaction, Reverend McNeil encourages Chun to read the books in his library when Chun should have been dusting it instead. However, upon interrupting Chun in the
Reverend’s chair with thoughts describing it as “royal” and “authority”, the Reverend reveals his sentiments at such a transgression of his authority:

Chun would never be able to describe the rage on the Reverend’s face nor would he be able to repeat his words. The Reverend yanked Chun from the chair, led him to the courtyard, broke off a twig from the plum tree and, still shoeless, gave Chun a switching, the first Chun had received in his life. (Kim 152)

Not only is Reverend McNeil’s violent reaction traumatic in that it is the first physical abuse of Chun’s life, it is moreso in that he corporally punishes a young man old enough that the Reverend himself has set up to be married.

Reverend McNeil not only neglects to respect Chun as a young man due to his skewed orientalist viewpoint, he fails to respect Korean class standing and pairs Chun with a woman who is culturally inappropriate for him. For the Reverend this is a moot point since the perceived class differentiations within Korean culture is a primitive social squabbling beneath the enlightened equality that Western Christianity offers. The fact that the Reverend did not hesitate to spank a man old enough to get married portrays a level of patronizing belittlement that Kim clearly wants to illustrate in order to affectively convey the power behind colonialist boundaries. The Reverend’s ire reflects the magnitude that separates himself from those he brings enlightenment to such that its transgression is unacceptable and morally wrong to the Reverend. By juxtaposing flashbacks of Korea within the narrative of Chun’s life in the U.S., Kim creates a contrasting view of Chun in Korea and Chun in the U.S. Her particular portrayal of the Reverend underscores the subversive intrusion of the U.S. into Korea masked as “savior” to a country colonized by Japan. It becomes apparent that the Reverend is no savior but
rather an oppressor who is absolutely clear about where the boundaries of authority must be exercised. It is interesting how ultimately, Chun’s behavior towards his wife and children closely mirror that of the Reverend. Just as the Reverend, Chun vigilantly exerts a clear boundary of authority that cannot be breached with both Haesu and the children. Furthermore, by depicting the subversive racism and bigotry behind the guise of Reverend McNeil’s authoritarian persona, Chun’s own behavior becomes metonymic for more than just a brute rapist. Thus, Kim narratively deconstructs the boundary between oppressor and oppressed through the affective intensity behind Chun’s psychological drama.

Like a drama, Kim’s narrative of Chun seeks to draw in the reader in such a way that elicits as much emotion as possible. For most, rape is an emotionally fraught psychological territory — perceived as traumatic at its most intense, uneasy conversational social transgression at its least. In any case, Kim develops a character from the start as a rapist and then develops his character into a more sympathetic and vulnerable human being as the novel progresses. A difficult task, Kim not only complicates the credibility of her own narrative, she challenges her readers to accept such a task. Consequently, Chun’s narrative presents a kind of interactive intensity with the reader that offers no clear resolution. Chun dies a pitiful and lonely death that could be read with sympathy or retribution. Just like Haesu’s ambivalent reaction to Chun’s death, Kim portrays Chun’s life as a paradox that resists the determinacy of an oppressor’s identity:

“Sometimes they look better than when they were alive.” …
“Haesu! What a thing to say!” Aunt Clara exclaimed.
Momma stopped when she realized what she had said. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I only meant that . . . Well, Clara, you know that he wasn’t the handsomest of men.” She shook her head sadly. “Poor Chun. Such bad luck. I’m glad he’s had a nice funeral though.” She clucked her tongue. “Too young. Only forty two.”

I waited for her to go on, to say, “the good always die young” the way she usually does, but she stuffed the sewing basket inside the buffet and slammed the door shut without saying anything. (Kim 225)

Despite the miserable life and oppression that Chun contributed to Haesu’s life, Haesu’s comments are neither scathingly bitter nor terribly remorseful of his passing. Perhaps sympathetic, perhaps introspective, but most likely conflicted, Haesu’s reaction to Chun’s death is mixed and unresolved. Despite the atrocious injustice Haesu suffered at Chun’s hands, Kim’s narrative does not end his life in a predictable emotional resolution; rather, the intensity of Chun’s life resolves in a paradox that asks who is really the oppressor and who is really the victim? Chun prefigures postmodern fragmentation in that the various perspectives of his subjectivity irrevocably clash throughout the novel thereby conveying the kind of ontological uncertainty Harper has located in postmodern narrative fragmentation.

On the other hand, although Chun’s postmodern fragmentation indeed deconstructs his subjectivity, Chun does not possess the agentive power as derived from the metaphor of Haraway’s cyborg in that ultimately, he dies alone, unrecognized and unempowered. In contrast, Haesu not only survives the suffering caused by Chun as well as Chun himself, she survives the multifarious hegemonic oppressions of herself and her family. More than just surviving them, Haesu deftly negotiates the boundaries that seek to contain and oppress her body as well as her children’s bodies. Seemingly bound to the domestic sphere, Haesu contends with her own psychological boundaries as well as
extends agentive power beyond the home and into the cultural, the national and the political spaces of Korean American subjectivity. From demanding that the U.S. uniform fit her sons in order to assert their national enfranchisement to being the sole provider for her family through the exploited labor of her hands, Haesu transgresses the psychological boundaries that Chun could not. Where Chun recapitulates the identity of the oppressor through the psychological containment of the victim, Haesu rejects such an identity by obdurately asserting her will as Korean, woman and mother. By examining the class boundaries that Haesu’s body crosses, Kim reveals how Haesu indeed embodies the multiplicity of the cyborg laborer as described by Haraway in her manifesto.

III. Class Boundaries: Family, Race Politics and the Ivory Tower

Class boundaries are compelling to discuss in that they starkly clash with national boundaries. Clay Walls depicts this already well-known irony — that many times immigrants in the U.S. who have been disenfranchised into the lower socioeconomic ghettos and statuses of society often come from much higher socioeconomic standings in their countries of origin. Clay Walls is not just about dispelling the myth that all immigrants come to America because they envision a shining beacon of economic opportunity and the idyllic political dream of absolute democracy; Kim’s immigrant protagonist Haesu is a fervent Korean nationalist who must struggle with America’s double-standards for a socioeconomically upward-bound majority class that ignores those who are not white — relegating non-whites as not eligible for the “American Dream”. In the context of U.S. history and politics then, examining class boundaries will reveal its
tight coupling with racial boundaries. Kim depicts how American nationalism is historically constructed along racial lines in that those who are not white are not actually part of the democratic ideals of freedom, upward mobility and other basic “inalienable” rights.

In the context of identity discourse, class boundaries are often the most invisible. In fact, even Kim seems to possess a blind spot to the class distinctions she makes in terms of determining who are the so-called heroes of her novel and who are the “failed” characters of her novel. It is not that the novel is about the forces of good and evil, but rather it consists of characters who survive and succeed and characters who suffer and ultimately perish. Most notable are the parallel characters Chun and Willie. Chun, Haesu’s husband and father to Faye, John and Harold, ultimately dies as a bellhop in Reno, Nevada, penniless and without his family. Kim significantly portrays Chun as an overbearing uncommunicative husband who not only sexually forces himself on Haesu against her will, but eventually gambles away the family savings such that he must leave the family in order to find money to support his family which he never succeeds in doing. In the second generation, Faye’s first boyfriend, Willie, is similar to Chun in that he comes from a lowly background, in fact, even lower since Willie is the illegitimate son of a wealthy businessman who gained his fortune from stealing from the Korean liberation movement. Willie also tries to force himself onto Faye, but fortunately, Faye is able to stop him. Kim’s construction of these parallel characters reveals her bias from points of similarity along the lines of class and education. Both Chun and Willie are apparently
too uneducated to be “successful” characters in Kim’s narrative for a future Korean America.

In stark contrast, Kim closes her novel with a letter from Dan, Faye’s second love interest; the letter is received airmail special delivery, covered in “layers of postal marks” (Kim 301). This final scene leaves us viewing Faye with a foreshadowing of optimism. In fact, just before this passage, Kim also pairs Haesu with Uncle Min, the Korean patriot literati who had spearheaded the U.S. division of the Korean People’s Republic: “So, Uncle Min would be living with us. I always thought that if Momma ever got together with a man, it would have been Uncle Yang. But then, Uncle Yang was not a scholar.” (Kim 300). In addition, not only is Dan a well-educated American, he is also the son of a well-educated Korean patriot literati: “By day I was a Yaley, by night the number one son of a Korean patriot.” (Kim 297). It is particularly this conversation between Faye and Dan that Kim’s privileging of the literati becomes most apparent:

“But Faye, we do live in the United States. You and I do speak English to one another. I do wear the uniform of this country. We are part of this society. Segments of it may not be completely accessible to everyone, but we who live here have something in common. *If not physically then intellectually. In many cases, experientially.*” [my emphases]

I could not follow him. “I don’t know. I could never be one of *them.* I don’t know if I would want to be. I really have no need to be.” (Kim 297-8)

Kim makes it clear that it is the U.S.-educated following generations of Korean Americans who hold the future for an idealized new identity. Through Dan’s speech, she articulates the Asian American dilemma of being disenfranchised *physically*, but in the end, sharing the *intellectual* commonality with the majority white segment of the U.S. I
find it particularly interesting that she only adds an intermittent qualifier to those who partake in “Americanness” via the experiential with the words, “in many cases.” In other words, those who experience Americanness are not as wholly qualified to share American commonality as much as those who do so intellectually.

I point out Kim’s blind spot in order to limn a critical metacommentary in terms of my own postmodern theoretical position in this literary critique. Such a blind spot is not only common but inherently predictable due to our own biases towards a better envisioning of the future as limited by our own scholarly perspectives. In Imagine Otherwise, Kandice Chuh emphasizes the need for this kind of acute awareness of critical positioning when she begins her text with a quote from Rey Chow’s Writing Diaspora (1993):

> We need to remember as intellectuals that the battles we fight are battles of words…. What academic intellectuals must confront is thus not their “victimization” by society at large (or their victimization-in-solidarity-with-the-oppressed), but the power, wealth, and privilege that ironically accumulate from their “oppositional” viewpoint, and the widening gap between the professed contents of their words and the upward mobility they gain from such words. (Chuh 1)

In other words, Kim’s novel privileges education in such a way that ignores its hidden bias towards those who are able to access upward mobility such as “Dan from New Haven”. In like manner, it is tempting to ignore my own academic positionality as conflated to my privileged class standing in order to promote a postmodern Asian American subjectivity via the transnational and cyborg politics. But it is more important to be acutely cognizant of the various sites of technological access my scholarship makes apparent.
Chuh points out how transnationality is not a unidirectional critical tool and in fact encompasses a multitude of hegemonic technologies that work to sustain class separation and centralized power:

Transnational capitalism is a global mode of production that is globalizing in its attempts to integrate all sectors of the world economy into its logic of commodification. Class exploitation in contemporaneous forms, articulated in racialized and gendered differentiation and layered unevenly across the north/south, first/third world divides, aggressively inscribes this globalized terrain. Multilateral cultural and information flows, enabled by contemporary technologies and driven by jagged relations of power, circulate across this landscape. (Chuh 7)

If, in the end, our academic pursuits are about ending class division, we must not forget how inextricably imbedded the academe is with class and its mobility. Ironically, Kim ends her novel with the optimistic metaphor for a brighter future for Faye and Dan, an “Air-mail Special Delivery letter for Faye” (Kim 301). Sadly, this is precisely the kind of communication that was denied to Chun when he so desperately needed to send monetary support to his wife and children. In other words, in order to formulate a transnational framework for Asian American subjectivity, it is crucial to recognize how deeply invested the appropriating power of contemporary technology rests in scholarly work.

This is not to say that the scholar does not play a vital role in resisting disenfranchised spaces that they do not occupy. Asian American transnationality as envisioned through a cyborgian lens locates the power to transgress precisely on the indeterminate nature of Asian American subjectivity. In other words, by focusing Asian American discourse on what Chuh calls “subjectlessness”, Asian American scholars are empowered to approach the politics of disenfranchisement on the basis of difference rather than identification. Furthermore, recognizing difference over identification orients
scholars to be vigilantly cognizant of the unseen loci that lie under the political umbrella of representation. Chuh propounds this notion when she states: “Thinking in terms of subjectlessness does not occlude the possibility of political action. Rather, it augurs a redefinition of the political, an investigation into what ‘justice’ might mean and what (whose) ‘justice’ is being pursued.” (Chuh 11) bell hooks takes this notion a step further when she foregrounds the black scholar’s particular contribution to postmodern critical discourse; she asserts how it is the responsibility of racially-marked scholars to create that space in which postmodern work becomes politically efficacious work:

It is important for postmodern thinkers and theorists to constitute themselves as an audience for such [disenfranchised] work. To do this they must assert power and privilege within the space of critical writing to open up the field so that it will be more inclusive. To change the exclusionary practice of postmodern critical discourse is to enact a postmodernism of resistance. Part of this intervention entails black intellectual participation in the discourse. (hooks 30)

Furthermore, Chuh quotes Gayatri Spivak’s explanation for deconstructive approaches to criticism: “Deconstruction does not say there is no subject, there is no truth, there is no history. It simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth.” (Chuh 82). It is in this manner that I locate moments of deconstructed subjectivity in Kim’s text. For example, I have already cited such a moment in Faye and Dan’s conversation above where Dan insists Korean Americans are a part of America to which Faye responds with uncertainty whether she even wants to be as enfranchised as Dan is promoting. Despite Kim’s clear intentions behind her rhetoric of establishing Korean Americanness, she does not veer away from articulating those conflicted moments where “melting” into the American cultural pot is not all that
comfortable or desired on the part of the disenfranchised. Kim further exacerbates this discomfort and uncertainty when she narratively incorporates the historical paradox of the Japanese American soldiers — as further complicated by Korean/Japanese political strife:

“Of course, what do you think?” she said impatiently. “He and his men got a special commendation from Eisenhower. Mr. Kim called C.K. a traitor for fighting with the Japanese. Said he was a disgrace to the Koreans. Broke C.K.’s heart.” (Kim 299)

By recalling that Japanese American young men were given the choice to either serve as subordinated soldiers in the U.S. army or go to prison, Kim brings to light the impossibility of Asian American subjectivity in the eyes of the U.S. nation-state. Furthermore, by narrating the visceral reaction of C.K.’s father against his son’s actions alongside Korea’s enemies, despite his son’s commended loyalty to the U.S., Kim portrays the impossibility of clearly delineating Korean American subjectivity. Kim’s narrative of C.K.’s heart breaking foregrounds the question, what is loyalty in the context of history, war, the nation-state and family? Whose truth endures, C.K.’s or his father’s?

Haesu and Faye articulate a more harmonious recognition of how difficult it is to negotiate identity across generational boundaries when Haesu says: “It’s hard to be Korean living in the United States. Especially for you children. For me, it’s not so hard. I know I’m one hundred percent Korean.” (Kim 300) This is not to say Kim is constructing an easy delineation where Korean identity ends and where Korean American
identity begins; Faye echoes her mother’s empathizing when she refers to her mother’s loss of Korean land in Qwaksan: “Gosh, Momma, being one hundred percent Korean isn’t easy”. (Kim 301) Chuh explicates Haesu and Faye’s conversation as illustrative of transnationality where historical and geographical boundaries splice Korean American subjectivity into what is actually not quite one hundred percent: “Clay Walls limns the inseparability of these axes [historicity and spatiality] as it literarily schematizes this transnational paradigm, narratively crossing borders but all the while remaining cognizant of the historical embeddedness of particular configurations of subjectivity.” (Chuh 94-5) Even though Haesu may sound glib about being “one hundred percent Korean”, the fact that she has to either sew neckties or rent out a room in order to keep her house in the U.S. and that she has lost her claim to any Korean soil in Qwaksan due to the arbitrary drawing of a line along the 38th parallel reveals that it is truly not so easy to be “one hundred percent Korean” regardless of location or time.

Furthermore, just as Chuh points out, by glibly quantifying her Koreanness, Kim ultimately begs the question, can we actually quantify identity? Chuh observes: “And yet, even as Haesu grows increasingly sure that she is ‘one hundred percent Korean,’ readers come to question what that in fact means. In this novel Koreanness is defined only through negation: whatever it is, it has no substance, no immanent presence.” (Chuh 96) Throughout Clay Walls, Haesu’s journey that takes her back and forth across the ocean between Korea and the U.S. consistently defines the protagonist through revelations of what she is not. The novel opens by informing the reader that Korean American immigrants are not inherently poor, uneducated people without a need to assert
dignity and pride. It continues by revealing that the Asian woman is not subservient or passive. Kim actively strives to breakdown as many stereotypes she can. By attempting to oppose these broad generalizations of Asian American identity that were rampant in the 1980s, Kim highlights the often-obsured boundaries of class. Thus, Kim goes beyond breaking stereotypes and literally develops her characters based on what they are not. The fact that Haesu loses Qwaksan does not break her even in the face of unremitting economic hardship and patent racism. Going to Korea and confronting her upper-class privilege against the backdrop of her struggles in the U.S. does not prevent her return to the U.S. — and this time not as political refuge but as a choice for a greatly-flawed nation-state. In other words, Haesu’s subjectivity develops on her experience of differentiation; more than defying stereotypes, Haesu’s character articulates the difficult and contradictory nature of a transnational’s survival.

Haesu is defined in terms of what she has proven she is not — at least in the eyes of both the U.S. nation-state as well as the Korean nation-state. In other words, Haesu defies what constitutes U.S. nationalism and Korean nationalism in that she makes it obvious how as a transnational, she is not quite a part of the U.S. body politic and neither is she entirely a part of Korea. Haesu painfully discovers that in the U.S., solely because of her racial status, she will not be given automatic dignity and equal opportunity:

Disgraceful. She thought that was the only word for it. As disgraceful as having to rely on Mrs. Thayer to find her and Chun a place to live. As disgraceful as having to buy their house in Charlie Bancroft’s name. ….

She was blind with rage, missing her stops, stalking back to where she should have made a transfer, taking any seat that was empty whether or not it was next to a window. In her preoccupation, she missed her stop and rode in the ‘whites only’ residential area. She didn’t care; it was all
L.A. to her. She got off the bus and crossed the street to stand with a group of ‘Anglo-Saxons’ to wait for the bus that would take her back to the ‘unrestricted’ section. (Kim 52)

Despite its rhetoric of freedom and opportunity for all, U.S. nationalism does not include the reality that its national boundaries run along the same lines as racial and class boundaries. On the other hand, Haesu is also disenfranchised from Korea; although a bit more complicated due to Japanese occupation and persecution, Haesu’s loyalties are not singularly for Korea. When she vehemently reacts to Lee’s dismissal of her anger over the Edwards Military Academy debacle, she says, “All your cries for freedom have to do with the Japanese. They’re thousands of miles away!” (Kim 56) Her response to Lee reveals that her cry for justice in the U.S. has become greater than her need to address the political oppressions in Korea. However, Kim never states that Haesu’s loyalties have switched over, because in all likelihood, they have not. More significantly, Kim repeatedly pokes holes through Haesu’s own initial identifications with a purely Korean nationalist stance.

Kim’s narrative deconstructs Haesu’s subjectivity by developing a character based on what she is not. Haesu is not white, male, nor privileged in the U.S. Haesu is not just a visitor from Korea but the mother of American children. Haesu is not the blindly-fervent patriot of Korea, nor is she the subservient wife of her husband. Moreover, Haesu is not an enfranchised member of the U.S. or Korea. The boundary by which we recognize Haesu then, is the class boundary that divides the material realities of socioeconomic power inequities. Recognizing the negation of privilege for classed bodies in the U.S. illuminates all of Haesu’s aforementioned negations as the tightly-
imbricated boundaries as contiguous to the class boundaries of the transnational. Haesu as classed body that is also raced and gendered by both U.S. hegemony as well as Korean hegemony exemplifies the kind of embodied cyborg entity that Lowe, Haraway and Chuh have all remarked upon: the exploited Asian American immigrant woman. Haraway refers to her as “the unnatural cyborg [woman] making chips in Asia and spiral dancing in Santa Rita jail whose constructed unities will guide effective oppositional strategies.” (Haraway 155) Likewise, Lowe specifically recognizes the conditions of the cyborg female worker as near identical to those described in Kim’s novel:

The women work under physical conditions that are unsafe, unhealthy, and fatiguing. Furthermore, the policy of paying the worker by piece exploits the immigrant women in ways that extend beyond the extraction of surplus value from hourly, low-wage factory labor. The incentive to complete as many pieces as possible makes certain that the sewing woman will work overtime without compensation and will intensify her productivity even if it results in exhaustion or personal injury. Because many are non-English or little-English-speaking women and consider their employment options limited, … These women are forced to accept the payment conditions dictated by the employer. (Lowe 155)

In the third section of *Clay Walls*, through Faye’s eyes, Kim presents Haesu in third person, as this very factory worker:

“How much you pay?” Momma asked.
“It depends. Most of the work runs about two or two and a half dollars.”
“Each?”
….
“Two and a half dollars? That’s all?” she asked, making him sound cheap.
“Listen lady, you should be able to do a dozen or more a day.” His tone was hard.
Momma bit her lip. “You give me five dozen to take home, I’ll bring them back in five days then you decide.”
“The most I can pay you is a dollar and a half to begin with. That’s for one dozen and only if the work is acceptable. That means if it’s good enough in my opinion. That means that I’ll decide after I see your work.” (Kim 194-5)

Not only does Haesu fit Lowe’s description of the immigrant Asian American female factory worker, Haesu embodies Lowe’s key assertion that such narratives that recognize these transnational women illuminate the various boundaries of exploitation that are imbricated along national boundaries:

[The testimonial of an Asian Immigrant Women Advocates member] does not reduce her political identity or actions to one cause or origin; it instead brings together the dimensions of her material and political subjectivity, and, in that process, illuminates the intersecting axes of exploitation she inhabits and the differentiating operations of contemporary capital that exploits precisely through the selection and reproduction of racial, cultural, and gender-specific labor power. (Lowe 156)

The key assertion I wish to make is that Haesu embodies Haraway’s cyborg in that she is not simply the victim of multiple sites of exploitation. Haraway calls to do more than recognize a passive exploited worker but to recognize her active potency as well:

This is not just literary deconstruction, but liminal transformation. …there is another route to having less at stake in masculine autonomy, a route that does not pass through Woman, Primitive, Zero, the Mirror Stage and its imaginations. It passes through women and other present-tense, illegitimate cyborgs, not of Woman born, who refuse the ideological resources of victimization so as to have a real life. These cyborgs are the people who refuse to disappear on cue, no matter how many times a 'western' commentator remarks on the sad passing of another primitive, another organic group done in by 'Western' technology, by writing. These real-life cyborgs (for example, the Southeast Asian village women workers in Japanese and US electronics firms described by Aihwa Ong) are actively rewriting the texts of their bodies and societies. Survival is the stakes in this play of readings. (Haraway 178)

Critiquing the feminist politics that hails for the “naturalization” of women’s femininity, Haraway suggests a different reading of the female body. She argues for an agency that
rejects the oversimplification of dualist relationships, recognizing how false such relationships are. Specifically, Haraway proposes to do away with the dualistic ideations of oppressor and oppressed and how these terms are construed with autonomy and agency:

To recapitulate, certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals - in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. …. The self is the One who is not dominated, who knows that by the semiotic of the other, the other is the one who holds the future, who knows that by the experience of domination, which gives the lie to the autonomy of the self. To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion, and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many. (Haraway 178)

By rejecting such dualisms and embracing the idea that being one or the other is a false construct, Haraway constructs a cyborg identity that is about being both dominated and autonomous and agentive. In a paradoxical relationship, she suggests that we conceive of a political power that lends itself to the disempowered precisely because it has been exerted upon the disempowered.

In this sense, Kim’s narrative depicts the harsh conditions under which the transnational Korean American female is exploited via multiple systems of centralized power in both the U.S. and Korea. But what is key is that Kim also portrays flashes of what we might initially disregard as moments of autonomy that are too insignificant to attribute to political agency. When Haesu takes Faye to the handkerchief factory manager, Kim narrates:
“You’ll have to come in on Monday.”
“Come in? No. I’m not going to work here. I’m going to work at home.” ….
“You’ll have to come here first to learn. The girls work here then when I see what they can do, I let them take the work home.” He was beginning to sound impatient.
“No. I can only work at home. That’s easy work for me. … I can’t come to work here.”

“… Come back in five days. That’ll be Wednesday.”
“Thursday,” Momma corrected him then added, “Thank you.”
I never knew when to be proud of Momma or when to be embarrassed. I hated having people stare at us and sometimes Momma seemed to go out of her way to make trouble. But the way Mr. Seligman smiled at her told me she had done something right. (Kim 193-5)

Although the power differential in this conversation between the factory manager and Haesu is clearly in the favor of the factory manager, Kim asserts Haesu’s individual persistence and authority within the sphere of the domestic that leaks into the sphere of the economic. In the context of being a mother who must provide for her children, Haesu calls the shots as to where her exploited labor will take place. Furthermore, Mr. Seligman’s smile could be read as condescension or satisfaction in gaining another employee or it can be read as one in a dominant position recognizing and giving respect to another taking and utilizing whatever agentive power there is to be exercised even in limited situations.

In fact, if read alongside Lowe and Haraway, Haesu has the most power in Kim’s narrative in that she is the most fully-incorporated embodied form of exploited labor of U.S. capitalism. According to Haraway, locating the cyborg occurs when recognizing the breakdown of dualisms within the technologies of high-tech culture: “High-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways. It is not clear who makes and who is made
in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices.” (Haraway 178) Haesu’s production of embroidered handkerchiefs are far from high-tech; however, by dissolving her status as purely victimized worker and recognizing how it is indeed not clear “who makes” and “who is made” in the sense that she is human worker as well as technologized machine just as she is exploited worker in one sphere as well as producer of capital in another. Moreover, this melded status of Haesu’s positionality in multiple spheres of power create an awareness that we cannot be sure what mode of production ends up sustaining centralized power (or according to Haraway, “coding practices”). However, it is this very ambiguous status that allows cyborgs such as Haesu to elude grand narratives and instantiate a deconstructive subjectivity. Thus, in the context of national boundary transgressions within the realm of class boundaries, the raced and gendered transnational becomes the quintessential cyborg. Haesu not only embodies the intersections where boundaries cross and splice one another, she exemplifies the ambiguities that tend to obscure agency precisely where agency can be found. Rather than stop at the recognition of Haesu as exploited female factory worker, Haesu as cyborg constructs a female Korean American subjectivity as agentive precisely due to its ambiguous and multifarious positionalities. It is in this way that Haesu demonstrates transnational fluidity such that the Asian American deconstructive subject exemplifies Donna Haraway’s cyborg.
Chapter 3: Myth and Reality in *Dictee*

A particularly salient feature of Haraway’s cyborg politics is its Althusserian ethos to recognize the mythology of identity from both sides of the ideological coin: myth-making on the part of the nation-state as grand narratives as well as myth-making on the part of the individual in how we desire to be hailed within those grand narratives. In her manifesto, she states: “The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other.” (Haraway 165) In order to deploy critical studies as the “tool” by which we seek sociopolitical equity, Haraway asserts that we are inseparable from the “historical systems of social relations” that we seek to recalibrate. Cyborg politics does not allow hegemonic constructs to be wholly responsible for the obstructions to a more just and equitable society. Rather, it demands that we fully acknowledge how all participate in the coalescing of power: “Innocence, and the corollary insistence on victimhood as the only ground for insight, has done enough damage.” (Haraway 158) Even the disenfranchised constitute the organization of hegemony — if that were not so, centralized power could not exist. In other words, Asian American subjectivity is just as much constructed by Asian Americans in that we are also participating in the racialization of the Asian American body. If the nation-state has historically sought to corporealize the Asian American body in order to disenfranchise it from dominant white culture, striving to substantiate the racialized Asian American body does not mitigate the centralizing power of dominant white culture.
Kandice Chuh addresses the paradox of identity and ideology in that the Asian American body is just as effectively decorporealized in the name of the abstracted universal citizen as it is celebrated in national multiculturalism. Yet, she points out, the nation-state ultimately remains firmly invested in the ideology of a subject in that “As the uniquely authorized discourse of the nation, and in contrast to the postulation of the modern are that subjects (to monarchical power) have transformed into consensual citizens (of a nation-state), law requires subjection/subjectification. [my emphases].” (Chuh 10) Subsequently, what Chuh proposes is an Asian American “subjectless” discourse. In line with Haraway’s idea of transgressing the boundary between myth and reality, Chuh proposes that we recognize the mythology that surrounds the Asian American subject as constructed by the U.S. nation-state. Moreover, Chuh asks us to recognize our own myth-making participation in the construction of this Asian American subject: “Recognition of the subject as epistemological object cautions against failing endlessly to put into question both “Asian American” as the subject/object of Asian Americanist discourse and of U.S. nationalist ideology, and Asian American studies as the subject/object of dominant paradigms of the U.S. university. (Chuh 10)

Chuh argues for an approach to Asian American studies as subjectless in order to sidestep the trap of wondering who constitutes being “authentically” Asian American. Recalling the controversy over Lois Ann Yamanaka’s Blu’s Hanging for its award for Best Fiction by the Association for Asian American Studies, Chuh observes how the incident limns the contested grounds for who, what and how the term “Asian American” is constituted. Stepping back and recognizing this contested ground reveals how much
the Asian American subject is inadvertently redefined within the rubrics of U.S. nation
state ideologies. Chuh proposes that we refocus from representation and to the
investigation of the unjust material conditions associated with the racialized Asian
American body:

If we accept a priori that Asian American studies is subjectless, then
rather than looking to complete the category “Asian American,” to
actualize it by such methods as enumerating various components of
differences (gender, class, sexuality, religion, and so on), we are
positioned to critique the effects of the various configurations of power
and knowledge through which the term comes to have meaning. Thinking
in terms of subjectlessness does not occlude the possibility of political
action. Rather, it augurs a redefinition of the political, an investigation
into what “justice” might mean and what (whose) “justice” is being
pursued. (Chuh 10-11)

Haraway’s cyborg politics contributes to Asian American literary studies by
formulating a language that is both self-reflexive of its complicity with hegemonic power
and at once resistive of that complicity in productive ways. Although Asian Americans
identify with and are identified via racializing modes of nation-state technologies, it is the
material conditions that surround such bodies that we can focus on. Acknowledging that
the cyborg is the offspring of hegemonic power, then, is precisely what imparts its power
to subvert that system: “The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the
illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state
socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins.”
(Haraway 152) Haraway encourages us to embrace illegitimacy, to abandon notions of
authenticity and origin, in order to challenge the authority of nation-state grand
narratives. By approaching Asian American subjectivity as a myth, parented by both the
U.S. nation-state as well as Asian American racialized bodies themselves, we may re-
imagine an entirely new creature, one I’d like to offer is the Asian American transnational as metaphoric cyborg.

If the cyborg is all about transgressing boundaries, the Asian American transnational demonstrates the material and lived modes by which the racialized body transgresses boundaries every day. By transgressing national boundaries, the Asian American transnational body reveals how so many other hegemonic ideologies are deeply imbricated into the notion of national identity. In Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*, Cha illustrates the tortured boundaries over which nation-state apparatuses colonize what we might arbitrarily label the Korean American body. Revealing the permeability between the myth of the “Korean American” label and the tools needed to recognize the lived realities of those labeled, *Dictee* defies any sedimentation of representative identity at every angle possible. Cha challenges her readers to strive to recognize her Korean American identity through the wreckage of elided history and multiply-colonizing technologies if only to prove that indeed no such identity can be recognized. At every turn, she crosses the line between what is myth and what is “real” precisely in order to limn that very line.

Read through the lens of cyborg politics, it is this crossing between myth and reality that highlights the hegemonic machinations that work to sustain systems of centralized power. Cha’s text is all about revealing myth in order to highlight both how powerful the tools of the state are as well as to sharpen the critical tools we seek to deploy in the name of justice. Three key mythologies in *Dictee* will be examined in this chapter: the myth of natural language, the myth of historical veracity, and the myth of
the coherent subject. In the midst of all these myths, what is consistent throughout Cha’s text is the insistence on the very real presence of a body. Cha never lets her reader forget that although she tears down every other façade of a coherent subject possible, somewhere, there is always a body involved. Without a body, the technologies of nation-state apparatuses would be inert. With a Korean American transnational body, Cha deploys the tool of the affective body in order to underscore the various mythologies that seek to undermine and colonize that body.

By the affective body, I mean one that remains firmly linked to its material conditions but delinked from its grand narratives and over-determined image-based representation. Relying on the body as fulcrum to Asian American identity politics will be a nuanced critical task. Chuh’s subjectless discourse demonstrates how we can move away from a representational politics of the image and towards a politics of indeterminate identity. The concern with indeterminacy is its power to dissolve materiality in a sea of endless difference. Haraway addresses this concern when she states: “But in the consciousness of our failures, we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connection. Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. ‘Epistemology’ is about knowing the difference.” (Haraway 161-2) Dictee seizes Asian American critical literary attention in that it is at once an aesthetically ground-breaking text as well as one that remains intensely focused on the Korean American body. Cha accomplishes what Haraway suggests: Cha demolishes the binary and opts for the nebulous grainy terrain of
difference. Nevertheless, *Dictee* never departs from the task of making partial, real connections through what I critically deploy as *affect*.

In *Parables of the Virtual*, Brian Massumi disagrees with Fredric Jameson’s pronouncement that a key feature of the postmodern age is a “waning of affect” (Massumi 27). Massumi argues that “If anything, our [postmodern] condition is characterized by a surfeit of [affect].” (ibid) Massumi’s main point here is that affect is indeed a tool critical studies should utilize in order to shed better light on the paradox of the postmodern condition. Posited in the tension between Jameson’s “death of the subject” (Jameson 5) and Massumi’s “surfeit of affect”, *Dictee* searches for a subject in a surfeit of affect. However, Cha never seeks to resuscitate the liberal humanist subject back to life. Instead, Cha’s text affectively conveys the specific struggle to seek subjectivity. Formally, although the textuality of *Dictee* is a postmodern landscape, it is an intensity of affect that defines Cha’s exploration of what is myth and what is real in the realm of identity. Coupling intensity to affect, Massumi proposes that critical light emerges in the movement of an expression-event such as *Dictee*:

Much could be gained by integrating the dimension of *intensity* into cultural theory. …. It is the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, or rules into paradox. …. The expression-event is the system of the inexplicable: emergence, into and against regeneration (the reproduction of a structure). …. Intensity is the unassimilable. (Massumi 26-7)

Just as Massumi locates *emergence* within the collapse of structure — “of rules into paradox” — *Dictee* demonstrates how debunking the myths of language, historicity, and subjectivity reveals more about identity than finding a subject itself. The *event* in *Dictee* is precisely the participation by Cha’s reader that the text demands of her reader through
its words. *Dictee* ignites a search for the subject that is never delivered in order to reveal the mythologies that surround our affective desires for that subject.

As Massumi describes it, affect is located somewhere between the material conditions of the body and the body’s trajectory path towards emergence. Closing his chapter on “The Autonomy of Affect”, Massumi describes affect as such: “The ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory.” (Massumi 45) The title to his chapter alongside his final statement reveal the simultaneously metaphysical and physical nature of affect as also found in *Dictee*. Massumi offers the anchor that resists the dematerialization of the body in unbounded indeterminacy. By asserting the autonomy of affect, Massumi argues that its “disconnection between form/content and intensity/effect is not just negative: it enables a different connectivity, a different difference, in parallel.” (Massumi 25) In other words, Massumi suggests that we disconnect the intense effects of political inequity from the materiality of the body such that we reframe our politics towards new and partial connections that reflect the technological permutations of a re-ordered hegemonic system — as described by Haraway in her “informatics of domination”:

“Simultaneously material and ideological, the dichotomies may be expressed [as] transitions from the comfortable old hierarchical dominations to the scary new networks I have called the informatics of domination” (Haraway 162).

By examining three kinds of mythologies that Cha explores in *Dictee*, I seek to locate the affective Korean American body that demonstrates the boundary-transgressing
nature of Asian American transnationality. *Dictee* deconstructs the myths of organic language, historical truth and coherent subjectivity in such a way that Cha’s work permeates an intensity that precludes any “waning of affect”. Rather, in a “surfeit of affect” Cha offers an intense experientiality of indeterminate identity that strives to convey the material conditions of the hegemonically-marked body in profoundly immaterial ways. Critical to note, affect is not emotion, rather, according to Massumi:

“An emotion or feeling is a recognized affect, an identified intensity as reinjected into … subject-object relations. Emotion is a contamination of empirical space by affect, which belongs to the body without an image.” (Massumi 61) When we speak of the emotional impact that *Dictee* brings to the reader, it is an incomplete discourse on the affective intensity of Cha’s textual landscape. Whereas emotion is restricted to the contextual nature of language, affect is “eventfully ingressive to context” (Massumi 217) or in other words, just entering and/or just exiting the realm of language content. Massumi concludes that the non-contextual nature of affect is what allows critical theory to seek the coalition of material bodies through the non-material connectivity of experience:

“Impersonal affect is the connecting thread of experience.” (Massumi 217) Hence Cha’s textual landscape conveys an affective intensity that connects us via the thread of experience and not via the object-oriented language of emotion. In other words, by deconstructing Korean American subjectivity in a language that departs from subject-object relations, I seek to deploy a language that fosters Asian American solidarity.

In other words, the language of *Dictee* is the language of the subject deconstructed. What seems disjointed, disoriented and disarticulated is in fact where
Asian Americanists might affectively locate the racialized Asian American body outside of identity. Cha’s text works to illuminate the permeability between myth and reality in language, thereby creating a sense of undecidability one might find nullifying of meaning. By recognizing the porous nature between what we want to believe and the material conditions that surround those beliefs, we begin to better understand the constructed nature of identity. Thus by approaching Cha’s text as an investigation into Korean American transnationality, *Dictee* becomes an exemplary literary site for Asian Americanists to explore the nature of this subjective undecidability that Chuh propounds:

> It is because the term [transnationality] is fundamentally undecidable and yet has material effectivity that critical investigation is warranted. It is in other words, the absence of identity, the a priori meaninglessness of “Asian American,” that collectivizes Asian American studies. *Undecidability rather than identity* provides the grounds for unity, and identifying and contesting the forces that control intelligibility, that affiliate meanings, emerge as crucial tasks for Asian American studies. (Chuh 82-3)

Chuh asserts that Asian American transnationality specifically highlights the technologies that construct national identity such that the Asian American subject slips outside of these borders in ways that both exceed U.S. jurisprudence as well as confound cultural essentialism. In the context of the Japanese American internment camps of WWII, Chuh points out how the U.S. nation-state was obligated to deploy “sheer force of juridical power” (Chuh 81-2) in order to sustain its material identification of Japanese American “foreignness”. She contends that because of this phenomenon, Asian Americanists might understandably react with like identity politics. However, she argues that ultimately, it is precisely the undecidable transnational nature of the Asian American that best subverts U.S. racial essentialism.
It is this undecidability of the transnational Japanese American that prompted the U.S. nation-state to attempt to contain and segregate otherwise patently legal citizens of the United States. It is transnationality that makes most apparent the slippages of nation-state mythologies and the material oppressions facilitated through cultural capitalism and state power. Undecidability does not refer to a negation of identity nor signification, it refers to the seeming negations that question our implicit trust in previously constructed identities and significations — the boundary between myth and material reality. In her argument for deconstructing Asian American subjectivity, Chuh hails Giyatri Spivak: “Deconstruction does not say there is no subject, there is no truth, there is no history. It simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth. It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced” (1996, 27).” (Chuh 82) *Dictee* illustrates Cha’s deconstruction of our notions of subject, truth and history — all in order to question whose notions these are. By affectively utilizing the incoherent gaps in language, Cha conveys an embodied intensity of experiencing what it is to *not* have authorship to these grand narratives. In doing so, *Dictee* is not a work of incoherent language but one that unequivocally seeks to experience truth.

I. *Dictee*: The Myth of Language

A particular feature of Cha’s Korean American transnational text is her use of multiple languages. From opening her work in *hangul*, to invoking Greek muses and deploying French dictation exercises, Cha disorients her readers’ possible expectations of
what a “Korean American” writer might produce. Moreso, she does this to unsparingly underscore the various technologies of colonization and domination that Korean American subjectivity entails. Even what might appear as the most “authentic” of Korean language on pages 26-27 and pages 54-55 are actually Chinese characters that Koreans heavily rely on due to its historically tributary relationship with China. In this way, *Dictee* demonstrates how profoundly mutable identity is at the mercy of language.

Rather than try to wield the immensity of meanings in language, Cha embraces the metonymic nature of language by using it to highlight hegemonic systems of oppression. In this way, Cha constructs a Korean American subjectivity upon a criterion of what it is *not* rather than what it is supposed to be.

I use the term “Korean American” loosely in that Cha herself might or might not label her work as such. Regardless of how we might be tempted to label her text and (anti-)subject, the key feature I investigate is her questioning of labels themselves. A natural place to start then, would be her treatment of the language that surrounds would could be surmised as her own subject position. Whether it is her intention to be autobiographical is not so much my focus as what she is saying about our own need to locate and posit an authorial position/voice. *Dictee* opens with its first bit of text in the phonetic lettering of Korea, *hangul*. The black and white image plate is a grainy facsimile, purportedly of a Korean coal miner’s words scratched into a rock in Japan (Park 142). Translated, the four lines are:

Mother
I miss you
I am hungry
I want to go home (Park 142)
Yet the facsimile is poor and hardly looks like a photograph. Rather, it appears to be almost painting-like with spatters of white that obscure the words that serve to introduce Cha’s text. Juxtaposed to this picture to the right, is Cha’s title page that simply says, “DICTEE”. Since the term “dictee” means “to take dictation in French” whereas the inscription on the left is written in hangul, one might note a level of irony and/or reflexivity that Cha means to invest in her work. On one hand, the hangul inscription is hardly a dictation but an emotional outpouring of longing from a colonized subject. On the other hand, the title word “dictee” implies that Cha’s entire work is an exercise in dictation — opening the question as to whether even our deepest desires are possible dictations.

Furthermore, not only is the “photo” of the coal mine worker’s message hardly a photo, the integrity of the message itself is unstable. Vertically-written hangul is conventionally read from right to left; however, in the last line “I want to go home” there is actually a break that separates this thought into two smaller lines that must be read from left to right in order to be grammatically coherent. There is no explanation for this break, nor is there any narrative surrounding this image plate that even indicates the history of the message. The purported story of the coal miner in Japan is exactly that since nowhere in the Cha’s own text does she ever offer such a narrative. Thus, Cha opens her text with an image with narrative gaps so large that the interpretations for it are potentially endless. Cha introduces her reader to Dictee such that the initial affective experience is a desire for narrative — or in other words, a desire for dictation. By undermining the integrity of language and its visibility, Cha limns the obscured myth-
making that surrounds the phenomenon of language itself. Furthermore, she underscores this mythology by naming our desire for that mythology in the very title of her work.

Cha begins *Dictee* with the experience of what seems to be the attempt to speak something generally considered spontaneous and natural. However, the title of her passage and the language of her description reveal that even the seemingly organic act of speaking is another form of taking dictation. Her third-person objective narrative describes a female subject attempting speech: “Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. …. 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 something.” (Cha 3) Describing in almost grotesque detail, Cha evokes a rather bestial picture of the human act of speaking. One could even surmise that Cha makes a case for the organic nature of human speech. However, Cha titles this passage “DISEUSE”, which according to the Oxford American Dictionary is a “female entertainer who performs monologues”. The significance of this word is that it ironically highlights the mimed performance of human speech. Speech is not an organic spontaneity but rather a practiced and prepared act: “She *mimicks* [my emphasis] the speaking. …. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to *mimicking* [my emphasis] gestures with the mouth. (Cha 3) The fascinating aspect to Cha’s use of mimicry is that her diseuse is not mimicking any preset culturally codified action, rather she is mimicking human speech itself.

In terms of this idiosyncratic feature of Cha’s passage, Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial notion of mimicry sheds an interesting light on Cha’s narrative when he
states: “…the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of … mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.” (Bhabha MAM 126) In other words, Bhabha observes that mimicry brings to the foreground the very essence of difference. However what is curious is that Cha’s diseuse induces this foregrounding across the boundary between human articulation and human non-articulation. Rather than the disavowal of explicitly-recognized colonizing technologies such as culture, society and politics, Cha’s text targets the act of articulation itself. Cha’s diseuse beckons us to recognize the very act of communicating itself as a cultural artifact — to dispel the myth that we communicate organically and that communication is indeed a mimicry that arises from the colonized body.

On the other hand, although Cha’s diseuse vivifies the deliberative performance in the act of speaking, Cha’s subtext reveals a different agenda. Within the narrative of Cha’s diseuse, Cha’s text interrupts itself with an italicized subsection that articulates something else entirely:

*It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. It festeres inside. The wound, liquid, dust. Must break. Must void.* (Cha 3)

Although there is pain in the effort to articulate, there is greater pain in not articulating. Cha’s subsection reflects a pain that implicates the desire to speak. Its italicized and compacted image conveys the deeper internalized nature of desire that lies below the performance of Cha’s diseuse. In other words, Cha’s text does not assert that articulation
is wholly constructed. Desire emerges through the cracks and fragmentations of the colonized self such that it is precisely what interrupts and subverts mimicry itself.

Bhabha refers to this desire as that which does not have an object but accomplishes what he calls a metonymy of presence: “The desire of colonial mimicry — an interdictory desire — may not have an object, but it has strategic objectives which I shall call the *metonymy of presence* [his emphasis]. (Bhabha MAM 130)

Bhabha describes this metonymy of presence as that which signifies “mimicry as the affect of hybridity — at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance” (Bhabha STW 162) In other words, the desire associated with mimicry is a layering of paradoxes that comply with authority as well as resist it. Thus in the midst of Cha’s *diseuse* mimicry of speech, desire and disavowal interrupt the passage such that it illustrates what Bhabha calls the “affect of hybridity” or what could be otherwise stated as an intensity of paradoxes colliding. In fact, this “pain not to say” (Cha 3) is so intense that it festers as a wound and must break; the interrupted subsection must be interrupted again in order to relieve its own tension of paradox. Cha’s text conveys the interplay of desire and disavowal in abrupt stops of truncated and interrupted thoughts such that it reveals the power in mimicry to lie in its own interruption.

Massumi addresses this very notion of mimicry and interruption when he observes the curious phenomenon of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Massumi notes how the political persona that Reagan conveyed over the media was dominated by his inability to coherently articulate himself as well as his always failing health. Massumi locates the power of Reagan’s popularity in the president’s recycled acting abilities when he states:
“[Reagan’s] means were affective. …. Reagan politicized the power of mime. That power is in interruption. A mime decomposes movement, cuts its continuity into a potentially infinite series of submovements punctuated by jerks.” (Massumi 40) In like manner, Cha’s disease decomposes movement such that speech is broken down to its affective components. By breaking, interrupting, loading each submovement with desire and disavowal, Cha’s text demonstrates the affect of hybridity by investing mimicry itself with the power to embrace difference. Cha’s text deploys language itself to reveal its own indeterminacy and thereby transgress its own boundaries of organic coherence.

It is in this space of indeterminate incoherence that desire spills out as the need to void: “Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. …. It festers inside. …. Must break. Must void.” (Cha 3) Here, abjection underscores the mythology of an organic language by converging the pain of not articulating, or, the desire to articulate into the need to void. Julia Kristeva addresses abjection as that which reveals what is lacking behind who, what and where we think we are: “There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.” (Kristeva 5) Playing on the word “want”, Kristeva clearly intends for the double entendre of “lack” and “desire” to refer to the conditions of abjection. Moreover, Kristeva also locates affect in the breaks of mimicry such that abjection is not only failed signification but it is also simultaneously the embodiment of desire or in Kristeva’s words “analytic speech … becomes ‘incarnate’ in the full sense of the term.” (Kristeva 31) Asserting that mimicry highlights “the affects … heard in the breaks in discourse”, Kristeva observes the power in mimicry:
I am thinking … of the completely mimetic identification of the analyst with respect to analysands. …. It allows one to regress back to the affects that can be heard in the breaks in discourse, to provide rhythm, too, to concatenate (is that what "to become conscious" means?) the gaps of a speech saddened because it turned its back on its abject meaning. If there is analytic jouissance it is there, in the thoroughly poetic mimesis that runs through the architecture of speech and extends from coenesthetic image to logical and phantasmatic articulations. Without for that matter biologizing language, and while breaking away from identification by means of interpretation, analytic speech is one that becomes "incarnate" in the full sense of the term. (Kristeva 30-31)

Kristeva’s passage relates to Cha’s text such that the mimetic identification between analyst and analysand could be posited between Cha’s diseuse and her readers. Where Kristeva locates a poetic mimesis throughout “the architecture of speech”, Cha’s text demonstrates the poetry of mimicry throughout the textual landscape of the passage — in language itself — which reveals the connection between the image of our bodies with our constructed and phantasmatic articulations. In this way, Cha’s incoherent text becomes as erudite as analytic speech, as well as poetic and incarnate.

Thus through the performance of mimicry, Cha’s diseuse embodies language such that Cha’s text brings to the forefront the notion of a particular body. Thus we see that although Cha’s text resists the notion of coherent subjectivity, it nevertheless asserts its own embodiment. Literally, Cha’s diseuse performs the corporeality of language such that her body experiences grammar. By mimicking the colonizing artifice of speech as her only mode of conveyance, Cha’s diseuse arduously takes on the corporeal task of preparing and augmenting the flesh in order to become language: “From the back of her neck she releases her shoulders free. She swallows once more. (Once more. One more time would do.) In preparation. It augments. To such a pitch. Endless drone, refueling
itself. Autonomous. Self-generating. Swallows with last efforts last wills against the pain that wishes it to speak.” (Cha 3) From the back of her neck, Cha’s diseuse summons that “autonomous” element that self-generates enough to fuel the desire to speak. Recalling Massumi’s assertion that the “disconnection [caused by the autonomy of affect] between form/content and intensity/effect is not just negative” (Massumi 25) but that “it enables a different connectivity, a different difference, in parallel” (ibid), Cha’s language indicates an independent factor that “wishes it to speak” such that this autonomous factor initiates its own severance between body and intensity precisely in order to highlight a new kind of connection. In other words, affect disconnects the notion that language organically arises from the body in order to paradoxically embody language.

The significance in this paradox is to recognize how easily the body disappears when we privilege the notion of a spontaneous and organic association between language and the body. N. Katherine Hayles expresses this concern in How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics when she observes how easily the body is dissolved in favor of disembodied information: “Whereas the body can disappear into information with scarcely a murmur of protest, embodiment cannot, for it is tied to the circumstances of the occasion and the person.” (Hayles 197) Moreso, Hayles explains how foregrounding embodiment precludes the dematerialization of individual particularity:

Embodiment is akin to articulation in that it is inherently performative, subject to individual enactments, and therefore always to some extent improvisational. … As soon as embodiment is acknowledged, the abstractions of the Panopticon disintegrate into the particularities of specific people embedded in specific contexts. Along with these
particularities come concomitant strategies for resistances and subversions, excesses and deviations. (Hayles 197-8)

*Dictee* forecloses the dissolution of the body by severing its ties with natural language such that speech becomes cultural artifact. Yet at the same time, Cha’s text metonymically embodies language such that grammar becomes an affective manifestation of desire: “*She would take on their punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs. Punctuation. She would become, herself, demarcations. Absorb it. Spill it. Seize upon the punctuation. Last air. Give her. Her. The relay. Voice. Assign. Hand it. Deliver it. Deliver.*” (Cha 4) Absorbing her audience’s desires, Cha’s diseuse represents their desires through the limited and interrupted modality of language. In this way we see how Hayles’ notion of the inherently performative nature of embodiment manifests itself through articulation such that spontaneity (improvisation) indeed arises from its own interruptions and foreclosures. However, it is this deliberation that voids and dissolves Cha’s diseuse — as if the performance of identification only sharpens Cha’s diseuse of how ineluctably deliberate such a performance must be: “*Inside her voids. It does not contain further. Rising from the empty below, pebble lumps of gas. Moisture. Begin to flood her. Dissolving her. Slow, slowed to deliberation. Slow and thick.*” (Cha 5) Cha’s text illustrates the constant paradoxical flux between the dissolution of the body and the embodiment of language such that desire and disavowal perpetually contend with one another. In so doing, this passage reveals the fraught boundary between language and the body thereby prefacing *Dictee* as the intensely contested textual landscape it has critically become.
Another key passage where Cha explores the myth of originary language is in the language of religion. In her passage beginning with the line “Black ash from the Palm Hosannah” (Cha 13), Cha references the Catholic ritual where the priest places black ash upon the foreheads of his supplicants: “Black ash from the Palm Hosannah. Ash. Kneel down on the marble the cold beneath rising through the bent knees. Close eyes and as the lids flutter, push out the tongue.” (Cha 13) In the form of imperative sentences, Cha’s diseuse performs the ritual of communion. Cha’s diseuse performing the act of communion calls forth multiple constructs to be found in the mythology of language. First, the language of religion constitutes a level of respect, fear and awe that the supplicant must naturally hold for what is sacred and/or God. Cha subverts the sanctity of religious language by foregrounding God in the masculine pronoun:

“The Host Wafer (His Body. His Blood.) His. Dissolving in the mouth to the liquid tongue saliva (Wine to Blood. Bread to Flesh.) His. Open the eyes to the women kneeling on the left side. Only visible on their bleached countenances are the unevenly lit circles of rouge and their elongated tongues. In waiting. To receive. Him.” (Cha 13)

Here Cha sets up a scene. Her diseuse kneels and prepares to perform communion. The “Host Wafer” is both Jesus, the priest, and the small unleavened cracker, dropped and dissolved in the awaiting women’s mouths. The large gaps in Cha’s fragments starkly emphasize the maleness of what is being offered in this religious ritual as well as the femaleness of those who receive him. In this way, Cha foregrounds the underlying gendered power differential invested in the ritual of communion. In her description of the priest’s masculine role as Christ’s intercessor, she conflates priest and God, thereby illuminating the Catholic language of man as God: “By then he is again at the other end.
He the one who deciphers he the one who invokes in the Name. He the one who becomes He. Man-God.” (Cha 13) Thus, by focusing on how the ritual of communion privileges the position of the man as savior and woman as sinful supplicant, Cha uses the language of ritual in order to reveal its own political constructs.

Secondly, by foregrounding patriarchal systems of oppression as embedded within the language of religion, Cha not only makes patent critique of patriarchal oppression, but also questions the awe and respect expected in religious fervor. As her diseuse performs communion, the ritual is transformed from an act of faith into an act of spectacle. The closer Cha brings her narrative into the realm of religious fervor, the more Cha highlights the garish accoutrements of institutionalized faith: “Waiting. Nearing, nearer and nearer to the altar of God. Infusion of the surplus perfumes, bee’s wax, incense, flowers.” (Cha 13) Nearing the altar of God, Cha’s diseuse becomes infused not with spiritual fervor but with a surplus of perfumes and other sundry objects involved in Catholic ritual. Ultimately, Cha underscores the manufactured nature of religiosity in order to illustrate in parallel the manufactured nature of its language.

Cha begins another passage with the quote “Bless me father, for I have sinned. My last confession was . . . I can’t remember when . . . These are my sins.” (Cha 16) Addressing her confessional priest with the pronoun “father” uncapitalized, Cha’s reader reads that Cha’s diseuse is disrespecting (at least grammatically) the priest in this sentence. Cha’s diseuse clearly does not view her priest in the unquestionable position of exalted holiness or even a given position of pronominal subjectivity. Furthermore, the
words are ritualized and the nonchalance that her language evinces reveals how little reverence is held for the act of confession:

*I am making up the sins. For the guarantee of absolution. In the beginning again, at zero. Before Heaven even. Before the Fall. All previous wrongs erased. Reduced to spotless. Pure. .... The greater the sin, greater the forgiveness, greater the Glory of God in His forgiveness. I have none. Venial sin. Small sins. Hardly worth the mention. Sins, all the same. Thoughts even. No matter how invisible. Everything is visible to God. Thought as visible as word as act. / Act of Contrition. I am making the confession. To make words.* (Cha 16-7)

My point is not that Cha is being flippant for the sake of impudence but for the sake of questioning the sanctity that surrounds religious ritual as well as its attending “theological truths”.

In the language of her confession, Cha’s diseuse equivocates her culpability. Opening her confession with the blunt admission that she is fabricating her sins reveals how little she feels any need for authentic atonement. Her next statement Negotiates for a guarantee of absolution — the dissolution of any necessity for punishment. If we question what punishment that Cha’s diseuse desires to be released from, her very next statement implies it could be “the beginning” or what Haraway refers to as an “origin myth”. Rather than a language of confession faithful to the pathos of Christian contrition, Cha’s diseuse rejects the rhetoric of confession in like fashion to Haraway’s manifesto to reject “the Fall”:

*Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.* (Haraway 176)
Both Cha and Haraway refer to “the Fall”, where one mocks the language of contrition in order to highlight its own sexist language that perpetuates the oppression of woman and the other illuminates how this tactic subverts hegemonic oppression.

Cha’s diseuse mocks her confessor by saying she will invent her sins because “The greater the sin, greater the forgiveness, greater the Glory of God in His forgiveness” where the glory of God is clearly a masculine circumstance indicated by the masculine pronoun “His”. Yet she reiterates again that she has no sins when she says “I have none”. Or, whether Cha’s diseuse is saying she has none of God’s masculine forgiveness or whether she is flatly informing that she has no sins, it does not change the evocation that she is not an incorporated subject into the ritual of confession. However, Cha’s language does not articulate the language of the disenfranchised victim, but rather the deliberate act of severance. When Haraway contends that cyborg writing is about power and survival, she calls for the agentive act of rejecting original innocence and marking those that have marked the disenfranchised. Cha’s diseuse does exactly this when she echoes the script of contrition, but affectively rejects its author(s) when she states “Thought as visible as word as act”. Cha puts these thoughts down on paper to be recognized for what they have previously been signified for — a confessional; however, her words are acts of rejection.

By the end of the passage, Cha’s diseuse reveals that hers is indeed an “Act of Contrition” in that she confesses to making words into a speech that ultimately rejects the ritual and pathos of hegemonic oppression. Cha’s diseuse confesses that she has no sins; such a language echoes the liberatory politics found in Haraway’s cyborg politics when
she states, “We are excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body. But with the loss of innocence in our origin, there is no expulsion from the Garden either. Our politics lose the indulgence of guilt with the naivete of innocence.” (Haraway 158) Haraway refers to the metaphoric language of rejecting previously constructed mythologies that surround notions of identity. Her primary point about rejecting the “origin myth” references previous feminists’ suggestions to exalt the notion of femininity. The problem, Haraway cautions, is that this notion of femininity is profoundly embedded in the very grand narratives that have historically oppressed women. Cha’s diseuse elegantly bypasses this problem by ironically rejecting the language of the “origin myth” in its own language — thereby highlighting the power of affect as invested in the making of words that undermines language itself. Couched in the pathos of contrition, Cha’s diseuse deploys the confession in order to make herself heard — to deliver a message that deconstructs the sanctity of the confession: “Their. Into Their tongue, the counterscript, my confession in Theirs. Into Theirs. To scribe to make hear the words, to make sound the words, the words, the words made flesh.” (Cha 18) In other words, Cha’s diseuse makes it clear how little power her marked body has within the context of the confession; therefore, she takes power by calling out its own constructedness by rejecting its false promises of redemption from a sin she never committed — that of being woman.
II. *Dictee: The Myth of Historical Truth*

In her section titled “Clio — History”, Cha opens with a blotchy black and white photo of Yu Guan Soon “taken sometime between 1916 and 1919 when [Yu] was a student at Ewha Girls’ School” (Lee 84). According to Kun Jong Lee in his essay “Rewriting Hesiod, Revisioning Korea: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* as a Subversive Hesiodic Catalogue of Women”, Cha rewrites Hesiod’s *Theogony*, a mythical poem on the beginnings of the universe and the Greek gods. Lee contends that Cha does so in order to subvert the primacy of influence that Greek theogony has had over modern Western civilization: “Cha’s strategy is double-edged, since it criticizes not only the Eurocentric masculinist worldview (tracing back to the *Theogony*) which has erased the history of Korea but also the patriarchal history of Korea which has silenced the experience of Korean women. Thus Cha criticizes both Eurocentrism and patriarchy by anchoring her revisionary gaze firmly on the intersecting sites of, among others, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. (Lee 80) Lee points out that although Asian/American literary scholars have rightly recognized the cultural specificities in *Dictee* such as Korean history, nationalism, feminism and diaspora, such recognition may need more scrutiny and analysis than just its nod to sociopolitical resistance: “Curiously enough, however, critics have rarely mentioned Queen Min, naively accepted Cha’s biography of Yu Guan Soon, insufficiently studied Cha’s rewriting of her mother’s journals, and inadequately addressed the significance of Princess Pari.” (Lee 80) Although scholars have acknowledged Cha’s transgressive and unfaithful treatments of Western conventionalities, Lee specifically explores the more esoteric historical details behind
Cha’s narrative on Korean history, nationalism, feminism and diaspora in order to underscore the extent to which Cha’s narrative rewrites and subverts (not only Eurocentric but also other) patriarchal paradigms. Thus by recognizing Cha’s own deviations from recorded history, Cha’s text transgresses the boundary that circumscribes the epistemological notion of truth. *Dictee* not only destabilizes the relationship between the body and language, it also limns the indeterminate nature of the body’s relationship to truth. Specifically, Cha’s text focuses on how truth is hegemonically produced for as well as by marked bodies. By underscoring its own ambivalence, *Dictee* reveals how language works as a technology of power that both centralizes as well as decentralizes power through the trope of historical truth.

Lee observes that Cha deviates from recorded history by narrating that the Japanese takeover of the Korean government was triggered by the assassination of Queen Min: “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.” (Cha 30) However, in fact, Lee points out that “Queen Min was murdered and burned to ashes by Japanese assassins in 1895, but the nationwide March First demonstrations broke out in 1919.” (Lee 85) He describes Queen Min as a headstrong woman who openly opposed her father and proved herself to be an influential female politician. In the midst of these power struggles, Queen Min was labeled at best, a betrayer of Confucian filial values and at worst, the cause for the fall of the Chosun Dynasty (last reigning family in Korea). Like Maxine Hong Kingston, Cha patently rewrites history in order to indict the patriarchal hegemonies that have obfuscated and
negated women’s significant histories. Not only did the Japanese exploit an androcentric Korean society to smear Queen Min’s reputation, it is key to recognize Cha’s indictment of Korean society as well. Lee contends that Cha “regards the Queen as the symbol of Korea colonized by Japan and situates her at the origin of Korea’s nationalist struggle against Japanese colonialism. Cha sees the murder of the Queen as the real beginning of Korea’s independence movement from Japanese influence.” (Lee 85-6) Thus by eliding the Korean nationalist-patriarchal residual on the historicity behind Queen Min, Cha’s narrative demands a new recognition of this figure to Western eyes. By patently disregarding the temporal logic of the date and circumstances of Queen Min’s death, Cha’s text reveals itself to be a manipulator of “historic truth” such that the author’s bias comes to the foreground just as Lee describes.

Lee emphasizes still other liberties Cha takes with recorded history such that she re-narrates Korean nationalist history according to the bias of an author who clearly lies outside of the established patriarchal order. Cha’s narration of Korean patriarchy dismissing Yu Guan Soon as woman warrior articulates her indictment of Korean historiography as well: “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.” (Cha 30) Furthermore, Cha positions Yu Guan Soon alongside the French rebel, Joan of Arc: “She calls the name of Jeanne d’Arc three times.” (Cha 28) Lee contends that Cha manipulates the historic narrative surrounding Yu Guan Soon such that she rejects the androcentric narratives that have effectively elided female voices: “Cha’s nonlinear, cyclical, and layered narrative punctures, fragments, disturbs, and questions the
apparently seamless surface of conventional Korean historiography. Indeed, by focusing on Guan Soon, Cha criticizes and rejects the androcentric assumptions encoded in Korean historiography that has negated female roles and silenced female voices. (Lee 84) Although Lee points out the germane recognition that Cha’s narrative calls for a reconstruction of the accepted epistemic paradigms so far — a subversion of grand narratives that limns its own mythologies, he does not fully consider the “apparently seamless surface of conventional Korean historiography” that the Western reader is inevitably vulnerable to credibly accept.

Not only does Cha explicitly re-narrativize Yu Guan Soon’s story, she intersperses this passage with multiple and varied “reliable sources” that read authoritatively as historic record; Lee lists these as: “… a foreigner’s letter about the engagements between the Japanese army and Korean militia in the Korea Daily News of 24 September 1907; an article on Japanese soldiers’ cold-blooded massacre of Koreans in the Korea Daily News of 26 September 1907; “Petition from the Koreans of Hawaii to President Theodore Roosevelt” dated 12 July 1905; and the anti-Japanese uprising at Aunae on 1 April 1919.” (Lee 84) Without claiming any authoritative position on historical truth herself, Cha’s narrative deconstructs the myth of historical truth by inserting her own “historicizing” voice into the cacophony of Korean historicity. What marks Cha’s text in particular is her blatant re-working of historical record such that not only patriarchal oppression becomes apparent, but how little the reader might question the authority of written words — even when the author herself warns her reader that History, with a capital H, is rarely examined for its “parts false” and “parts real”: “She makes complete
her duration. As others 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.” (Cha 28) Thus Cha’s narrative not only works to indict and subvert hegemonic text, but the hegemony of textuality itself. Cha’s narrative locates the patent fabrications that warp and oppress women throughout history, but more than seeking to correct these fabrications, Cha’s narrative reveals the technology of oppression through historic text itself. By highlighting how easily and quickly we soak up what we read and never question the verity of those facts belies Cha’s own historicizing tactics. It is not until Cha’s text admits outright that her disease completes her duration — in other words, rendered her myth — just the same as others (hegemonic, patriarchal, national) have completed their own myth-making with none to examine the verity of all this obsessive myth-making. History with a capital “H” stands unchallenged and unrevised as the hybrid landscape of “parts real” as well as “parts false”.

Yet Cha’s move to deconstruct historical truth does not erase its attending authors and the technologies such myths deploy. Rather, it demands that a vigilance to receiving historicity assume an even larger role in understanding and conveying language. In other words, Cha underscores the crucial need to both recognize and appreciate myth in history so that we might more intensely interact with the material conditions it imposes. Chuh proposes political deconstructive readings as such:

We might explicitly politicize this deconstruction by understanding that persistent interrogation into the production of truth is inquiring after, and contesting as necessary, its consequences as well as its conditions. Which is to say that such an interrogation includes investigating how and why,
and for whose benefit, certain meanings, interpretations, and knowledges garner the semblance and authority of truth. (Chuh 82)

In terms of Korean American subjectivity, the purpose of deconstructive politics is its contestation of the mythology of subjectivity as well as recognizing the material conditions that such a construct sustains. By acknowledging and even underscoring its own mythology that supports “historical truth”, Cha’s text disallows its powerful and complicit relationship with language to sustain hegemonic oppressions. Self-reflexively, Cha’s narrative resists hegemonic oppression not by “opposing” one truth for her own truth, but by indicting the very technology that sustains the notion of truth in textuality itself.

By juxtaposing various historical narratives, Cha examines the boundaries between myth and reality such that she bombards her reader with the perpetual question, *whose truth is this?* In introducing Yu Guan Soon’s life, Cha sparsely offers the girl’s birth date and death date that indicate she lived no longer than seventeen years. Following these two bare facts, Cha comments: “She is born of one mother and one father.” (Cha 25) As if in sardonic deadpan, the statement seems self-evident. On the other hand, it deviates from the convention of stating the father first as well as the naming of at least the father’s name. Through elision and the large expanse of blank page that faces a grainy gray photograph of Yu Guan Soon (Lee 84), Cha again presents the unavailability of information to underscore the historic paucity of female recognition in Korean historicity. Additionally, Cha follows this sparse biography with two entire pages filled with two Chinese characters. Of course, only those with the “leisure to examine” (Cha 28) will discover that the first character is that of “woman” and the second is that of
“man” — a reiteration of Cha’s genealogy of Yu Guan Soon. It is also key to note that Cha centers the Chinese character of “woman” slightly higher than that of “man” on pages 26 and 27 as if to stress her own bias invested in her historicization of Yu Guan Soon’s biography.

Cha’s text then interrupts itself again. Departing from her description of her diseuse recapitulating “parts false” and “parts real” in the myth-making of History, another italicized subsection follows, addressing “truth”: “Truth embraces with it all other abstentions other than itself. Outside Time. Outside Space. Parallels other durations, oblivious to the deliberate brilliance of its own time, mortal, deliberate marking. Oblivious to itself. But to sing. To sing to. Very softly.” (Cha 28) Cha’s narrative defines truth in terms of what it is not — through abstentions. Acknowledging the existence of truth but placing it outside of time and space, Cha’s narrative reveals a boundary that divides truth from the fidelity to temporality — indicated by the term “duration” (which could be surmised as the lengths of time dedicated to history/myth-making). Cha’s narrative places truth to parallel these durations, but assesses truth as unrecognizable: “oblivious to the deliberate brilliance of its own time, .... Oblivious to itself.” (Cha 28) In other words, historic truth does not exist because no one author could possibly claim to own it.

Cha’s narrative offers a truth akin to Massumi’s autonomy of affect in that it eludes confinement. The abstentious nature of truth reveals how Cha’s narrative profoundly invests truth as an affective intensity. For if truth only exists as what it is not,
then truth can never be temporally nor materially locked down; truth is not capturable.

Massumi describes the autonomy of affect in like manner:

The autonomy of affect ... is its openness. Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement ... Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the most intense (most contracted) expression of that capture — and of the fact that something has always and again escaped. Something remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any particular, functionally anchored perspective. (Massumi 35)

Furthermore, the autonomy of affect always escapes just as truth always escapes time and space because as Massumi states: “If there were no escape, no excess or remainder, no fade-out to infinity, the universe would be without potential, pure entropy death. Actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them.” (Massumi 35) Massumi’s language echoes Cha’s narrative of truth in that both assert a critical recognition of the affective intensity that eludes the temporal and material examination. Yet it is precisely at this locus where potential and emergence might be found.

Cha’s subsection on truth finishes with a rather striking moment when it answers truths non-recognition of itself with the act of singing: “But to sing. To sing to. Very softly.” (Cha 28) The words are wistful and longing, conjuring perhaps a lullaby a mother sings to her child. Not only does the language indicate the suggestion to sing but to sing specifically “to” someone. It is in this way that Cha’s narrative asserts the real yet virtual nature of truth. Just like the autonomy of affect, “[a]ctually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes” (Massumi 35) truth. Through the act of
singing softly to someone, Cha’s narrative concludes the integral, essential and material nature of an elusive and abstentious truth.

It is a tender longing that Cha invokes in the name of Korean history — one that has systematically erased the valor and sacrifice of its women in addition to its own well-recognized rhetoric of Japanese colonization and tragic persecutions. In reading the various excerpts that articulate a variety of versions surrounding the internal politics of the Japanese occupation of Korea, Cha literally draws a map of varied regions of narrative power. And although her reader is able to recognize varying modes of language, Cha demonstrates how little one is able to discern which is the most “truthful”. Omitting any footnotes to her passage of multiple excerpts, Cha blurs the boundaries that divide these voices in such a way that sharpens our perceptions of each excerpt when we must wonder, who wrote this excerpt? Cha’s text demands that we ponder the power relations between reader, writer, information and the attending desires that define our interpretations.

Following the call to sing to truth, Cha’s text becomes a bricolage of historic textualities stitched together via random quotation marks with no citations and third-person objective biographical narration with no source acknowledgements. Citationless, this passage becomes a map uneven narrative power relations that underscore the blurred boundary between authorship and truth. The plurality of unknown authors is limned by the othered nature of the passage content. Self-reflexively, the passage ends with a disavowal of its own pretext for authorial legitimacy:

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 pre-coded to perform predictably however passively possible. Neutralized to achieve the no-response, to make absorb, to submit to the uni-directional correspondence. (Cha 33)

Cha’s narrative explicitly admits to mimicking the indistinct style of the third-person objective narrative of factual information. Yet, the objective of this passage is to critique not only the bland and mundane disguise of hegemonic inculcation, but the passive absorption of its readers. Patently indicting those who have the power to sterilize and immobilize language, Cha’s narrative includes not only those who have the power to disseminate information but also those who have the power to receive it. Cha’s narrative begs us to take notice of its information with decoded bias.

When Cha states that they (those in the power of myth-making) are “no longer able to transcend their own conspirator method, no matter how alluring their [my emphases] presentation”, Cha refers to how profoundly we have disembodied information — enough to be able to ignore the material conditions that are so deeply invested in the words that articulate pain and suffering. Hayles cautions against this kind of liberatory dream that imagines a liberal humanist subject without a body: “Because information had lost its body, this construction implied that embodiment is not essential to human being. Embodiment has been systematically downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the liberal humanist subject, especially in feminist and postcolonial theories. (Hayles 4) Hayles recognizes that the danger in believing the myth of the liberal humanist subject is that it can only exist if we erase the corporeal boundaries that mark so many oppressed bodies: “Only because the body is not identified with the self is it possible to claim for
the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race and ethnicity.” (Hayles 4-5) She observes how posthumanists seek to unwittingly superimpose deconstructionist ideas onto the liberal humanist subject — a template that has already proven to exist based on the binary logic of unequal power distribution — thereby succumbing to the allure of the disembodied subject.

However, as Hayles, Haraway and Chuh propound, embodiment is a fundamental feature of lived material experience that Cha does not ignore:

The “enemy.” One’s enemy. Enemy nation. Entire nation against the other entire nation. One people exulting the suffering institutionalized on another. The enemy becomes abstract. The relationship becomes abstract. ….

Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary. To this enemy people. The meaning is the instrument, memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh, the volume of blood, the physical substance blood as measure, that rests as record, as document. Of this enemy people. (Cha 32)

When addressing the enemy, Cha points out how abstracted the pain of the other nation becomes in the name of nationalism. Only when the enemy nation becomes “larger than its own identity” — in other words, only when nationalism exceeds the boundaries of identity and surpasses its own symbolic signification, can the enemy properly exist such that mass annihilation and inhumane persecution can be executed. Recalling Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life and the camp, Cha addresses the same level of disembodied abstraction that allows man to extinguish life with impunity in the cloak of absolute sovereign power. Cha does not let us forget that for this people, for the people who have suffered at the hands of absolute power, those who have been reduced to bare
life, the material reality of the “enemy” people lies in an embodied meaning. In other words, meaning is a material reality embedded in the body: “The meaning is the instrument, memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh, the volume of blood, the physical substance blood as measure…. Of this enemy people.” (ibid) Cha challenges us to locate the boundaries between the material conditions that sustain myths as well as the material consequences that myths sustain.

Cha reinvests embodiment and material reality into a heightened awareness of the power of words in order to hope for a different future:

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 replay that will not repeat history in oblivion. (Cha 33)

Averting any utopian ideal, Cha does not claim to dream for a new History — but instead, indicates in her no longer capitalized second “history” — a new construct of knowledge that accepts history as the flawed record of indeterminate meanings that it always will be. Instead, Cha suggests that we confess to relive the same folly, except this time, consciously embodied — not in a passive pre-coded state of oblivion, but to replay a deconstructive ontology that celebrates the indeterminacy of multiply marked bodies.

III. *Dictee: The Myth of the Subject*

“The acid tools of postmodernist theory and the constructive tools of ontological discourse about revolutionary subjects might be seen as ironic allies in dissolving Western selves in the interests of survival.” (Haraway 158)
How to “replay” a deconstructive ontology invested in its own indeterminacy? How to take action in a tactic that propounds the impossibility of stable meaning? In ironic metaphor, Cha’s text undertakes this very task by undermining its own language in order to awaken her reader to a deconstructive Korean American subjectivity. *Dictee* presents Korean American subjectivity as un-locatable, unrepresentative, and disarticulated in order to precisely display Korean American subjectivity. By undermining its own language to convey the impossibility of stable meaning and coherent narrative, the affective force behind *Dictee* asserts a meaning that implicates our desires for meaning. *Dictee* proves how written text can go beyond the visual by explicitly deploying affect as an integral part of reading and interpreting literature. Cha’s work exemplifies what we might call deconstructive reading in action as she demands that her reader not only “see” her work but participate with her work on multiple levels in order to understand it. Furthermore, she disallows any illusion that there is a “correct” interpretation through aesthetic devices such as large expanses of blank page, photographs with no supporting information and quoted passages with no source citations. Aesthetically, she illustrates the feeling of emptiness, desire and abjection to intensify our awareness of unqualified spaces.

What Cha demands of her reader, then, is something far more agentive than the passive absorption of words. One must overcome the hurdle of frustration, confusion, inquiry and/or extensive research in order to find an appreciation for *Dictee*. Cha’s work denies any tepid reading partly due to her deliberate formal use of postmodern textuality and partly due to an emphatic ethos for sociopolitical justice. Although the two may
seem contradictory, Sue J. Kim formulates a reading of *Dictee* that theorizes a fusion of both features in her essay, “Narrator, Author, Reader: Equivocation in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*”. Kim labels Cha’s work an *equivocal* text “in which the author and narrator are neither wholly distinct nor wholly identified; rather, the dynamics of this equivocation contribute to the project of the text.” (Kim 164-5) Kim argues that a reading that embraces both the aesthetic values of the postmodern as well as the modern constructs a more cogent approach to understanding Cha’s text: “The lacuna in the criticism may seem minor but, I would argue, speaks to a tension between poststructuralist emphasis on textuality and subject-effects and a persistent desire for an active, ethical agent making a rhetorical argument through a text.” (Kim 165) *Dictee* exemplifies this tension that deconstructs its own narrative in order to underscore our very desires for narrative.

The final boundary between myth and reality I explore is that which circumscribes the notion of a coherent subject through this equivocal textuality. Cha creates a textuality that perpetually challenges us to transgress the boundaries that sustain hegemonic grand narratives about a coherent subject as well as locate the material conditions and consequences of those myths. Kim asserts:

> While its lyric and autobiographical elements would seem to encourage … ‘attachment,’ or identification of the narrator and author, *Dictee* complicates these generic conventions in order to interrogate the boundaries of the individual speaking subject. … The complexity of equivocation and the exploration of different axes of identification in *Dictee* serve its project of theorizing subjectivity, history, and ideology through aesthetic form. (Kim 165)
Through her framework of equivocal textual reading, Kim posits the power behind *Dictee* in its refusal to be either postmodern or modern. Furthermore, I locate a parallel cogency in *Dictee* in its troping of Korean American transnationality as transgressive subjectivity. In fact, I contend that Cha’s equivocal text is what affectively conveys the fluid nature of Korean American transnationality.

By formally deconstructing the post-/modern binary, Cha dismantles the notion of either/or subjectivity. Cha deploys this tactic in order to highlight the boundary between subjective myth-making and the material conditions and consequences that sustain those myths. It is when this boundary becomes apparent that we recognize the transgressive nature of Korean American transnationality. As we see in her letters to her mother, Cha not only explores the political transgressions of Korean American transnationality, but the intensely personal as well. Cha’s insistent references to her mother’s material realities and political positionality as disenfranchised, colonized and androcentrically-oppressed female tightly binds the historic, the cultural and the personal as inextricable. It is important to note that *Dictee* highlights not only the myth-making technologies of the nation-state that shape our desires for a coherent and enfranchised subject but the myth-making that we participate in ourselves to sustain those desires. Cha focuses on both sides of subjective myth-making in order to deconstruct Korean American subjectivity.

Addressing her mother, Cha begins her Calliope Epic Poetry chapter with the lines:

Mother, you are eighteen years old. You were born in Yong Jung, Manchuria and this is where you now live. You are not Chinese. You are
Korean. But your family moved here to escape the Japanese occupation. 
…. You live in a village where the other Koreans live. Same as you. Refugees. Immigrants. Exiles. Farther away from the land that is not
your own. Not your own any longer. (Cha 45)

A particular feature that stands out immediately is that although an addressed pronominal
greeting is often literarily deployed in order to avoid the third-person omniscient, Cha
slyly melds the two narrative forms in such a way that confuses who exactly is being
addressed. Although the letter addresses a “Mother”, one does not usually inform the
person being written to, of how old that person happens to be, where she was born and
where she lives. The beginning of this letter, then, clearly offers the introductory
information to a certain “character” of a narrative. In this way, Cha notifies her reader
that she is actually also writing to her reader; subsequently, the writer of this letter indeed
assumes an authorial third-person omniscient positionality that ultimately objectifies
“Mother”. She informs us that “Mother” was born in Yong Jung, Manchuria and that she
is Korean, not Chinese. Cha brings up Japanese occupation, clarifying that “Mother” is a
refugee, immigrant and exile.

On the other hand, the language of this letter affects the personal conversation
between mother and daughter with the intimate details a daughter might have heard from
her mother. Cha asserts an intimate voice that in fact, goes beyond the conversational
and often superimposes the first-person internal emotions of “Mother” that articulate only
what the person in action could have felt:

You did not want to see. You cannot see anymore. What they do. To the
land and to the people. …. You suffer the knowledge of having to leave.
Of having left. But your MAH-UHM, spirit has not left. Never shall have
and never shall will. Not now. Not even now. It is burned into your ever-
present memory. Memory less. Because it is not in the past. It cannot be. Not in the least of all pasts. It burns. Fire alight enflame. (Cha 45)

Despite her persistent use of the pronoun “You”, Cha’s language evokes the intimate experience of one suffering thereby asserting a subjectivity that “Mother” historically has been denied. Subsequently, Cha’s linguistic transgression of the boundary between objective third-person and subjective first-person affectively evokes the angst of an erased history, but at the same time denies any authorial claim to any universal historic record. Cha takes authority in the context of affect — the pain and suffering of “Mother” is clear; however, Cha avoids assuming any position that concretizes this history precisely in order to highlight the elision of “Mother’s” history. In other words, Cha refuses to conform to either objective or subjective narrative in order to limn the myth-making technologies involved in either narrative form.

To assume a third-person objective point of view, Cha would be taking on the authorial voice of universal “History”-making. Instead, she undermines her project to tell the “history” (with an uncapitalized “h”) of “Mother” by writing in the form of a letter to her mother. Yet it is not a “true to form” intimate letter since Cha does not present a complete first-person subjective point of view. Rather, the letter takes on a confusing hybrid of objective language that implicates how much we desire and need this seeming universal construct in order to define ourselves. Cha cannot entirely tell the true subjective narrative of “Mother” because she is not “Mother”. Thus she has no other recourse than to form “Mother’s” subjectivity along the mythology of History/history. Dictee reveals how we cannot escape the myth-making technologies of identity; we can
only be cognizant of them and strive to “replay” and retell the epic poetry of history in new and better (in terms of sociopolitical accountability and justice) ways.

Spelling the word “MAH-UHM” in all capital letters, Cha makes it clear she strives to retell an epic history in new and better ways by highlighting the affective pain of Korean colonial history. In her use of the word “MAH-UHM”, Cha augments the pathos of the Korean exile in order to convey the intense pain of injustice, separation, home and loss. Incorporating it into the language of lost language, unrelinquished memory and undiminished pain, the word stands out in the midst of these passages, repeatedly underscoring the angst of historic Korean disenfranchisement and colonization:

Mother, you are a child still. …. Mother tongue is your refuge. It is being home. Being who you are. Truly. To speak makes you sad. Yearning. To utter each word is a privilege you risk by death. Not only for you but for all. All of you who are one, who by law tongue tied forbidden of tongue. You carry at center the mark of the red above and the mark of blue below, heaven and earth, tai-geuk; t’ai-chi. It is the mark. The mark of belonging. Mark of cause. Mark of retrieval. By birth. By death. By blood. You carry the mark in your chest, in your MAH-UHM, in your MAH-UHM, in your spirit-heart. (Cha 45-6)

By defining MAH-UHM as a spirit-heart, Cha constructs a symbol of metaphysical-physical unity that encompasses the idea of language as both abstract cultural indoctrination as well as the corporeal marker of the “tongue”. Thus we see how mythological grand narratives have the power to physically tie the tongue. Cha delineates “the mark of belonging” as the symbology of yin and yang, thus the dominant features of nationality as displayed on the Korean flag, for Cha, are just as inextricable from the flag as they are from the body. The mark exists within the body as well — the
mark becomes the tongue that determines who is colonizer and who is the colonized, refugee and exile. It is this mark that is also the mother tongue that is “home”. In other words, “MAH-UHM” indicates how the mark is just as much a part of nation-state power building as it is a part of the private psychical negotiation for identity for the individual.

In addition, the act of speaking (the utilization of the mark as tongue) is a privilege that not only marks the individual body, but the collective body as well: “To utter each word is a privilege you risk by death. Not only for you but for all. All of you who are one, who by law tongue tied forbidden of tongue.” (ibid) Cha highlights the inextricable relationship language has with national identity such that the myth of national identity becomes a corporeal marker that literally marks the body through speech. Just as she draws out the line between yin and yang in the Korean flag “tai-geuk”, Cha illustrates the integral boundary between identity and language through the metaphor of speech. Extending her metaphor of speech through the act of singing, Cha inserts what “In truth this would be the [national] anthem” (Cha 46), but instead is simply the song that Koreans sang to evoke the pathos of being unjustly colonized by the Japanese. After the imperative statement, “You sing.” (Cha 46) Cha inserts in italics the lyrics to this pseudo-anthem that more articulates the spirit-heart of a people exiled, colonized and persecuted.

Invoking the pathos to “wait”, Cha transitions from these lyrics that arise from national identity into another kind of song in the language of Roman Catholicism:

From the Misere to Gloria to Magnificat and Sanctus. To the Antiphonal song. Because surely. Soon. The answer would come. The response.
Like echo. After the oblations. The offering. The sacrifice, the votive, the devotions, the novenas, the matins, the lauds, the vespers, the vigils, the evensong, the nightsong, the attendance, the adoration, the veneration, the honor, the invocations, the supplications, the petitions, the recitations, the vows, the immolations. Surely, all these and more. Ceaseless. Again. Over and over. (Cha 46-7)

Repeating the lyrics, Cha further underscores the pathos of waiting by immediately following the italicized insert with: “You know to wait. Wait in the Misere. Wait in the Gloria. Wait in the Magnificat. Wait in the Sanctus. For the Antiphonal song. Antiphonal hymn. The choral answer. In the ebb and tide of echo.” (Cha 47) As if to echo herself in choral answer, Cha moves from the pathos of Korean colonization by Japan onto a form of Western religious institutionalization — the liturgy of Catholicism. Lyrically, Cha’s epic poem invokes the suffering of colonial oppression and calls for the people to wait. Interestingly, Cha’s answer to that call to wait is an ironic hailing of the Catholic Antiphonal. The significance of this transition lies in Cha’s affective movement from the suffering at the hands of Japanese colonializers to a plateau of feeling that asks her reader to wait, to anticipate the relief from pain and sorrow that one assumes that time always offers. In answer to this wait, Cha ironically presents the rhetoric of salvation from the Western Catholic church.

Cha’s text progresses into a dreamscape that arises from fevered hallucinations of extreme illness — an illness due to the harshness of Manchurian climate, starvation and overexertion:

It is February. In Manchuria. In this village you are alone and your hardships are immense. …. Outside the room and board that you pay, you send the rest of your pay home. …. You are giving in. To the fall to the lure behind you before you all around you beneath your skin the sharp air begins to blow the winds of the body, dark fires rising to battle
for victory, the summoning the coaxing the irresistible draw replacing sleep dense with images condensing them without space in between. ” (Cha 49-50)

As Mother falls ill, Cha’s letter becomes increasingly affective as opposed to narrative. Cha’s textuality is much more about Mother as an experiential intensity rather than the particular details of historic event. What is offered in this experience is the journey from the displacement from home and the yearning that accompanies that displacement. Cha finally brings her reader to an ornate “home”; it is curiously “how Heaven should be” (Cha 51) yet it is clearly not “home”. At the brink of death, this place that mimics Heaven brings Mother back to life at the hands of those “dressed in costumes made of a strange and beautiful cloth. They are carried in a light breeze faintly lifting above ground as if their bodies wore wings.” (Cha 51) Cha’s imagery calls forth the historic realities of the many Catholic mission homes that served to simultaneously offer food, medical attention and lodging in the attempt to convert many to the Catholic church. Thus, Cha’s angel-like beings could be aligned with such Catholic missionaries who are the answer to Cha’s invocation to wait out the oppressions of Japanese imperialism.

In essence, Cha illustrates a Korea that is “saved” from the hardships of Japan by the nurturing arms of the Catholic church. Cha presents a dreamscape that is captivating and alluring, like a fantasy that indulges one’s yearning from deprivation: “They entrance you. Numb you. You watch in awe from what seems to be a very long time. …. Curiosity pulls you further and you move towards what looks like a restaurant. …. You notice that they each carry a large dish of food. You cannot identify its origin, but it captivates you completely.” (Cha 51-2) Cha’s dreamscape becomes nightmarish when
these angel-like beings offer food, but Mother rejects the food. In an eerie turn that implicates these angel-like beings to indeed be Catholic missionaries, Cha parallels Mother’s dream experience with the Biblical story of Jesus fasting in the desert.

Disturbingly salient in this parallel structure is that Cha aligns her angel-like beings to Satan who tempted Jesus to break his fast in the desert:

 Their spirit takes your own. You are immobilized they hold you to their sight and approach even nearer. They smile to you they say to you they have prepared this food especially for you. The first one stands facing you and asks you to eat from it. You shake your head in refusal inspite of its aroma and the beautiful arrangement.

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. (Cha 52)

Cha’s story continues with Satan’s three attempts to seduce Jesus to break his fast in the desert and each time, Jesus rebukes Satan, and each time after that, Cha inserts another temptation for Mother from one of the angel-like beings. The third and final being offers and when Mother refuses for the third time, the being says, “If you do not eat, you must become a cripple!” (Cha 53)

In this heavily symbolic passage, Cha echoes scriptural language that doubly metaphorizes the suffering of Korea as a nation starving and alone in a political desert where the only assistance being offered comes from the Catholic church. Cha’s answer to the invocation to wait and ride out Japanese persecution ends up being the seduction of the church — tragically, it is yet another form of hegemonic oppression. Subsequently, when “Mother” refuses the spiritual nourishment offered from these beautiful beings and narrowly escapes death, she has been indicted to become a “cripple”.
This passage is doubly metaphoric in that Cha’s text not only deploys scriptural language to emphasize the cultural colonization of the Catholic church, but also reveals the frightening power of mythology in religious rhetoric and how that power has justified its own agenda to oppress. Cha’s progression goes from Mother’s exile due to Japanese occupation, Mother’s false salvation by the Catholic church to Mother’s daughter’s experience as a Korean American. If we recognize the historic involvement of U.S. Catholic missionaries with Korea’s liberation from Japanese occupation in 1945, we can recognize Cha’s indictment of how false that liberation actually was in Cha’s eyes. In a crucial line of the passage, she states, “Mother you are eighteen. It is 1940.” (Cha 48) Cha makes no subtle reference to the catalyzing role that institutionalized religion played in the post-colonizing of Korea by the U.S.

Specifically, Cha transitions from Eastern oppression to Western oppression by immediately following the third angelic being’s final pronouncement that Mother must become a cripple with the experience of a U.S./Korean transnational at the airport. By beginning the next passage with the pronoun “I” Cha evokes a paradigm shift that introduces a new subject other than Mother — the person addressing Mother. Cha now simply deploys the direct pronoun “I” and “you” as if to affectively draw her reader even deeper into her/Mother/subjective/objective epic historic journey: “I write. I write you. Daily. From here. …. You are here I raise the voice. Particles bits of sound and noise gathered pick up lint, dust. They might scatter and become invisible. Speech morsels. Broken chips of stones. Not hollow not empty”. (Cha 56) Cha’s text becomes increasingly equivocal in that she is not only possibly addressing “Mother”, Cha is also
possibly addressing the reader of her text as well. Using material imagery to emphasize the broken nature of communication and its material consequences, Cha evokes “Broken chips of stones” as the bits of speech that she attempts to offer her reader/”you”/”Mother”. She calls out her own equivocality when she continues by saying, “They think that you are one and the same direction addressed. The vast amiant [sic] sound hiss between the invisible line distance that this line connects the void and space surrounding entering and exiting.” (Cha 56) If we imagine the boundary between myth and reality as that which delineates the dream for subjectivity and the sociopolitical injustices that attend that dream, Cha describes this boundary as a multi-sensory experience [sound hiss] that connects our abjected desire [void] for national identity [space].

In other words, Cha’s text asserts that there cannot be a smooth coherent narrative of the subject because there is no identifiable unified subject. At the airport, “I”, perhaps Cha, a Korean American transnational, perhaps the historic “you” her mother, and/or perhaps “you” her reader, experience the disjointed reality of being multiply hailed as “American” as well as “not one of them”:

I have documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American. They give you an American Pass port. The United States of America. Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph. The other one. Their signature their seals. Their own image. And you learn the executive branch the legislative branch and the third. Justice. Judicial branch. It makes the difference. The rest is past. (Cha 56)

That “I” have documents, material evidence that proves U.S. citizenship, underscores the constructed nature of identity. Cha points out how easily replaceable identity is with a
photograph of “The other one” as well as its validation through signature, seal and image. She further deconstructs identity as cultural inculcation through education with what “you learn”; she twists that reference by referencing our education of “Justice” and how it ultimately indicts the lack thereof in the context of abstracted national identity.

On the other hand, Cha just as quickly critiques the problematic nature of representative identity through corporeal markers when she evokes the shock of rejection upon returning to Korea:

You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. All the time you understand what they are saying. But the papers give you away. Every ten feet. 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, classifications, any set of miscellaneous properly uniformed. …. Every ten feet they demand to know who and what you are, who is represented. The eyes gather towards the appropriate proof. Towards the face then again to the papers, when did you leave the country why did you leave this country why are you returning to the country. (Cha 56-7)

Here the abstracted and disembodied power of documentation “gives you away”; Cha is not so much concerned with the shock of being rejected by the officials but rather, the shock of the incommensurability between abstracted citizen and bodily-marked representation: “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.” (ibid) Cha limns the power that the nation-state has to delineate identity; she demonstrates the power of corporeal markers in order to highlight how much the transnational exceeds those boundaries: “Every ten feet they demand to know who and what you are, who is represented.” (ibid)
transnational troubles representation in that it highlights how notions of national identity fail to account for the vast histories of colonization, oppression, and persecution that underlie the bodily-marked transnational.

At the close of this epic historic poem, where Cha’s Mother/I/you returns “home”, the myth of the heroic subject is thoroughly deconstructed. Unlike Odysseus, her hero is not a conqueror returning to reclaim his home, but rather, her heroine is not even recognized thus denied interpellation altogether. Cha narrates the epic journey of the dispossessed, disenfranchised and de-corporealized such that she indicts the power of narrative itself as the technology that dispossesses, disenfranchises and de-corporealizes. Her epic journey then, ultimately seeks to showcase how mythology itself constitutes subjectivity. What is left for Cha is what constitutes the bare materiality of the body and moreover, the residual intensity of being reduced to that bare materiality — the affective moment for a Korean American transnational at an airport:

Composition of the body, taking into consideration from conception, the soil, seed, amount of light and water necessary, the geneology [sic]. Not a single word allowed to utter until the last station, they ask to check the baggage. You open your mouth half way. Near tears, nearly saying, I know you I know you, I have waited to see you for long this long. They check each article, question you on foreign articles, then dismiss you. (Cha 58)

To have waited to see you for long this long, Cha recalls an extensive history that started with “Mother” in Yong Jung, Manchuria, a journey travelled by mother to daughter, extended and sustained through the affective desires of a body that never belonged and ultimately never finds belonging. By locating the permeability between myth and reality,
Cha’s equivocal text becomes the tool that reaches towards a cyborg politics by envisioning agency located through affect rather than identity.

*Dictee* illuminates the mythology of the subject by revealing the boundaries that the Korean American transnational transgresses. It is a textual landscape that never denies its embodied investments yet persistently defies any particularized representation. By highlighting the boundaries that circumscribe our notions of language, truth and the subject, *Dictee* reveals how deeply we are all invested in believing in these myths — in fact, how inextricably tied to these myths we are. Yet, rather than the utopian notion of dispensing with these myths, as impossible as discarding our bodies and their attending technologies, both hegemonic and subjective, Cha’s equivocal narrative suggests a different way out of the logic of centralized power. Through affective means, *Dictee* conveys the autonomous phenomenon of the suffering from fragmentation. It does not deny that we desire coherence; it does not forget the crucial role in survival that desire plays.

Cha’s work inspires in that indeterminacy is not about losing one’s self in a sea of boundless difference but embracing the extremely particular nature of every bodily particulate in the sea. When Cha asks “mom” to lift her up to the window at the end of *Dictee*, again, the subject is lost to the object such that “mom” could be the child just as much as the narrator could be the child. In fact the child could be the window with the glass obscuring the view above: “Lift me up mom to the window the child looking above too high above her view the glass between some image a blur now darks and greys mere shadows lingering above her vision her head tilted back as far as it can go.” (Cha 179) In
a final narrative of melding subjectivities, Cha never loses sight of the fact that we strive to see, to view, to strive itself. Whether it is mother, the child, the window or the view, Cha departs from the logic of subject-object relations in favor of an affective path that locates an indeterminate subjectivity that does not ultimately elide intimate bodily connections but embraces them.
Chapter 4: Identity Simulation in *American Woman*

On February 4, 1974, nineteen-year-old Patricia Hearst is kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). On April 15, little over two months later, Hearst is videotaped wielding a semi-automatic carbine inside a San Francisco bank. According to the pbs.org timeline, on April 24, on recorded audio tape, Hearst adamantly asserts that she was never coerced to join the SLA and that “the idea of her being brainwashed is ridiculous.” (pbs.org) Perhaps part of the reason why the U.S. public was so fascinated in the Patty Hearst story was our dogged pursuit of the “real story” behind the iconic bereted victim-turned-rebel heiress. Susan Choi showcases this pursuit of the “real story” in her 2003 novel, *American Woman*. However, the story of the woman that Choi pursues is not of Hearst but of Wendy Yoshimura. On May 17, 1974, most of the SLA members are incinerated in an abandoned West L.A. apartment that police set on fire. Hearst escapes this fate and goes into hiding with who is now known to be her companion for a little over a year, Wendy Yoshimura. Known as “the lost year” when Hearst’s whereabouts were entirely unknown, the U.S. media never discovered Yoshimura enough to scandalize over her identity as it did with Hearst’s. Choi’s narrative takes up where the media never began. The story about a young heiress in the care of a slightly-older veteran leftist revolutionary explores more than the “real story” in that we never really learn anything more about Hearst than we did from the U.S. media storm in the 1970s.

Staying oddly faithful to the media coverage of the Patty Hearst story, it could be said that *American Woman* is more about our desires invested in pursuing the real story
than the fruition of any such pursuits. The Patty Hearst story, told through the eyes of the U.S. media, is itself a fascinating narrative that transgresses the boundary between reality and fiction such that the U.S. public had no idea what to make of Hearst’s innocence/criminality. Choi’s narrative of this narrative takes a “behind the scenes” look, but through the eyes of Jenny Shimada, the silent/invisible observer and caretaker of Pauline. However, considering the transgressive nature of the original media narrative itself, Choi’s fictionalized drama unfolds such that it reveals less about Hearst’s “true identity” so much as it reveals how unlikely such a thing as “true identity” exists. Choi’s narrative simulates a real story by producing a fictional landscape that mimics our perceptions of reality as well as how we construct that reality. In other words, by simulating the Patty Hearst media narrative, *American Woman* becomes a meta-narrative that showcases our desires invested in the making of identity. As much as the U.S. public wanted to find out who the real Patty Hearst was, Choi’s narrative reveals how much those desires actually shaped not only Patty Hearst but the U.S. public itself. In a parallel textuality, Choi’s narrative also reveals how much our desires not only shape our realities but ourselves as well.

By simulating the U.S. media narrative of Patty Hearst, Choi’s narrative produces a virtual landscape that reveals the limitations in representational identity politics. In her *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway advocates deploying simulation rather than representation as a tactic to deconstruct identity through the power of narrative:

> The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling the origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of
Western culture. We have all been colonized by those origin myths, with their longing for fulfillment in apocalypse.” (Haraway 176)

Whereas representation is founded on being faithful to an original truth, simulation is free to retell, reverse and displace at will in order to produce an entirely new narrative. Rather than construct her narrative as a dramatized non-fiction, Choi presents a work of fiction where she is free to produce the textual landscape for her novel as she so desires. Nonetheless, the resemblance to the Patty Hearst story is explicit; however by fictionalizing, hybridizing and simulating that resemblance, Choi narratively severs any allegiance to any possible original story.

It is this severance from any original story that supports Haraway’s notion of simulating identity over representing identity. When Haraway states that “[t]he cyborg is not subject to Foucault’s biopolitics; the cyborg simulates politics, a much more potent field of operations” (Haraway 164), she recognizes how simulation politics does not recapitulate the same kind of centralizing logic of power that representation politics is susceptible to. Foucault’s biopolitics describes the technologies of oppression that the nation-state has exerted over marked bodies in the guise of population hygiene. One step away from eugenics, biopolitics organizes the population under the logic of caring for the population such that a body is no longer an individual’s right but that one body is in the rightful care of everyone else. In this way, hegemonic power succeeds in representing the needs of a body such that its oppression of that body is seemingly justified. For biopolitics to continue, we must remain complicit to the myth that truth is a representable phenomenon and that there lies an originary truth for all bodies. Representational politics of identity for marked bodies recapitulate this logic by perpetuating the myth that certain
bodies can represent a particular originary truth. Relying on the body as image, such a politics forces us to commit to a pre-coded narrative that applies to certain multiple bodies. In both cases of the nation-state as well as minority politics, representational politics ultimately substantiates the kind of boundaries that centralize and marginalize.

A simulational politics of identity based on the logic of the cyborg resists the centralization of power in that it rejects the myth of any originary truth. Instead, the simulation politics of the cyborg is about producing its own truths based on the recognition and transgression of the boundaries that sustain hegemonic mythologies about truth and the body. According to Haraway, the body is no longer a unified, coherent and pure entity. Subsequently, to construct our identities based on such notions of clarity and purity only serve to sustain our complicit subservience to an informatics of domination through the hegemonic technologization of our bodies. In order to escape these systems of oppression, the cyborg offers its own technologization of the body such that we embrace the hybrid conditions of our bodies and the identities we consciously construct around them. Simulating identity, then, is about recognizing that there is no original story, and that the real story is the story that is unfolding right in front of us. Identity cannot be represented nor can it be discovered. Rather, identity unravels experientially such that it is recognized processually as we transgress across boundaries that reveal the constructed conditions of subjectivity. Haraway’s cyborg articulates the profound stakes in which such an alternate politics of identity are invested in when she states: “The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination.” (Haraway 151)
The power behind Choi’s narrative is that it participates in this border war by contesting the territories of production, reproduction and imagination through a tactic of meta-narrativizing the U.S. media narrative of Patty Hearst. By narrativizing an already unstable narrative in order to supposedly get to the “real story”, Choi’s story not only reveals the impossibility of this task; more importantly, it refocuses on the task of trying to figure out why this is such a difficult task. Fictionalizing her meta-narrative, then, creates an entirely new space to explore our desires and investments in the linkages between identity and an original story. In other words, by highlighting how much we desire to recognize the “real story” of Patty Hearst, Choi’s narrative demonstrates how little that “real story” exists or even matters once we recognize that desire itself.

*American Woman* reveals how Asian American studies can explore identity simulation as a process of evolved interpretations that emerge from Choi’s meta-narrative. Rather than investigate how *American Woman* appropriately represents Asian American identity politics, this chapter seeks to discover how Asian American identity politics might produce new interpretations of identity from the simulations of identity in *American Woman*.

In his essay “Realer than Real”, Brian Massumi differentiates simulation from representation by hailing Deleuze and Guattari’s work on simulation: “It is that masked difference, not the manifest resemblance, that produces the effect of uncanniness so often associated with the simulacrum. A copy is made in order to stand in for its model. A simulacrum has a different agenda, it enters different circuits. (Massumi, *http://www.anu.edu*) Readjusting our perception of simulation, Massumi points out that
it is actually the contrast of what we expected from an original model that marks simulacra, and not its familiarity with our expectations. Concurrently, it is not what we recognize in the Patty Hearst story that asserts its own identity politics in Choi’s novel, it is its distinct contradictions in what we expected that gives cause to take note and examine. Furthermore, Massumi emphasizes that what is crucial to examine in simulation is its processual aspects, not visual: “The process of its production, its inner dynamism, is entirely different from that of its supposed model; its resemblance to it is merely a surface effect, an illusion.” (ibid) It is in this way that I seek to establish that Choi’s narrative as the kind of identity simulation that departs from Asian American representational politics. By examining how her narrative negotiates the terrain of the actual (as constructed through the 1974 media storm) and the virtual (what Choi produces as hybrid of media facts and fiction), I seek to recognize emergent evolved interpretations of Asian American identity.

By locating Choi’s narrative in the terrain of the virtual, I seek to displace what we expected to be real into a new formulation of what we might imagine as real. For is this not what narrative-making is all about? Story-writers create narratives such that it simulates a particular writer’s reality of life. The art of literature, then, lies in its power to convey a particular intensity of life. In the realm between writer and life, there lies the virtual. In terms of Asian American literary studies, Asian American narratives convey the lived experiences of racialized and marginalized bodies; these narratives simulate Asian American identities in that they organize, mutate and evolve to affectively convey what it is to be Asian American. It is crucial to emphasize how vastly different
simulating Asian American identity is from representing Asian American identity. In the simulation of identity, Asian American narratives will remind us of the absence of identity in the term “Asian American” rather than asserting some kind of myth of autobiographical truth. Kandice Chuh propounds on this absence of identity when she states:

It is because the term [Asian American] is fundamentally undecidable and yet has material effectivity that critical investigation is warranted. It is in other words the absence of identity, the a priori meaninglessness of “Asian American,” that collectivises Asian American studies. Undecidability rather than identity provides the grounds for unity, and identifying and contesting the forces that control intelligibility, that affiliate meanings, emerge as crucial tasks for Asian American studies. (Chuh 82-3)

Choi’s narrative dips into the actual and virtual landscapes of Asian American identity such that it disallows the kind of decidable representations of identity that sediments the term “Asian American”. On multiple levels, Choi deploys this undecidability in her text by constantly thwarting our identifications of her characters, her stories, as well as herself as author.

A particularly interesting way that Choi thwarts identification is by choosing to portray the life of a Japanese American woman in her novel. Being of Jewish American and Korean American parentage, Choi could be expected to limit herself to writing within her representational identifications. Instead, Choi clearly feels unencumbered to stay faithful to any such circumscriptions. In this way we see how Choi indeed deploys undecidability such that identity subordinates to the processes of subjectification and the material conditions that sustain those processes. Not only does Choi’s narrative simulate the Patty Hearst story such that processes of identification emerge to reveal a new politics
of identity, it also simulates Japanese American subjectivity in ways that provide the
grounds for more unity, intelligibility and coalition for Asian American identity politics.
By deploying undecidability even from the standpoint of her own positionality, Choi
demonstrates the power of identity simulation in that her novel encourages us to accept
what we do not know to be answered with what her narrative provides. Against the urges
to found our identificatory politics on the representations we are familiar with, Choi
creates a virtual narrative that borrows from reality just as much as it asks us to borrow
from fiction in order to imagine a new conception of identity.

The connection between identity simulation and virtual narrative can be found in
Hayles’s comment on literature as simulation in her text, My Mother Was a Computer:
Digital Subjects and Literary Texts: “…literature functions more like simulations than do
other discursive forms, because like computer simulations such as Karl Sims’s “Evolved
Virtual Creatures”, literary texts create imaginary worlds populated by creatures that we
can (mis)take for beings like ourselves. (Hayles 6) Likening literature with computer
simulations, Hayles points out how narratives can create creatures that we mistake for
ourselves — and is this not identity? Additionally, Massumi correlates the vital role that
imagination plays in the world of virtuality when he states: “Imagination is the mode of
thought most precisely suited to the differentiating vagueness of the virtual.” (Massumi
134) For Massumi, imagination is key because it sparks virtuality; virtuality is key
because it triggers emergence: “Concepts of the virtual in itself are important only to the
extent to which they contribute to a pragmatic understanding of emergence, to the extent
to which they enable triggerings of change (induce the new). It is the edge of virtual,
where it leaks into actual, that counts. For that seeping edge is where potential, actually, is found.” (Massumi 43) Massumi limns the boundary that lies between the virtual and the actual as the locus where emergence occurs. It is this locus where Choi’s narrative simulates identity. *American Woman* is a narrative wrought from the paradigm of actuality to create a virtual narrative that leaks into our personal consciousness as political awareness.

The affective power behind this sort of virtual narrative lies in our apprehension of what we already know and what we desire to discover. Choi clearly founds much of her narrative on the easily-recognized media coverage of the Patty Hearst case. But instead of narrating a non-fictional account that would replicate the U.S. media coverage of the privileged “American princess”, Choi rejects this paradigm for one that favors the barely known Asian American woman known to have accompanied Hearst in their final year in hiding, Wendy Yoshimura. Thus, despite her choice to use the Patty Hearst case as a platform for her narrative, Choi places her Japanese American protagonist, Jenny Shimada, center stage. In a way, Choi bait-and-switches her readers by packaging a story about an American princess — someone we visualize to be white and privileged — and instead offers us the unheard story of someone who is neither white nor privileged. Subsequently, Choi’s title to her novel patently points to her own bait-and-switch narrative tactic. What we are left to wonder is how much of this story is “true” and/or “authentic”?

Even the title of Choi’s novel, *American Woman*, begs the question: which American woman is this novel about? Is it about Pauline/Patty Hearst? Jenny
Shimada/Wendy Yoshimura? American women in general? Susan Choi, the author herself? A case could be made for each of these identities. I would like to argue for all of the above. By constructing a title composed of two broadly-identifying labels that encompass a wide variety of bodies, Choi’s title takes on a multiple-referentiality that challenges us to examine more closely what we think “American” means as well as who we think “women” are. Who does this title identify? By choosing two terms that have historically been such contentious territories, *American Woman* becomes larger than the narrative it ensconces. From the billionaire media-mogul grandfather of Pauline to Juan to Jenny’s father, Choi presents an array of “Americannesses” that ranges from racist to rebel to recluse. Likewise, from her sexual initiation into the leftist revolution by her boyfriend, William, to her final journey to Manzanar with her father, Jenny’s experiences illustrate the politically fraught spaces of being “woman”. Repeatedly transgressing the boundaries of subjectivity by bombarding her characters with one perspective identification with another, Choi persistently forecloses any possibility of a clearly defined “American” or “woman”. Even Jenny’s own character arc is not a singular trajectory in that Jenny is simultaneously a mysterious, under-the-radar, seasoned revolutionary as well as a repressed Japanese American girl being orientalized and manipulated for her “nimble” fingers and “exotic” sexuality. Thus we see how Choi’s title alone deploys Chuh’s notion of subjectlessness when Chuh states:

Subjectlessness as a discursive ground for Asian American studies can … help to identify and trace the shifting positionalities and complicated terrains of U.S. American culture and politics articulated to a globalized frame, by opening up the field to account for practices of subjectivity that might not be immediately visible within, for example, a nation-based
representational grid, or one that emphasizes racialization to the occlusion of other processes of subjectification. (Chuh 11)

In other words, Choi’s title, *American Woman*, points to the “shifting positionalities and complicated terrains” involved with the two terms “American” and “woman”. Choi’s narrative correlates with Chuh’s suggestion in that it opens up its story to account for subjectivities that are not immediately representable. Furthermore, by tackling both the terms “American” and “woman”, Choi’s narrative succeeds in approaching the nuanced task of simulating identities without over-determining the processes of “racialization to the occlusion of other processes of subjectification” (ibid).

Finally, Choi’s text not only transgresses boundaries of narrative and subjectivity, it also transgresses the boundaries of power as well. In a narrative that revolves around the Stockholm Syndrome complex, Choi applies the notion of undecidability to our relationship with power. In a narrative that revolves around the Stockholm Syndrome complex, Choi focuses on the notion of undecidability and its relationship to power. Also known as “capture-bonding”, Stockholm Syndrome is about the transgressed boundary between “captor” and “captive” such that the captive psychologically negotiates for survival by realigning with the captor, for all appearances, both emotionally and cognitively. In *American Woman*, Choi’s account not only replays the Patty Hearst case in her narrative of Pauline, Choi subversively underlies her narrative of Jenny with many symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome. Jenny’s romantic relationship with William is acutely undermined by a subtext that reveals the intense level of pleasure William (clearly a privileged white male) derives from Jenny’s “orientalness”. Choi’s language suspends William as an image of god-like detachment that uncomfortably belies Jenny’s
hero-worship of an ideology rather than a romance. In all the intrigue of a spy drama, it is key to note that the fugitives in this novel are not always only running from state power. Jenny hides from Frazer — not due to his revolutionary connections, but due to the overbearing sexual oppression he clumsily exerts on her. Later, Jenny and Pauline are not so much running away from the law (they move to San Francisco in fact) but rather from Juan, Yvonne and Frazer (again).

The key role that Stockholm Syndrome symptoms play in Choi’s narrative is to reveal how mutable the boundaries of power really are, as well as how much more we have to learn where these boundaries are located. In imagining these boundaries to exist in spaces other than the sociopolitical constructs that we have so far subscribed to, Choi’s narrative suggests a powerful mobility in power that might begin more between the intimate connections between two humans than in the larger scope of many humans. In other words, simulation identity politics begins with examining power in one or two bodies before making blanket statements about a body politic. By founding such a notion of power in the framework of a simulational model of identity politics, we might better locate the process and mobility of power in such a way that representational identity politics cannot.

Ultimately, the irony of interchangeable captor/captive subjectivities plays out when Pauline is finally found by the authorities and implicates Jenny as her captor. Feeling that she has protected Pauline from the beginning, Jenny is stunned by Pauline’s betrayal. Jenny is unable to comprehend this level of callousness from Pauline in that she has opened up her vulnerabilities to Pauline; in essence, emotionally, Jenny is Pauline’s
captive. In addition to the complex power relations between herself and Pauline, Jenny’s final revelations on power are deeply imbricated with the sociopolitical constructs of class and race. Amidst the intensely emotional pain of personal betrayal, Jenny begins to recognize the boundaries of power that she must transgress in order to find peace that she will never know the “real story” behind Pauline. Choi’s narrative investigates the boundaries that circumscribe narrative, subjectivity and power such that it compellingly urges us to ask ourselves how invested we are in assuming the captive position and how incognizant we might be of being the captor.

I. Transgressive Narrative: Dramatic Nonfiction as Virtual Reality

If we contemplate how narrative-making is an art that simulates identity, we might better appreciate the field of literary scholarship — especially if we better understand the products of simulating identity versus the consequences of representing identity. Jean Baudrillard observes that our culture of simulation has become wholly reliant on signifiers that have replaced “reality” with “hyperreality”. Massumi critiques Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality as a perception that leaves us in a sea of endlessly floating signifiers where “[m]eaning has imploded” (Massumi, http://www.anu.edu.au). Massumi asks, “But do we really have no other choice than being a naïve realist or being a sponge?” (ibid) Instead, Massumi advocates Deleuze’s notion of simulacra as an alternative to “being a sponge”:

The thrust of the process is not to become an equivalent of the “model” but to turn against it and its world in order to open a new space for the simulacrum’s own mad proliferation. The simulacrum affirms its own
difference. It is not an implosion, but a differentiation; it is an index not of absolute proximity, but of galactic distances. (ibid)

Promulgating Deleuzian simulacra, Massumi rejects Baudrillard’s endless sea of signifiers on the grounds that it is too passive a vision of the world. Massumi believes that Deleuze’s figuration of simulacra lends the term more potency in that the sea of signifiers we live in is not of endlessly nondiscriminate labels, but rather, each singular signifier is a distinction unto its own. It is not about recognizing that we (referent to things as well as persons) are all really the same, it is rather about recognizing that we are all really so incredibly different.

In other words, a postmodern literary simulation of life can be indicative of the turn that envisions potential political change. Using Massumi’s interpretation of Deleuzian simulacra, I investigate how Choi simulates identity in her novel *American Woman* by transgressing the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. By imbricating her story with non-fictional information with fictive narrative, Choi highlights the permeability between what we perceive to be non-fiction and fiction in order recognize our invested expectations in assimilation rather than difference. She depicts how despite the U.S. media’s profound investment in revealing the “true” Pauline, not even Pauline nor Jenny seem to know who this “true” Pauline is. On the other hand, Choi showcases the media’s absolute disinterest in Jenny; her narrative emphasizes this fact by acutely focusing on Jenny’s interior landscape. In this way, Choi creates a paradoxical narrative that deconstructs identity by thwarting our expectations of “discovering” any “true” Pauline except through Jenny. In other words, Choi answers the real-life question of Patty Hearst’s identity as answerable only through the fictive framework of Wendy
Yoshimura’s silenced narrative. In this way, Choi’ narrative reveals how identity is not found in the assimilation of our desires but rather the differences that we tend to overlook. Choi chooses to explore identity through the process of examining the simulacra of U.S. media as commensurable to the simulacra of fiction.

Choi counterposes Pauline’s narrative with Jenny’s narrative such that their initial identities sharply contrast. Despite the prior body of publicized information on Pauline’s character before the novel even begins, Pauline’s narrative is murky. Always in the third-person objective, Choi remains distant from Pauline’s interior landscape and never feigns to understand it or analyze it. Narratively speaking, Choi treats Pauline’s character development as a non-fictional drama to be observed and not interacted with. In contrast, Jenny’s narrative is copiously-detailed; always in third-person subjective, Choi delves into Jenny’s thoughts and feelings as if to over-compensate for the media’s elision of Wendy Yoshimura’s existence. Juxtaposing these narratives, Choi makes a meta-narrative statement about how the personal and the political collide and affect the other. By “affect” I underscore the affective means by which narrative-making achieves its power to assert identity. By personal and political, I refer to the intensely personal narrative of Jenny in contrast to the heavily “fact”-imbricated political narrative of Pauline. Choi’s deployment of these contrasting styles of narrative suggests that simulating identity constitutes both the personal and the political. Not only does Choi’s text imply that the personal might not be so subjective and the political might not be so objective, it reveals how fabricated personal identities can materially affect a nation as well as how political identities can profoundly affect the individual.
In non-fiction such as autobiography, the author asserts a singularly particularized identity, whereas in fiction the author invites readers to participate in the illusion of a multiplicity of identities often orchestrated in the perspective of an omniscient observer. It is interesting how identity asserted in autobiography is more easily “authenticated” than the identities a fiction-writer strives to “authenticate” through the lens of suspended disbelief. Choi’s tactic to narrativize events embedded in the lived realities of Patty Hearst and Wendy Yoshimura puts her readers in a space that forces her readers to negotiate the boundary that separates the facile acceptance of autobiographical identity versus the suspension of one’s disbelief that comes with fiction. It is this negotiation where I locate the affective power behind Choi’s virtual narrative or what can also be understood as her narrative simulation of identity. By developing such a subjectively-narrated character as Jenny against an objectively-narrated character as Pauline, Choi simulates the boundary that lies between the individual and the state. If Jenny appears to represent individual subjectivity and Pauline stands for all the U.S. public media that circumscribes the subject, Choi’s text reveals how that boundary is ineluctably transgressed in its negotiations with power.

Somewhere between the realms of the private and the public, Choi’s narrative mines the virtual landscape in a simulation of identities such that it begs the question: how “real” is this simulation? Choi’s narrative unfolds along a tightrope of media “facts” and internal dialogues that ultimately reveal how narrativized and constructed the media “facts” already were. Jenny gets to know Pauline over the radio long before she meets her through Pauline’s pre-recorded conversations through the U.S. media. However,
even this medium is undercut in that we do not know if Pauline is being genuinely honest — with the public, her captors, her family members, or even herself: “There was a tape with the victim’s voice on it. … The victim detailed — clearly reading, her voice strangely girlish yet dull — the demand….” (Choi 81) Through Jenny’s ears, we struggle to hear the hints that reveal “the real story”. Evolving from a girl “clearly reading”, Choi describes Pauline’s second recording: “But the girl’s nervousness seemed to alternate now with a different, peeved tone. …. She had a script, but she seemed to be straying from it.” (Choi 85) Narrating the progression of Pauline’s explicit change of heart as told to an entire nation, Choi’s narrative becomes a metonymy of simulations both thematically as well as theoretically.

Choi’s narrative simulates Asian American identity such that it produces a textual landscape revealing the indeterminate nature not only of Jenny Shimada but of Asian American subjectivity in general. Moreover, positing a simulation within a simulation, Choi’s plot incorporates the actual simulation event of Patty Hearst simulating the identity of her captors through the narrative of Pauline. This is not to say that Choi’s narrative definitively defines Pauline/Hearst’s Stockholm Syndrome conversion as a “fake”. Quite pointedly the converse in that Choi’s narrative demonstrates the very tangible affective force produced through simulational identity tactics. Choi’s language describing Pauline’s very public communiqués with the U.S. public reveals the affective power behind simulation — in the Deleuzian sense of the word — in that it affirms its own differences.
Whether we assess Pauline’s simulation in the eyes of the public sympathetic to Pauline’s class standing or whether we view it through the eyes of her fellow revolutionaries, it is Pauline’s differences that emerge to the foreground. From Jenny’s employer’s point of view, Pauline’s upper-class background would never allow such a girl to succumb to the demeaning politics of lowly rabble-rousers. Dolly, an anachronism from the 1950s version of upper-crust indifference to today’s political awarenesses, is an elderly woman who can only see Pauline’s stark difference in class-standing from her captors. Listening to the radio, Dolly is horrified when she hears Pauline’s final communiqué: “My decision is made: I will stay with these comrades forever, because theirs is the only just battle there is. They are my family. My old family did not care for me; this new family does. My old family did not care for the poor; this new family does.” (Choi 87) Dolly’s unhesitant response is: “Brainwashed” (Choi 88). When Jenny challenges Dolly’s resolute assessment, Choi’s narrative emphasizes the absolute demarcation in Dolly’s mind between those with such lowly politics and those who have the upper-class sensibility to recognize such low thinking:

“How do you know?” Jenny said. “How do you know that she doesn’t agree with them?”

“Oh, please,” Dolly said, with a voice full of scorn for the people that would have to be agreed with. “Not a girl from a family like that. Not a girl like her.” (Choi 88)

Choi’s narrative even portrays the U.S. media to publically underscore the impossibility of Pauline being in any true alignment with her captors: “The post-tape commentary began, and even the newsmen made no effort to hide their revulsion. It made you
disgusted one said, to imagine the tortures the poor girl had endured, to say something like that.” (Choi 87)

On the other hand, Pauline’s captors also never let Pauline forget her differences from them even when they have ambivalently accepted her as a part of their group. Juan and Yvonne, the only co-survivors with Pauline after the L.A. hideout was burned to the ground with its members within, grudgingly accept Pauline into their union on the condition that she accept the position of perpetual subordinate based on the grounds that she comes from a privileged background. Although the two are not brown, as Juan admits, “at least we’re blue-collar.” (Choi 140). Deliberately eliding the fact that he and Yvonne are also white, Juan points out the irreconcilable difference in Pauline from being legitimately othered enough to authentically participate in a revolutionary politics:

She knows how important she is. The Publicity Princess. But she’s still got to learn that there’s no substitute for a Third World perspective like yours [Jenny’s]. Brown, yellow, black, red: those are four things she’ll never be. And she isn’t just white, she’s a filthy rich white. …. Like I tell her, she can’t kill what she is. She can only atone.” (ibid)

Nonetheless, Juan and Yvonne accept Pauline as a trusted comrade. Choi’s narrative limns how Pauline’s simulation successfully propagates an identity such that she survives her circumstances. Furthermore, it is clear that Pauline’s conversion to the group never elevates her to any status equivalent to the group for Pauline could never replicate the revolutionary’s needs that demand the conviction to their cause. Instead, Pauline’s conversion serves the groups’ purpose of allowing them to punish the differences in Pauline that have come to represent all that is privileged, classed and therefore deserving
retribution. As long as Pauline agrees to this status of marked difference, her simulation propagates her deviant identity as social rebel.

Yet Choi’s narrative disallows the convenient conclusion that Pauline’s conversion is a ruse to deceive her captors. Choi’s narrative never explicitly expresses the psychological negotiations in Pauline’s head that explain her passionate pursuit of being accepted into her group. However, particularly apparent in the increasing bonding between Pauline and Jenny, Choi’s narrative offers increasingly poignant hints that Pauline’s simulation is not fueled by the desire to assimilate but rather by the fear of being differentiated and excluded. When Pauline presents Jenny with a stack of tabloid clippings that speculate on Pauline’s dormant social deviancy previous to the kidnapping, Pauline is ultimately disappointed when Jenny tenuously responds by saying what she thinks Pauline wants to hear: “You must be glad to have finally found comrades who share your same views.” (Choi 175) Jenny notices Pauline’s disappointment and wonders what it is that Jenny has failed to say or not say that Pauline wants to hear. Perhaps what Jenny is unable to recognize is Pauline’s desire to connect rather than assimilate. Where Jenny’s response is generalized and impersonal, Pauline is desperate for intimate connection — the kind of connection that ensures that Jenny will not abandon her.

It is in this way that Choi’s narrative demonstrates the affective power in simulation in that it is Pauline’s desire to create connection that empowers her simulational identity rather than the espousing of any proper political rhetoric. We see how Pauline’s narrative dips into her own past as constructed by tabloid clippings — a
medium that is yet another amalgam of fact and fiction — along with her desires in order to sustain her simulation of identity. Choi’s narrative mimicks the affective power behind tabloids in that it dips into the actual and augments itself with the virtual. In other words, not only is Choi’s literal textual landscape located in the space between fact and fiction, the plot itself incorporates a plethora of virtual narratives such that we begin to observe the metonymic nature of indeterminate identity. However unlike Baudrillard’s hyperreality where identity is hopelessly obscured and lost, Jenny and Pauline are not lost due to the palpable desire each conveys amidst this metonymy of virtual narratives. By participating in the actual and the virtual, Choi’s narrative induces a new kind of identity construction that focuses on its power to move through the intensity of affect. Although desire itself is not affect but effect, it is an indicator that movement is happening, as Massumi states: “Desire is the condition of evolution.” (Massumi 123) Subsequently, one might say that desire is the manifestation of a virtual narrative that successfully simulates identity.

Hence it is not the conclusions of “who” Pauline and Jenny generate that matters so much as it is the processes that Choi’s virtual narrative reveals in the simulating of identities. In her observation of Sim’s evolved virtual creatures, Hayles states:

The conjunction of processes through which we come to narrativize such images clearly shows that the meaning of the simulation emerges from a dynamic interaction between the creator, the virtual worlds (and the real worlds on which its physics is modeled), the creatures, the computer running the programs, and (in the case of visualizations) the viewer watching the creatures cavort. (Hayles 196)

In this case, the creator and the virtual worlds are Choi and her virtual narrative (constructed from a real world media narrative model); her creatures, the computer and
the viewers are her characters, her novel and her readers. Hayles’ observation aptly applies here in that Choi’s narrative indeed reveals the *processes* by which meaning emerges from the dynamic interactions of all of the participants mentioned. In other words, meaning is invested in the process of narrativizing rather than the image of the narrative.

By relinquishing our need to identify Pauline’s singular subjectivity, we can step back and recognize the particularized subjects in Choi’s narrative that collectively work to deconstruct subjectivity altogether. Showcasing Pauline’s identity simulation ultimately functions to reflect Jenny Shimada’s narrative. If we accept that Pauline’s narrative works to reveal her own transgressions between dis/enfranchisement from the vantage point of the privileged, Jenny’s narrative works from the opposite direction. Whereas Pauline’s story is incontrovertibly in the public forum, Jenny’s is not: “Jenny’s nobody’s story.” (Choi 319) The most apparent difference in Choi’s narrative from the 1974 U.S. media coverage is that her story centers on Jenny — an entirely silenced narrative to the U.S. public. Both women struggle to assert their identities within the “margins” of the Left movement. However both women are doubly marginalized in that the radical Leftists of Choi’s novel clearly recapitulate patriarchy and racism even as they decry inequality and exploitation. Pauline’s and Jenny’s narratives oppose each other to highlight the various boundaries that separate as well as circumscribe the two women.

By opposing narratives, I refer to Choi’s subjective narrative for Jenny and her objective narrative for Pauline. Each narrative defines each character such that the chasm between the two appears to be great. By manipulating her narrative styles, Choi alienates
Pauline while drawing Jenny close to the reader. On the other hand, as the novel progresses, Choi draws the two together such that the boundaries that seemingly contain and separate these women merge and coalesce in unexpected ways. Despite Pauline’s seemingly fragmented identity, Choi ultimately draws together bits and pieces of the girl to conclude a startling paradox, that Pauline’s fragmented identity is just an illusion: “More than anything else Pauline would come to symbolize the immutableness of her class.” (Choi 354) Pauline’s identity is immutable in that regardless of her psychological turmoil and the contortions of her survival instinct, her socioeconomic position predetermines her fate. We come to recognize this immutability through Jenny’s eyes. Embedded in Jenny’s reflections as she sits in jail, the apex of this narrative is when Jenny realizes that ultimately, she does not share the same ontological space with Pauline. In other words, Pauline’s betrayal of helps Jenny realize they were never on the same page, or as Jenny alludes, they were not sharing the same script. In her dream longing for Pauline, Jenny hears Pauline say: “Jenny, why do you always say ‘money’? We never called it that, don’t you remember? We always called money ‘bread.’ That’s the word that we used.” (Choi 360) As Jenny’s heart is breaking from Pauline’s betrayal, Jenny begins to see that despite their brief idyllic period of shared life, in the end, money, power and class separate the two irrevocably.

Choi utilizes Jenny’s subjective narrative to create a point of view that highlights the immutability of privilege as well as the instability of denied privilege. More importantly however, Choi reveals how constructed both these perceptions are. Although Pauline’s fate appears incontrovertibly tipped towards fortune and security, Choi makes
sure to depict the pathetic deterioration of Miss Dolly. A depressing Miss Havisham, widowed and abandoned by the high-minded racist ideals of the past, Choi simultaneously illustrates an immutable ideology of privilege and places it in the midst of a decrepit mansion that nobody even wants to see much less pay to see. Choi dismantles class and money in order to reveal how the identity of class is not the same as the identity of money. Choi constructs a narrative around Pauline as classed and immutably stable in its distance and objectivity. However, viewed through the subjective and intimate lens of Jenny’s point of view, we are able to recognize the fissures and fragments of both Pauline’s psyche as well the crumbling infrastructure of Dolly’s home and finances.

Interestingly, Choi depicts these revelations to come to Jenny as she sits in her jail cell awaiting her own fate. Although Choi has consistently devoted a stable and intimate interior narrative for Jenny, it is here that Choi deconstructs Jenny. Jenny literally falls apart as she discovers that Pauline has betrayed their friendship; Jenny recognizes the mutability of her own script as opposed to Pauline’s. Pondering both her and Pauline’s unknown futures, Jenny realizes that in the face of “infinite revisions” being possible, it is she who will be “revised” rather than Pauline:

No one would be charged with Mr. Morton’s murder, and this strange way in which punishments never seemed to coincide with their crimes, in which everything was so out of sync, in which there was such a freight of confusion and pain left hovering and unseen, would make it seem to Jenny, in the least welcome way, that infinite revisions were possible now. Although even at the height of their friendship Jenny somehow might have known she was destined to be so revised, to be described by Pauline as “nicer than most of the people I met — but still a terrorist I lived in fear of.” (Choi 355-6)
Jenny’s epiphany reflects an underlying possibility that social inequity and injustice are constitutive of the mutability of identity. In other words, it is in the margins of power where change is most likely to emerge. Pauline’s words neatly conflate Jenny into the model minority where underneath, lurks the yellow peril that threatens to topple white power. However, Pauline’s words more crucially indicate a misappropriated power that race politics has lent to social revolution. Rather than conclude that the power to revise remains in the hands of the empowered, Jenny realizes that she herself was a key agent in the revising of her own narrative:

Jenny had to acknowledge that even Pauline’s stark betrayal of her had its element of cooperativeness, with Jenny. Jenny had lied, and called herself a captor, a cruel prison-keeper, for the sake of Pauline, and Pauline’s response just conformed to that fiction. Even the ax falling, severing them, made a chime of harmonious lies. (Choi 356)

This is not to say that Jenny was somehow in the space of centralized power and Jenny deliberately made decisions to keep herself oppressed. Jenny comes to peace in her jail cell when she recognizes that she was complicit in sustaining the rhetoric of captor and prisoner “for the sake of Pauline” (ibid). Or perhaps, another way to observe Jenny’s peace with Pauline was that she did it for the sake of their “lost year” where the two woman share a space of shared boundaries and simulated identities. Jenny forgives Pauline because she recognizes an agency located in their “perfect comradeship” shared during their lost year:

Jenny forgave Pauline’s lie, because she thought it revealed a rare truth about Pauline’s desires. And because Jenny knew, the true bond with a comrade was what she herself craved most of all. It was what, even now, some submerged stubborn part of her feels she had gained, for a time. A perfect comradeship, unlike the farce that the cadre had lived. (Choi 352)
In other words, the connectivity that arises between Jenny and Pauline is the manifestation of each woman’s desires; it is the affective force behind coalescing affinities that Haraway’s cyborgs can accomplish.

From misguided young revolutionaries to Jenny’s well-intentions herself, Choi’s virtual narrative illustrates how representation fails to negotiate power differentials. By contrasting the media narrative of Patty Hearst with a virtual narrative that displaces the image for processes of connectivity, *American Woman* produces a simulation of identities where affect eclipses the ideological. Jenny’s reflections reveal this phenomenon when she realizes that what first began as a private wound between the two women would “seem increasingly” to take on the illusion of ideological conflict instead: “And so the rift she had felt open up between herself and Pauline, which at first seemed entirely intimate, a rift between two individual persons, would come to seem increasingly social, inevitable and ordained.” (Choi 355) Choi explicitly reguides her readers to read her narratives as they are between two individuals within the realm of virtual simulations of identities rather than the “social, inevitable and ordained” rifts of power that we are so well-trained to seek and locate. Massumi observes, “Affect holds a key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology.” (Massumi 42) In so doing, we might reframe ways of investigating rifts of power outside of the paradigm of ideology in order to recognize a more powerful mode of inducing change in the affective through the virtual. Choi’s virtual narrative offers a simulation of identities that underscores how powerful affect and desire are in the paradigm of sociopolitical change.
II. Transgressive Subjectivity: Relinquishing the Original Model

If we are to seek and locate new derivatives of empowerment, Haraway’s suggestion to simulate identity points us away from the representational grid that Choi narratively critiques in her novel. Choi’s title, *American Woman* implicates two manifest loci where Choi contests the notions of identity and power: race and gender. Representation relies on the authenticity of an original model. Simulation, on the other hand, implies that there is no need for an original model. In simulation, authenticity arises from the evolved interpretations emergent of the process of simulation. Choi simulates race and gender identity such that her virtual narrative limns the problems in searching for authenticity that stems from an original model. While simultaneously narrating the failures in the representational politics of her Leftist revolutionaries, Choi narratively simulates identity through an assemblage of these very characters. In other words, Choi’s narrative functions on multiple levels; whereas her plot development scathingly critiques the blind-sightedness of her well-meaning revolutionaries, she develops her characters such that they deconstruct the very identities they propound to be representing.

Pauline’s captors as well as the general Leftist revolutionary movement that Choi amorphously describes, all espouse the rhetoric of socioeconomic equity and political justice. Ironically, nearly all of these revolutionaries attempting to represent the marginalized and “colored” consciousness are white. Almost to parodic levels, Choi depicts how such representation sadly fails, mainly because racially unmarked individuals trying to represent racially marked individuals lacks an “authenticity” that
traces back to an original model. Ultimately, the group’s representational politics is founded on an empty ideology where there is no history, no materiality and no lived insight into what the group is trying to represent. Positive change cannot emerge from the group’s efforts as there is no connectivity to history, materiality and lived insight within the group. In Juan and Jenny’s conversation over Jenny’s skin color, Choi depicts Juan’s complete inability to bypass his objectification of race. When he tells Jenny, “All I’m saying … is your skin is a privilege. Your Third World perspective’s a privilege.” (Choi 140), Choi parodies Juan’s philosophy by ironically turning the point of his so-called revolutionary politics in contradiction of himself. Juan claims that he is a defender of the under-privileged because he recognizes the power of the (non-)color of his skin: “Y and I are from the Midwest, and I’m not saying our town wasn’t racist, or that we don’t have a taint that we’ll never repair.” (ibid) Yet he obtusely tells Jenny that she is the one privileged.

Juan’s words reveal an objectification of race that exchanges material reality with the representation of skin color. Juan automatically assumes Jenny’s “Third World perspective”, and when she informs him that she’s from California, his response is still, “You’d make an exceptional leader” (ibid) — a statement solely based on his observation of her skin color. For Juan, Jenny’s lived experience is irrelevant to the power invested in her skin color. When Jenny points out that it’s wrong for Juan to condemn Pauline for her skin color, he denies that he is racist on the grounds that he intensely desires to be black: “You can’t say that I’m racist, … I’ve always wished I was black. Not just wished it, but willed it. If any black man came to me and said Change places with me —
regardless of if he was poor, or in prison, or was suffering in ten different ways, I would do it without thinking twice.” (Choi 141) With Juan’s speech that patently blinds itself to every other existential status other than skin color, Choi mocks the kind of misguided 1970s representational race politics that failed to recognize its own underlying savior complex. Juan articulates a fervent desire to be black but is indifferent to changing those conditions that he has defined to be “black” conditions such as poverty, incarceration and “suffering in ten different ways” (ibid).

Juan’s speech reveals how representational identity politics demands an original model in order to sound authentic. Juan fails to authenticate the “brown cause” since he is not brown. Sensing this profound absence in his own identity, Juan is left to pine after a skin color more than the material realities attending that skin color in order to feel truly committed to his cause. Choi acutely illustrates the problem in this representational grid when Jenny encounters Juan’s politics. Despite the “privilege” of her non-white skin color, Jenny resists being pigeon-holed into Juan’s one-sided (white-sighted) perspective of race politics. Not only does she confound Juan with her refusal to conform to being an original model, or in other words, an authentically colored person, she denies sharing his belief system altogether when she says, “I don’t have more integrity than you do, just because of my skin. I wish you wouldn’t use me as an example of something I don’t believe.” (ibid)

Unlike Juan, William does not articulate any such pining for brown skin. Rather, Choi narrates a more insidious psychology behind William’s representational politics that recapitulates the forms of hegemonic oppression he so claims to protest. Choi describes a
William who never forgets he is white and therefore, feels empowered by his generosity to consider those who are not white as his cause: “William had possessed a sort of reverse entitlement, it occurred to her now — he had seemed to assume that because he dignified them with his efforts, he deserved a particularly hearty reception in the realms of the poor and the marginalized. (Choi 277) More disturbing than this, however, is William’s patent orientalizing and fetishizing of Jenny. Choi describes William’s voracious sexual desire for Jenny in a language that indicates a colonizing of Jenny’s body as both racially as well as patriarchally oppressive: “He often, in the full light of day, had a sexually calculating, restless, predatory expression on his face, the same expression she sometimes saw when he was on her and arching to push farther in — a decadent look, as if sex with her were as ruinous as a drug addiction.” (Choi (166) For William, Jenny’s body is a territory that he hungers for in the same way Juan pines for brownness. However, William finds access to this brownness through physical union with Jenny.

The most apparent example that reveals William’s conflation of Jenny’s body with his objectification of skin color is right after the two have witnessed Jenny’s bomb go off in the city:

William sees her quaking, her teeth chattering, as if it’s the middle of winter, and kneels quickly before her, grabs her hands, her little hands, squeezes them, as if she is a child. “Think of that being dropped onto people,” he hisses. “Balls of fire dropped down onto children. Little children who look just like you.” (Choi 230)

Choi repeatedly italicizes Jenny’s little hands, as if to painfully punctuate in Jenny’s own mind what Jenny does not want to consciously articulate, that William indeed sees Jenny
as the already-colonized body of the subaltern: “Little hands! William had often said that. Little hands but big deeds. She had been very good at wiring explosives.” (Choi 198)

This is not to say that Jenny does not finally recognize her own complicity with this objectification. Sitting in her jail cell just after Pauline has betrayed her, Jenny contemplates how little she could even relate to the people of those little hands: “The anger of the Vietnamese — although it was hard to know, caught up in the rage and confusion at home, if the Vietnamese were most rightly described as angry. Hard to know anything concrete about them, these people to whom she’d felt pledged. They had been an abstraction….” (Choi 352) Choi makes it clear how even someone with yellow skin cannot represent the Other with yellow skin on the basis of William and Juan’s representational grid. Choi makes this point even clearer when Jenny’s thoughts continue her thought on abstraction: “…the way Mr. Morton had been an abstraction, although now Jenny sees him with almost unbearable clarity.” (ibid) Jenny realizes that all the rage and righteous indignation in the name of social injustice, abstracted, is meaningless if not personal. By abstracting the body from its materiality and history, the Vietnamese people and the U.S./Vietnam war were simply excuses for a bunch of young angry people to vent their frustrations with growing up. Moreover, Jenny recognizes how abstractly reducing Mr. Morton to a symbol of oppression, extracting him from the reality of the intensely personal, enabled his unjust homicide. It is in this way that Choi demonstrates how the representation of images in a Baudrillardian world of endless signifiers cannot achieve the kind of vision that progressive politics strives to inaugurate. In a world of
endless signifiers that signify nothing, meaning is lost. However, Choi concludes for Jenny that life indeed holds meaning. It is just not discovered through the endless significations of abstracted rhetoric and representational identities based on visual markers. Rather, Choi points towards a different modality of discourse to inaugurate a progressive politics towards change.

In Part Three, Choi creates an interlude where Jenny and Pauline and their female comrades begin to recognize spaces where the cycle of oppression has been replayed within their own revolutionary movement. Starting with Pauline’s initiative to form a women’s group to educate themselves on the use of firearms, Choi opens a door where the women give voice to deeper insights about themselves in relation to the movement, men and power. Pauline’s argument in response to Jenny’s reluctance with courting violence in their already tenuous lives reveals a new kind of politics for the women: “The point is, it would be a woman’s approach to firearms. To understanding why men use them, and misuse them.” (Choi 290) It is during this interlude where the women significantly discover more about themselves and their relationship to the revolutionary Leftist movement than the mechanics of firearms per se. Choi highlights the ruminations of the women (through Jenny’s narrative) as if to drive in a particular point about the politics of women and political change:

Learning to learn without being embarrassed. One thing they all agreed on, one thing they realized was true across contexts and even in the best of situations, was that in their relations with men they had subtly but constantly presented themselves as more knowledgeable than they were; all the time, in the wings, playing catch-up. (Choi 290)
Finally, Choi presents a “label” that characters in this novel can really coalesce under. Unlike the fraught territory of skin color, Choi presents a signifier founded on the experiential rather than visual marker. In addition, this experiential factor is not just historical; Jenny’s words clearly savor the present moment of communion such that it substantiates an affective reality for her: “But being just among women was something more sweet, the fresh pleasure of coming to things the first time, and of showing their wonder — of not having known, and then knowing.” (Choi 291)

Choi offers a simulation of identity by narrating the process by which Jenny, Pauline and the other women coalesce on terms beyond just power. Through communion, education (of guns for that matter), and introspection, the women form an allegiance founded on the connectivities arising from the spaces they are sharing. It is this connectivity arising from the power of coalition that we might consider as the affective impetus that propagates identity simulation over the limited view of identity representation. Choi is careful to include that such coalition is not about perfect union; she describes how the women come to a basic conclusion in the discussions that were forming their identities: “They’d been dismayed but also electrified to have seen it so clearly; resolved, Pauline wrote (she kept minutes because she had the best handwriting): *Women must assume leadership roles in the revolution.* But after this they began arguing.” (Choi 196) Even Pauline’s own conclusion may not have been exactly that of her comrades; Choi makes sure to portray how complicated coalition is, yet how it only takes rare and momentary touchpoints for coalition to begin. For that matter, even the women’s coalition around the trope of guns is problematic in that they are indeed, as
Jenny fears, symbols of power and instruments of its oppressions. However, Choi’s troping of the guns as fulcrum for the women’s bonding illustrates the indeterminate nature of coalition that this new politics entails. As cyborg creatures of hybridity, transgressive tendencies, and complex indeterminacies, Choi’s narrative avoids illustrating women as organically coherent and unified. It is within these affective touchpoints amongst varied women where Jenny finally begins to discover the power of change.

**III. Transgressive Power: Stockholm Syndrome, Too Close to Home**

Symptoms of Stockholm syndrome permeate Choi’s novel. Describing its history in his definitions of “Rare and Unusual Psychiatric Syndromes”, Christoph Correll, M.D. explains how the syndrome got its name from the location of a bank robbery where two robbers held bank employees hostage for five days inside of a vault in August 1973. When the hostages were rescued, it was clear they had bonded with their captors and even defended their captors as well as refused to testify against them. (Correll, www.medscape.com) The key feature in this syndrome is the fascinating bonding that occurs between captor and captive. The very next entry in Correll’s article is “Lima syndrome”, where he describes it as “the exact inverse of Stockholm syndrome. In this case, hostage-takers or victimizers become sympathetic to the wishes and needs of the hostages or victims.” (ibid) Again, named after the location of its occurrence, Lima syndrome refers to the four-month hostage ordeal in Lima, Peru from December 1996 to April 1997. Members of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement took several
hundred diplomats, officials and business executives of various countries hostage. However, within a few days, most of the hostages were released without prejudice for their value as hostages, “including the future president of Peru, and the mother of the current president.” (ibid) It is speculated that this release was instigated by an abnormal level of sympathy the captors had for their hostages. Correll states: “It is unclear if Lima syndrome can be explained by feelings of guilt, moral indecisiveness, second guessing of one’s actions, or obliviousness.” (ibid) If we derive anything from these two incidents, it should be that these syndromes share the common feature of human bonding. It is this profoundly powerful force of connectivity between human beings that Choi limns in her narrative as well.

I bring up both Stockholm syndrome with Lima syndrome in order to underscore the bi-directional transgressions between captor and captive bonding situations that we see in American Woman. Furthermore, H. Keith Henson offers an explanation for the Stockholm syndrome mechanism from an evolutionary psychological perspective: “Natural selection has left us with psychological responses to capture seen in the Stockholm Syndrome and the Patty Hearst kidnapping. Capture-bonding or social reorientation when captured from one warring tribe to another was an essential survival tool for a million years or more. Those who reoriented often became our ancestors. Those who did not became breakfast.” (Henson 345) Using the evolutionary psychological term “capture-bonding” highlights the phenomenon of connectivity between captor and captive that occurs not only in our primitive past but in Choi’s narrative as well. As tantalizing as it is to solely ponder whether Pauline’s bonding with
her captors (especially Jenny) is “authentic”, it is just as insightful if not more to examine how capture-bonding occurs in Jenny.

Choi transgresses the boundary that separates captive and captor with Pauline and Jenny such that her narrative portrays how power is not as one-sided in capture-bonding as it appears. Although capture-bonding might be triggered by the recognition of one’s utter powerlessness, Choi illustrates how the boundary that delineates the positions of captive and captor is mobile, shuffling and reshuffling these positions endlessly. Imagining the machinations of power as such also illuminates how representational politics is not as effective as simulational politics because it cannot take into account the non-stationary nature of power. In other words, identity simulation takes into account the indeterminate nature of power than identity representation because it is based on the notion of process and mobility. Choi’s narrative reflects this mobility of power such that Pauline and Jenny illustrate a process that hints more at pattern/randomness than presence/absence — a notion Hayles explores in her essay “Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers”:

Identifying information with both pattern and randomness proved to be a powerful paradox, leading to the realization that in some instances, an infusion of noise [my emphasis] into a system can cause it to reorganize at a higher level of complexity. Within such a system, pattern and randomness are bound together in a complex dialectic that makes them not so much opposites as complements or supplements to one another. Each helps to define the other; each contributes to the flow of information through the system. (Hayles, www.english.ucla.edu)

For Hayles, recognizing pattern/randomness takes into account the element of noise that disrupts the binary logic of presence/absence. In turn, by embracing the notion of functional noise thereby foregrounding pattern/randomness, Hayles makes a
theoretical turn from Lacan’s notion of floating signifiers with her own theory of flickering signifiers. In a similar departure that Massumi makes from Baudrillard, Hayles critiques Lacan’s premise of subjectivity as founded on the phenomenon of absence: “Thus for [Lacan] a doubly reinforced absence is at the core of signification — absence of signifieds as things-in-themselves as well as absence of stable correspondences between signifiers.” (ibid) Likewise to Massumi, Hayles moves away from the notion of presence/absence in order to recognize a connectivity between signifiers. She does this by recognizing difference as a crucial player in identity rather than the labels that either match or do not match their proper original models: “Foregrounding pattern and randomness, information technologies operate within a realm in which the signifier is opened to a rich internal play of difference. In informatics the signifier can no longer be understood as a single marker, for example an ink mark on a page. Rather it exists as a flexible chain of markers bound together by the arbitrary relations specified by the relevant codes.” (ibid)

By recognizing how Pauline and Jenny both function as flickering signifiers of both captive and captor players of power, Choi’s narrative demonstrates a simulation of identity that better elucidates an indeterminate Asian American subjectivity. Instead of being restricted within the logic of presence/absence, Choi’s narrative embraces the kind of noise that Hayles calls for us to consider when thinking about power. Choi presents the Patty Hearst story as if to offer the “real” story — one that definitively confirms whether Pauline really meant to bond with her captors or whether she just did it for survival. However, what Choi narratively offers instead are a plethora of stories that
might or might not be real; not only is there is an element of noise in *American Woman* that we cannot account for, this noise is necessary for Choi to convey her version of how life, identity and power coalesce and collide. For Choi, Pauline is not just a captive, Pauline is also a captor; Jenny is not just a captive but also a captor. Choi plays out these flickering signifiers as if to suggest that a more pressing question than the real story on Pauline is the real story on power: “Jim Shimada’s not part of the story. Pauline’s grandfather fifty miles off, his excitable mistress. None of this is the story. There’s no room, there’s no good place to put it; in the end it’s just static and lint. The two girls who thought they could make history, while all the while *it* had made *them*: that’s not even the story. (Choi 323)

Beginning with Pauline, Choi hints at the transgressible boundary between captive and captor in the media headlines that mimic the actual headlines in 1974: “IN THE END, read the title, COPS, AGENTS MAKE NO DISTINCTION BETWEEN ‘VICTIM’ AND CAPTORS.” (Choi 174) and “KIDNAPPED HEIRESS MAY HAVE HAD MORE IN COMMON WITH CAPTORS THAN INITIALLY THOUGHT.” (Choi 175) This is not to say that Choi ever eases the tension between Pauline, Juan and Yvonne; Choi never lets her reader forget Juan’s propensity towards violence nor Yvonne’s blind devotion to him. Choi narrates a tight but unhealthy union between the three that ultimately illustrates how emotional relationships might better illuminate the nature of power than the arena of political conflicts. She reveals how the messiness of emotional relationships might display the complexities of power better than the over-determined binarized language of socioeconomic politics. In the end, Choi credits the
intensity of the human heart to sway the poles of power rather than the influences of any cognitive coercions. In other words, for all the directions that power and politics takes, for Choi, they are rarely (if ever) determined by intellectualization but rather, they are chance undulations of humanity and its affects. Unlike the status of her privileged class, Pauline’s identity in relation to Jenny transgresses from being captive to captor to captive again. In any case, Choi does not allow us to ever decisively locate Pauline as a signifier of any singular identificatory signification. Moreover, it is Pauline and Jenny’s transgressions that Choi’s narrative offers as the signification of identity itself. As Jenny and Pauline flicker back and forth, we are asked to recognize the identificatory moments that signify the process of identity.

In the language of relationships, power signifies our most vulnerable needs and not our entitled rights. Even though it would seem that Jenny and her father, Jim, would be aligned in their political positions against the U.S. nation-state, they are at seemingly irrevocable odds with one another. Ironically, it is Jim’s early political protest as a No-No boy, his history of U.S. imprisonment and internment that is precisely what fuels Jenny’s politically-left revolutionary motivations. Nonetheless, despite sharing a similar representation of politics, the two clearly are not at peace with one another:

Her discovery of what he’d endured was the beginning of her discovery of history and politics, of power and oppression, of brotherhood and racism, and finally, of radicalism; but it only drove them to fight with each other. As she grew increasingly involved in the antiwar movement she and her father fought with increasing fury, but not increasing complexity — never about issues, never about the war itself, only about her arrogance, or perhaps it was her stupidity, or her naivete, in daring to oppose it. What do you know? he would shout. (Choi 163)
Ultimately, their rift lies in their emotional investment in one another. Jim’s anger or perhaps fear of Jenny’s opposition to the nation-state and Jenny’s need to vindicate the injustices in her father’s life reveal how deeply imbricated our politics are with our intimate individual needs. Choi illustrates how a daughter and father’s coinciding politics has nothing to do with ensuring harmony. Rather, it is a daughter’s need for her father to listen and a father’s need to trust his daughter that would better suture such a rift.

Choi’s narrative touches on this notion of personal rift as more affective than the political constructs that frame them in Jenny’s jail cell when Jenny muses: “And so the rift she had felt open up between herself and Pauline, which at first seemed entirely intimate, a rift between two individual persons, would come to seem increasingly social, inevitable and ordained.” (Choi 355) Jenny realizes that the seemingly “social, inevitable and ordained” politics of conflict are actually a language that substantiates its own illusion rather than the kind of “entirely intimate” autonomous intensity that arises between two people hurt. Choi reminds us how, from the perspective of the players of this drama, Stockholm Syndrome and mass media hysteria aside, what happened happened to two individual people intimately involved in each other’s everyday lives. *American Woman* is ultimately a story about two women and how their story was read to the public in stark contrast to how it may have played out in their private lives. It is important to remember that the political positionalities, captor and captive, are labels the media and power discourse have established in order to sustain the boundary that separates the powerful from the powerless. Choi’s narrative illuminates how a boundary
is inherently transgress-able. In other words, as the saying goes, rules are meant to be broken; if a boundary exists, it is a line that can be crossed. One is never a captive without also being able to be a captor. Thus, rather than being reduced to single markers, Choi’s story depicts how two women signify a “rich internal play of difference” such that each flickers on both sides of the boundary that separates power.

However, before we examine how Jenny and Pauline play both captive and captor roles, it is key to recognize how power moves the boundary between these two roles. Choi illustrates the mobility of power as motivated through our intimate vulnerabilities, the most telling in Pauline is the fear of being abandoned. From the beginning Pauline exhibits a strong need for connectivity. Her recorded communiqués through the media to her family cry out for inclusion and safety: “Um — what you said, about doing the best that you can, that’s just fine. Just do it, really quickly, okay?” (Choi 85) Embedded within language that espouses approval of her captors’ politics, Pauline’s moments that directly address her father ring with a child’s entreaty to be protected. Even when the situation devolves and Pauline sounds angry with her father, the central affective argument here is not about the groups’ Leftist politics but rather based on Pauline’s disappointment that she is not being rescued: “And I just have to wonder, I feel like if you or Mom, or Alexa or Katie was kidnapped I would just do whatever it took. Which is not what you’re doing!” (Choi 86) Pauline’s final words before her infamous bank robbery are: “My old family did not care for me; this new family does. My old family did not care for the poor; this new family does.” (Choi 87) Finally, Pauline completely conflates her intimate family’s inability to retain her with her new family’s political
claims to retain the poor. Choi begins to construct a narrative with two dimensions, personal conflict as reflected in one’s public politics.

Pauline’s fear of abandonment never leaves her for the rest of the novel. Despite Juan’s misogynistic and racist abuse, Pauline clings to both him and Yvonne like a helpless child. Choi implies that Pauline’s conversion was less about political conviction and more about her emotional needs. However, it is not so simple as to say Pauline faked complicity with her captors in order to survive. For Choi, capture-bonding is more than this. It is an example of how identity simulation really happens. Through the power of affective bonding, the recognition of a new identity arises. In her recounting her conversion experience to Jenny, Pauline explains how she relinquishes her fear of death and with it, she lets go of her old self:

Her fear of death had been so huge, she told Jenny, her brain just gave up on the job. They’d advised that she not try to struggle, or talk, or do anything “stupid,” and this advice, once she surrendered to it, had revealed itself as applying to everything. There had been something comforting in the idea that the best thing she might do for herself was to opt out completely. Give up the pain of pride injured, the torment of thwarted desires. Give up all the worries of what one should do and not do to be decent in life. (Choi 265)

The seemingly pernicious aspect of capture-bonding is of course that it demands the subject give up subjectivity: “Captivity in a way had released her, into an elemental world in which recollection of a few basic facts, like her name and birthday, were great triumphs.” (ibid) And as Choi narrates, such a conversion is a fleeting experience: “It was a frame of mind needing extreme disconnection, but this she achieved, as if sinking through fathoms of ocean and at last touching down on the silty black floor. …. But that extreme, like extreme fear, was also short-lived. Perhaps she only touched down before
rising again.” (Choi 265-6) But it is in this fleeting moment that Choi reveals the affective impetus behind forming identity. If identity is the illusion of a singularized and particularized subjectivity, capture-bonding facilitates an emptying of the body and mind of all the clutter of identities we naturally collect and cherish to form our richly complex subjectivities. Naturally, this is a transient accomplishment but a momentous one, only achievable via extreme trauma and duress. Choi then undermines the success of Pauline’s capture-bonding conversion by acutely focusing on Pauline’s need to connect with another human being.

It is this connectivity that demonstrates the affective impetus that drives identity simulation. Pauline primally clings to Juan and Yvonne only for so long before she recognizes a “better” identity fit than the violent one Juan and Yvonne have to offer. As an outsider herself, the double irony in Choi’s plot, Jenny recognizes some sort of identification with Pauline as well. Perhaps, although Jenny functions here as a captor/caretaker of even Juan and Yvonne in addition to Pauline, Jenny also becomes a captive to Juan and Yvonne’s narcissistic violent ideology: “But if [Pauline] felt brief alliance with Jenny, from both finding themselves at the weapon’s wrong end, she had never let on.” (Choi 186) However, Pauline ultimately does let on. In convoluted manner, Pauline manipulates Jenny into robbing Mr. Morton as a ploy to include Jenny despite the fact that Juan never commissioned Pauline to do so. Although Choi’s narrative reveals that Pauline seemingly did it for Juan and Yvonne’s ultimate approval, we see that there is a greater desire here at play. In the end, Jenny realizes her own
complicity, her own relinquishment of identity in exchange for the bond Pauline offers her:

Pauline had reached for her and she’d taken the hand, knowing now that she’d felt abdication, the relief of giving up, of removing, as Pauline had said, the temptation to escape by removing the option completely; of dropping the insuperable obstacle just at her back. She’d stopped fighting and known, as Pauline must have known when she’d joined with her captors, that any bond is its own great salvation, no matter how damning in all other ways. She’d bound herself to Pauline, and Pauline’s rushing fate. [my emphasis] (Choi 348-9)

Choi’s narrative reveals how the women connect as an act of identity. Jenny finally recognizes how she and Pauline affectively participated in an act of identity. Moreover, Jenny finally recognizes the illusion of power: that it only sets up the appearance of identity.

In her jail cell awaiting the sentence for Mr. Morton’s homicide, Jenny recognizes her intimate identification with Power (with a capital P). In the name of Power, Jenny assumed the role of the morally righteous in order to pursue what she thought was justice. In the name of Power, Jenny sees how she justified the use of violence when all the while she intellectually rejected violence:

Might does not make right: a stunning truth, robbed of its force by a numbing cliché. The mind might believe, but the body has trouble. Power has the power to seem natural, and to live in your gut like an ulcer: your secret certainty of your defeat, finally at its hands. And yet Power was only people, war makers, money-possessors, with elaborate tools to use. This had been the belief that impelled her, when she learned to build bombs. (Choi 198)

In the end, Jenny recognizes that what she was really pursuing the whole time was anger:

But it wasn’t intentions, however lofty or petty, that mattered, but how things turned out. When she shined that harsh light onto all her acts, her bombings no longer seemed so exalted. Exalted intentions — never fatal
results, perhaps just thanks to luck. No salvation, either. Only anger, infectious like fire: Jenny’s anger at her nation’s abuses; the patriotic American’s anger at subversives like her. (Choi 352)

Choi reveals with Jenny’s harsh light that the illusion of a unified self, complete with pure and impure motives, is the vehicle by which power propagates its oppression. With the power to appear to be an inherent component to life itself, Power existed in Jenny’s mind as the reality she was committed to fighting on its own terms: “…perhaps they had been wrong to fight Power on its terms, instead of rejecting its terms utterly. Little hands. Something about this memory made her cringe now.” (Choi 198-9)

Jenny’s reflections begin to articulate a critique of the kind of representational politics that cannot escape recapitulating the same logic of centralizing power that Haraway hints at her essay on the informatics of domination. Advocating the connectivity that Choi highlights, Haraway proposes her cyborg as an alternative to the illusion of a unified identity: “[Cyborgs] are wary of holism, but needy for connection — they seem to have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party.” (Haraway 152) Haraway recognizes this same downfall of the seeming political need for a “vanguard party” that Choi depicts. However, just as Choi portrays how the vanguard party will always crumble if organized on the logic of power, Haraway’s cyborg is premised on the notion of connection: “This identity marks out a self-consciously contracted space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship.” (Haraway 157) It is this connectivity that ultimately emerges from Choi’s narrative identity simulation. In other words, Choi’s simulation of identity emerges from
coalition. Rather than accept the cynical conclusions that much of the U.S. did about Patty Hearst’s capture-bonding syndrome, that it was a psychological ploy to use her captors political front to simply survive, Choi depicts a more delicately nuanced narrative about how identity is not stable. From every aspect of identity such as her own Korean/Jewish American identity narrating a Japanese American identity to simulating a media story in order to investigate identity itself, Choi deconstructs the subject such that she concludes with the simplest of Asian American identity markers: affection.

Jenny’s final thoughts on Pauline are that of connection and affection: “Unlike, even, Jenny’s previous life with William, in which she had felt herself struggling to keep his approval, and always amazed at his interest in her. With Pauline she had never felt that, but that their mistakes they at least made together, and their remorse they’d at least get to share.” (Choi 352-3) What Choi drives home most poignantly, however, is this need for connection and affection with the very subsequent sentence after: “Now she prepared to face all of it newly alone.” (Choi 353) Elegantly, Choi clarifies that this is not a romance novel about lasting connections either. Reiterating the notion that the personal is the political, Choi ties in Pauline’s abandonment of Jenny with the political coalition that forms around Jenny from that abandonment:

…the bare appearance of [Jenny’s] name registered in a few different places with a few different people, and in the first quiet hum of what became a significant murmur those few people contacted others of similar background to Jenny, if not similar frame of mind. The people who joined in the murmur were mostly those who’d eschewed politics all their lives — they didn’t need the additional trouble. (ibid)

Despite these people who eschewed politics, Choi clearly illustrates the coalescing of political representation not based on original model, “they didn’t need the additional
trouble”, but on like-mindedness. Impling a rejection of political rhetoric based on over-determined identities, Choi narrates the support Wendy Yoshimura received from a community of people who, just like Wendy, went unrecognized. Without the political cache of media power, Choi narrates how a coalition of affinity formed for the sake of a woman who also rated under the radar of social media: “Unsought, unexpected: first one, then five, then a church congregation. They were all Filipino-, or Chinese-, or Korean-, or Japanese-Californian-American. Some were apolitical truck farmers or small-business owners.” (ibid)

At the end of her novel, Choi concludes with Jenny’s political identity associated with her father’s history, a kinship tied both familially as well as racially. Most of all, however, Choi closes her narrative simulation identity with the political consciousness of an intimate conversation that ends with action:

“Hey,” her father said. “I lived here.”
“I know,” she said.
“Let’s go help them set up.” He turned and strode off.
In a moment, she followed. (Choi 369)

Although Jenny’s father’s history is one heavy laden with a nationally-framed racist history, Jenny ultimately connects with her father because of her affection for him first. In other words, the power of her political convictions arises from the kind of intimate connection that simulates her father’s identity such that it is fueled affectively rather than discursively.
Chapter 5: Coalitions of Affinity in *Comfort Woman*

By imagining indeterminacy as processual of emergence, deconstructive Asian American subjectivity introduces a political immanence behind transnationality. Asian American transnationality reveals the ideological limitations of nation-state apparatuses as well as the pitfalls in representational identity politics. By transgressing these ideological boundaries, Asian American transnationality demonstrates the political potency behind Donna Haraway’s cyborg theory as a cogent critical tool. Observing how early feminist identity fractured under the weight of the limited perspective of “white, professional middle-class, female, radical, North American, mid-adult bodies” (Haraway 156) Haraway states how “the sources of a crisis in political identity are legion” (ibid). Subsequently, she calls for coalitions based on affinity rather than coalitions based on identity in her Cyborg Manifesto. In it, she hails Chela Sandoval’s “oppositional consciousness” that “marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship.” (Haraway 157) Highlighting its history of affinitive coalition-making, Asian American transnationality demonstrates this self-conscious space that disallows the sedimentation of identity and sustains political kinship via affinity over naturalized identity.

Embracing indeterminacy for political leverage and coalition-making by affinity over identity may sound rather abstract. However Brian Massumi makes a strong case for the abstract when he contends: “…the problem with the dominant models in cultural and literary theory is not that they are too abstract to grasp the concreteness of the real.
The problem is that they are not abstract enough to grasp the real incorporeality of the concrete.” (Massumi 5) What he argues for in *Parables for the Virtual*, is for a critico-political thinking in terms of an *emergence* that:

…can only be approached by a logic that is abstract enough to grasp the self-disjunctive coincidence of a thing’s immediacy to its own variation: to follow how concepts of dynamic unity and unmediated heterogeneity reciprocally presuppose each other. (Massumi 8)

In other words, Massumi points out how a thing must abstractly recognize it’s own variation in order to fully grasp how “dynamic unity” and “unmediated heterogeneity” constitute one another. If we look at emergence as the abstract political realization for agency and justice, Asian American transnationality distinctly limns dynamic unity and unmediated heterogeneity via its own variation.

Addressing the emergence of justice within a politics of heterogeneity, Kandice Chuh traverses the same trajectory as Massumi when she asserts:

When difference meets itself … the necessary variability of justice comes to the fore, a vacillation that is necessarily present because of the acknowledged presence of diversity. Permanently fluctuating and irregular, justice cannot be conceived within a politics of heterogeneity as a fixed goal but emerges rather as an orientation, as a commitment to an indefatigable and illimitable interrogation of myriad relations of power and how they give, shape, and sometimes take life. When difference meets itself in the space of deconstructed identity, the complex personhood of every self and other rises to the surface. (Chuh 150)

Chuh remarks that justice emerges as an orientation and a commitment to interrogate power within a paradigm of indeterminate identity; it is within this paradigm that we might realize individual power and agency. Therefore, taking up Haraway’s call to coalesce a political awareness based on difference, I examine Haraway’s notion of affinity using a critical lens focused on Massumi’s notion of affect. In this way, I seek to
deploy a logic abstract enough to “grasp the real incorporeality of the concrete”, or in other words, I seek to utilize a critical tool that will shed light on how the indeterminate nature of Asian American transnationality reveals the very material conditions and consequences of hegemonic power inequity.

Haraway defines affinity as that which is “related not by blood but by choice, the appeal of one chemical nuclear group for another, avidly.” (Haraway 156) As a chemist, Haraway is not likely using the latter descriptive phrase lightly. Rather, she reminds us that not being related by blood does not necessitate the negation of a physical materiality. Whether we are carbon-based or not, Haraway emphasizes the need to remain cognizant of how the incorporeal nature of affinity must still be rooted in a material reality. If affinity conjures the image of bodies coalescing due to positive attraction, affect is just as imbricated with the body according to Massumi when he states: “Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is.” (Massumi 35) Although Massumi observes affect to autonomously escape a particular body, it is key to note that affect still originates from the body; affect is still conceptually embodied. However, it is the autonomy of affect that allows us to critically examine how we might coalesce by affinity rather than identity. It is an issue of approaching political affiliation through the means of what lies in excess of the body — it is still of the body but cannot be reduced to visual markers. It is a move to coalesce on the basis of an embodied phenomenon unseated from the logic of marked bodies.
In his analysis of the affective power behind Ronald Reagan’s presidency, Massumi illustrates the autonomous yet corporeal nature of affect. Recounting a case study by neurologist Oliver Sacks, Massumi observes how Reagan’s body played a remarkable role in sustaining his influence on the U.S. body politic. Massumi relates Sacks’ case study on how a room full of hospital ward patients with “two kinds of cognitive dysfunction” (Massumi 39), aphasia and agnosia, each reject the Great Communicator’s speech on television on both fronts. Reagan failed to convince the aphasics (those who can only read body language) with his inept body language, and he failed to persuade the agnosics (those unable to hear tonal cues thereby reducing language to grammar and logic) with his garbled grammar and incomplete logic. Massumi concludes that Reagan only managed to convince the rest of the nation to vote him into a second presidential term through the force of the affective power behind his persona:

Reagan was more famous for his polyps than his poise, and there was a collective fascination with his faltering health and regular shedding of bits and pieces of himself. The only conclusion is that Reagan was an effective leader not in spite of but because of his double dysfunction. He was able to produce ideological effects by non-ideological means, a global shift in the political direction of the United States by falling apart. He means were affective. Once again: affective, as opposed to emotional. This is not about empathy or emotive identification, or any form of identification for that matter. (Massumi 40)

Clarifying the difference between affective intensity and emotional identification, Massumi stresses how Reagan’s ideological influence on U.S. history and politics was facilitated via non-ideological means. Moreover, Massumi emphasizes how these non-ideological means were not about emotive identification “or any form of identification for
that matter” (ibid). The power behind Reagan’s persona was affect as defined in excess of his body — that which arose from the various negations of his body rather than any visible markers on his body.

In a similar move that decouples affective interpretations from the body, Kandice Chuh cautions against conflating image with identity in her essay “Discomforting Knoweldge: Or, Korean ‘comfort women’ and Asian Americanist critical practice”. Discussing the epistemological pitfalls of scholarly critique that objectify the ‘comfort woman’ by recapitulating the U.S. as savior of Korea from Japanese colonialism, Chuh warns: “Effectively masking U.S. imperialism and simultaneously reinstalling American exceptionalism, the ‘comfort woman’ as exemplary figure of subjugation under Japanese imperialism seemingly argues for U.S. intervention in the peninsula’s affairs” (Chuh 8).

Moreover, Chuh argues that by conflating image with identity, scholars run the risk of stabilizing the status of victim as identification for Korean comfort women: “The task here is to avoid mistaking the identification of an injured party as the identity of that party; it is to recognize unfailingly the complex conditions that result in injury and produce “victims,” and to target our critical responses accordingly” (Chuh 11-2). It is in this way that I seek to approach Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman; I argue that a deconstructive reading of Keller’s complex narrative can disallow such an interpretation and conflation of identity.

By foregrounding the extra-corporeal phenomenon of affect in Keller’s narrative, I seek to avoid the kind of identity sedimentation that Chuh observes. Highlighting three distinct literary boundary transgressions in Keller’s novel, my contention is to investigate
its paradoxical complexity that demonstrates affect over identity. In other words, Keller’s narrative augments an affective intensity that resists sedimenting Akiko’s identity as hopeless victim. By transgressing boundaries between (1) reality and super-reality, (2) sanity and insanity, as well as justice and injustice, and finally, (3) between life and death, Keller perpetually destabilizes the economies of visibility that have circumscribed both hegemonic narratives as well as academic investigations. The first boundary Keller transgresses is the one between reality and super-reality in that she deploys a narrative that illustrates the excesses of reality as what I would like to term as a “virtual narrative”. Keller’s virtual narrative underscores the indeterminate nature of what we perceive as “real” as well as highlights how affect plays a key role in this indeterminate excess. The second boundary Keller transgresses is the one between sanity and insanity; by questioning Akiko’s sanity, Keller textually deconstructs the notions of sanity as well as justice. Using N. Katherine Hayles’s notion of flickering signifiers, I seek to reveal how Keller’s text showcases the kind of pattern/randomness that again demonstrates how indeterminacy and affect work to deconstruct subjectivity. And finally, Keller’s transgressions of the boundary between life and death will be discussed in tandem to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of how indeterminacy plays a crucial role in power negotiations in the camp as well as dominant U.S. white culture. In this final section, the notion of transgressing boundaries as opposed to the dissolution of those boundaries will be extensively discussed in relation to how indeterminacy works as a cogent critical tool as opposed to its functional hegemonic role in dissolving the subject altogether.
I. Transgressing boundaries of in/corporeality through virtual narrative

Examining boundaries, in this chapter then, entails recognizing that which escapes the spectacle of the body, or in other words, that which lies outside the boundaries of corporeality. Like Massumi’s analysis of the affective power behind Ronald Reagan’s body, Nora Okja Keller explores the affective power behind the Korean comfort woman, Akiko. In *Comfort Woman*, Keller’s narrative transgresses boundaries of the body such that it bypasses the body as spectacle and rather conveys that which exceeds the corporeal conditions of the historic Korean comfort woman. By deploying a virtual narrative, Keller challenges her readers to reconsider what is “real” in terms of how the nation-state as well as cultural hegemony define it. In two contrasting realms, the WWII Japanese military camps and a low-income neighborhood in Hawaii, Keller uses this virtual narrative to highlight the surreal qualities of the nation-state and cultural hegemony and how they both circumscribe the body in ways that sustain profound power differentials. In doing so, Keller’s narrative participates in what Massumi has labeled as the “virtual” such that she captures what we might recognize as the affective intensity behind what is now a loaded term, “comfort woman”.

Propounding political potentiality, Massumi defines the virtual as that which defies “the law of the excluded middle” — a paradigm that denies any third possibility beyond affirmation and negation. Massumi proposes that conceptualizing the body as more than just abstract or concrete, and rather, as both real and virtual, we may imagine more “real” political potentialities:

Since the virtual is unlivable even as it happens, it can be thought of as a form of superlinear abstraction that does not obey the law of the excluded
middle, that is organized differently but is inseparable from the concrete activity and expressivity of the body. The body is as immediately abstract as it is concrete; its activity and expressivity extend, as on their underside, into an incorporeal, yet perfectly real, dimension of pressing potential. (Massumi 31)

By considering Massumi’s “real but abstract” body, Asian American studies can examine political unity as the phantasmatic construct we have recognized ideological notions to be — yet embrace this very incorporeality as its own functionality of becoming:

A word for the “real but abstract” incorporeality of the body is the virtual. .... There's the ultimate paradox of the dynamic unity of movement and sensation: the unity is purely virtual. For the virtual to fully achieve itself, it must recede from being apace with its becoming. (Massumi 21)

In like manner, Keller’s narrative gestures towards embracing this excluded middle through a narrative that refuses to dramatize the body or ignore the patent material abuses that state power exerts over the body. Keller’s deployment of this virtual narrative presents her readers with a “real but abstract” body that we must contend with in terms that defy hegemonically-circumscribed boundaries of that body. In other words, Keller both decouples the image of the comfort woman from its hegemonic identifications in order to limn the very real and material conditions of a comfort woman’s life.

Jumping the border between the “real” and the “unreal”, Keller’s narrative captures affect such that she intensely conveys the experiences of a Korean comfort woman, Akiko, without relying on the body as spectacle. Sparse in graphic details, Keller deploys a virtual narrative that draws from the grittiness of war details by acutely focusing on the phenomenon of trauma. By defying what is normally considered as “reality” and introducing the idea of the super-real, Keller challenges her readers to do more than just suspend their disbelief. She asks her readers to be open to reconfigure
what is “reality”. If the atrocities of what occurred in the “comfort stations” of the Japanese military camps of WWII could be called super-real, Keller’s narrative challenges us to consider how virtually absolute sovereign/state power is over life and death. Are Akiko’s interactions with Induk the delusions of a trauma victim or are they “genuine” narratives of the super-real that Keller wants her readers to participate in? By keeping this narrative vulnerable to either interpretation, Keller literally creates a third space that does not reject the “excluded middle” but rather embraces the notion of a simultaneous sense of the real and super-real coexisting in her text. By making this boundary porous, Keller invites her readers to renegotiate how much we suspend our disbelief in the virtual extents of absolute state power.

In other words, Keller’s super-realism opens a third space that participates with Massumi’s notion of the virtual “real but abstract body” where the spectacle of the body falls away to the background in order to foreground the abuses of state power. As “comfort woman” is a pre-loaded political term, it is particularly vulnerable to the cultural visual economies of the female body as spectacle. Keller bypasses this pitfall by abstracting the body from its corporeality through her language of super-reality. Rather than dwell on the details of the war atrocities Akiko suffered, Keller articulates the pain of these atrocities through the virtual — where the virtual, according to Massumi “is unlivable even as it happens … a form of superlinear abstraction that does not obey the law of the excluded middle, that is organized differently but is inseparable from the concrete activity and expressivity of the body” (Massumi 31). Keller’s narrative approaches Akiko’s body via the virtual such that the corporealized body of the comfort
woman falls to the background but the material conditions and consequences of hegemonic power inequity are starkly foregrounded.

Shifting from shockingly brutal scenes of rape and torture to passages of super-realism, Keller’s narrative conveys the trauma of war through the virtual. By disengaging from Akiko’s singularly gruesome experiences and deploying super-realist twists in her narrative, Keller disorients her reader from becoming overly invested in a visually corporeal experience. Rather, Keller’s narrative creates a space that beckons a more intense participation with Akiko’s psyche rather than the simple observation of the violence imposed on her. Describing Akiko’s rape, Keller opens chapter four with a passage that appalls and repulses:

You’re a doctor, I screamed, help me, help me get home. But he only laughed and pushed himself on top of me, using my body as the other soldiers had done. Afterward, as he wiped himself on my shift, he opened the screen partition and let others watch him examine me. This one is still good, he called over his shoulder. He pried the lips of my vagina open with his fingers. See? he said. Still firm and moist. (Keller 35)

Following this passage, Keller merges this brutal scene with the birth of her daughter. She extends the graphic and violent nature of Akiko’s camp experience into a frightening, patriarchized and institutionalized description of birthing in a hospital: “… they roped my legs, stretching them open into the Japanese character for “man”. One doctor pushed on my stomach, another widened me with a double-pronged stick, and this time my baby came into the world fully formed and alive.” (ibid) Keller’s hospital scene is no less disturbing; her language conveys the ominous threat Akiko feels regardless of whether she is in the camp or in a cold state institution. The only reprieve Keller offers is when she hears a woman’s voice in the hospital room and begins to channel Induk.
Interspersing the horribly violent conditions of wartime and institutionalized oppression with Akiko’s spirit world, Keller’s intervals of super-realism allow a release from the mounting horror of witnessing heinous injustice. The intensity of release that Keller’s super-realism ushers in is palpable when she transitions from brutal scenes to Akiko’s interactions with Induk: “She comes in singing, entering with full voice, filling me so that there is no me except for her, Induk.” (Keller 36) Not only is the imagery suddenly jubilant, Keller uses language that belies a kind of lesbian relationship between Akiko and Induk that patently rejects the earlier conditions of patriarchal oppression. To assume that Akiko’s involvement with Induk is Akiko’s psychological attempt to escape reality would grossly underestimate the kind of affective power that Keller seeks to convey.

Using descriptive language that is just as corporeal and material in her realist passages of the camp and the hospital, Keller makes it clear that Akiko is not dreaming about Induk. Right after her escape from the camp, it is Induk who shows Akiko that the wild ginseng is edible enough to sustain her life:

Here, baby, here, Induk said, her voice creaking like a hundred thousand frogs. She shuffled closer, hands cupping her breasts, which turned into an offering of freshly unearthed ginseng.

It is not myokkuk, Induk said as I gnawed on a raw root. She stroked my head, combing out the tangles with her fingers just as I did for her when she was alive, then she said: But the seaweed soup is mostly good for making milk anyway. You don’t need that now.

My stomach cramped, and I threw up what I had eaten. I rinsed my mouth with water from the stream, and my stomach rebelled at even the taste of water. Yet I could not stop my mouth from sucking the root. (Keller 36)
The essential change from realist to super-realist narrative correlates with Induk’s appearances in Akiko’s life. Induk is maternal figure, lover, and savior to Akiko such that she provides in every sense the counterbalancing power that equalizes Akiko’s world. However, Induk is not only a symbolic foil to the relentless injustices in Akiko’s life, Induk is just as much a material presence for Akiko as is the rest of Akiko’s living experiences.

In other words, Induk is the real but abstract body in Keller’s narrative that refuses to capitulate to hegemonic circumscriptions of the body. Induk forces us to engage with the realities of war, patriarchy, and state technologies through the virtual: “The body … as immediately abstract as it is concrete; its activity and expressivity extend, as on their underside, into an incorporeal, yet perfectly real, dimension of pressing potential.” (Massumi 31) Narratively, Keller utilizes this notion of the virtual to tap into an emerging potential for justice by creating Induk’s abstractly concrete body. Furthermore, it is this narrative virtuality that augments the affective intensity behind Keller’s text. Keller opens moments of emergence for her readers when she offers the participation in a virtual narrative that foregrounds the kinds of hegemonic technologies that seek to dominate and oppress the marked body. By participating in the suspension of disbelief that Induk could be real, Keller invites her reader to do more than witness Akiko’s suffering. A virtual Induk extends into the reader’s world and beckons us to question reality as it is. Instead of just wondering, how could the atrocities of war like this happen? Keller deploys a virtual narrative that definitively posits the camp as a grim and concrete reality.
The nature of Induk’s body is simultaneously corporeal as it is symbolic. Keller describes Induk’s body with language that explicitly evokes Akiko’s desperate need for maternal protection from the kinds of hegemonic technologies that oppress her.

I saw her with my eyes closed, though how I knew she was Induk I do not know, for she looked like my mother, standing there next to the river with her arms outstretched, long strips of hair coming undone from the married woman’s bun at the back of her neck. It was as if without their earthly bodies, the boundaries between them melted, blending their features, merging their spirits. Now I cannot remember what either my mother or Induk looked like when she was alive and a separate person. (Keller 36)

As read in the previous passage, Induk is hardly phantasmatic as she is the one who prompts Akiko to consume ginseng as well as the one who directs her to Manshin Ahjima. On the other hand, Induk is “seen” with Akiko’s eyes closed, and although Akiko knew it was Induk, she did not know how. This kind of seemingly ambivalent language is not so much uncertain as it is simultaneous and illustrates how Keller’s virtual narrative embraces both the real and the unreal. As if looking at a flickering hologram, Keller describes Akiko’s vision of Induk such that the language of the visual subordinates to a language of the symbolic.

In her essay “Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers”, N. Katherine Hayles takes Jacques Lacan’s notion of floating signifiers and contends that in the context of globalizing information technology, language is not so much about presence/absence but rather about pattern/randomness:

The contemporary pressure toward dematerialization, understood as an epistemic shift toward pattern/randomness and away from presence/absence, affects human and textual bodies on two levels at once,
as a change in the body (the material substrate) and a change in the message (the codes of representation). To explore these transformations, I want to untangle and then entangle again the networks connecting technological modes of production to the objects produced and consumed, embodied experience to literary representation. (Hayles www.english.ucla.edu/faculty/hayles/Flick.html)

Deconstructing language on this logic of pattern/randomness, Hayles argues that in order for more complex systems to emerge, it is crucial to recognize the mutual signification that pattern and randomness lend to each other within evolving systems of information. In other words, Hayles observes how global technologies inaugurated a departure from the logic of binarism to the logic of noise. She suggests that this shift from presence/absence to pattern/randomness might profoundly inform how cultural studies might better inform subjectivity and identity. Taking this approach into literary consideration, I explore how Keller’s text demonstrates the relationship between technological modes of production and consumption as well as the embodied experience to literary representation.

In this way, Hayles’s theory of flickering signifiers informs my reading that Keller’s super-realistic narrative transforms Induk into a virtual body. Keller’s use of super-realism literally demands that we read her narrative on a logic of pattern/randomness rather than presence/absence in that it would be less productive to simply decide whether Induk is real or not. Keller’s narrative lends much richer insight into Akiko’s psyche if we recognize how Induk’s body is both real and super-real: “It was as if without their earthly bodies, the boundaries between them melted, blending their features, merging their spirits. Now I cannot remember what either my mother or Induk looked like when she was alive and a separate person. (Keller 36) Induk is not
only a phantasmatic body, she is a literal body in the context of how we self-reflexively
extract new ideations of how to deconstruct subjectivity. She is a flickering body in that
Keller weaves her in and out of the realms of reality; we cannot read Induk as a concrete character nor can we dismiss her as spectral hallucination.

Keller’s virtual narrative plays with what is real and what is in excess of real in order to shift our significations from a logic of presence/absence to pattern/randomness. Such a shift allows us to recognize an Asian American subjectivity where boundaries melt between what is material body and what is phanstasmatic projection in order to conceptualize an identity that resists reorganization into centralized systems of power. When Keller melts the boundaries between Induk’s body and Akiko’s mother’s body and blends their features, she sheds their corporealities in exchange for a representation that defies visual markers. It is important to note that Keller’s specific passage of melting the boundaries between Akiko’s mother and Induk is not the same as Haraway’s notion of transgressing boundaries. Keller “melts” boundaries in order to create a super-realist moment that transgresses the boundary between what is real and what is in excess of real. The boundary that Keller transgresses is not the one between Akiko’s mother and Induk but rather the boundary between Akiko’s material reality as opposed to the melted zone of indistinction that these women create.

Keller’s super-realism disallows the delineations of either body as simply there or not there; rather, the process of deciphering these bodies on multiple other levels allows Akiko’s identity to emerge as defiant of hegemonic circumscription. By weaving a narrative that asks her readers to recognize a patterned/random sense of reality rather than
adhering to the concrete values of real versus not real, Keller’s text affectively conveys this sense of flickering signifiers. *Comfort Woman* is not just about the atrocities of war, patriarchy and absolute state power, but about the illusion of reality that we have come to involuntarily accept along with those atrocities. Keller’s text reconsiders what is real and what is super-real such that it aptly illustrates the deconstruction of Korean American female subjectivity.

II. Transgressing boundaries of in/sanity in order to reveal boundaries of in/justice

Not only does Keller’s novel probe the illusions of reality, it investigates the illusions of both sanity and justice. By aligning the boundary between justice and injustice alongside the boundary between sanity and insanity, Keller narratively deploys pattern/randomness to reveal how these boundaries are constructed according to hegemonic parameters. Disputing any universal sense of sanity or justice, Keller’s narrative suggests that the definitions of sanity and justice are constructed through technologies of the state and dominant culture. By juxtaposing culturally-determined ideals of justice, morality and religiosity alongside Akiko’s transgressions of culturally-determined sanity, Keller makes scathing indictments on how hegemony works to construct both justice and sanity in order to propagate and sustain centralized power. Keller’s narrative underscores how intimately imbricated justice and sanity are in terms of identity; Akiko, as an unremitting reminder of the atrocities of injustice, reveals the stark irony of how sanity is defined in terms of societal norms and has little to do with justice or reasonability. The narrative that Keller deploys to portray a woman driven to
“insanity” due to the injustices of war underscores how hegemonic circumscriptions of
sanity obfuscate injustice through the illusion of insanity. She highlights how constructs
of sanity adhere to societal norms in order to mitigate the monstrosity of injustice and
power inequity. Through state apparatuses that effectively marginalize marked bodies,
the notion of insanity functions as a technology that sustains our illusions of subjectivity,
thereby thwarting any possibility for affective coalescing.

In other words, the solace of sanity is a construct by which subjectivity anchors its
recognition and incorporation by the state. In Madness and Civilization, Michel Foucault
opens his archaeology of madness by observing the European trend of living with the
insane, progressing in time, to containing the insane. In line with his notion of biopower,
Foucault points out that this phenomenon occurred not because of madness itself but
because the madman transgressed the “bourgeois order”:

If there is, in classical madness, something which refers elsewhere, and to other things, it is no longer because the madman comes from the world of the irrational and bears its stigmata; rather, it is because he crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic. (Foucault 58)

The organization of the insane was inaugurated to discipline the transgressive body, not
in order to treat its unreasonability, but in order to contain that which did not conform to
the ethics of a given social order. As well as overtly contained in the war camps, Keller’s
narrative illustrates the ways that Akiko’s body is subversively contained through various
dominant cultural institutions of the church, patriarchy and bourgeois community.
Underscoring the fragile boundary that determines whether Akiko is indeed insane or not,
Keller illuminates how hegemonic institutions obfuscate injustice through the guise of containing the insane.

The most apparent example of Keller’s ironic twisting of sanity and justice is when Akiko addresses Induk’s sanity in the war camp:

To this day, I do not think Induk — the woman who was the Akiko before me — cracked. …. Even as they mounted her, she shouted: I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive. I am seventeen, I had a family just like you do, I am a daughter, I am a sister.

Men left her stall quickly, some crying, most angrily joining the line for the woman next door. …. Just before daybreak, they took her out of her stall and into the woods, where we couldn’t hear her anymore. They brought her back skewered from vagina to her mouth, like a pig ready for roasting. A lesson, they told the rest of us, warning us into silence. (Keller 20)

From Akiko’s point of view, she realizes that it was insane to accept the conditions of the camp — to accept that state power had the right to reduce the body to less-than animal status. Induk’s belligerent protest and self-incurred death sentence then becomes an act of agency in that she rejects the paradigm of state/sovereign power to reduce her life to its bare life. In all its perversity, it is indeed insane to recognize that a given system of oppression has the power to take life with impunity. For the rest of the novel, Akiko carries this realization with her, thereby rendering her sense of sanity skewed from the societal norms around her. She realizes that it was Induk all along who was most sane for articulating the insane injustice of the camp. In Akiko’s eyes, it was Akiko who died and Induk who survived in terms of who asserted justice and sanity:

That is how I know Induk didn’t go crazy. She was going sane [my emphasis]. She was planning her escape. The corpse the soldiers brought back from the woods wasn’t Induk.

It was Akiko 41; it was me. (Keller 21)
Again, we see how Keller “melts” the boundaries between Akiko and Induk in order to transgress the boundary that separates the real from the unreal. In other words, Keller highlights the inconceivable extents of injustice Induk experiences by metaphorically extending her entity into Akiko — who it is important to remember is actually Soon Hyo. However, throughout her life, Soon Hyo never claims this identity. Instead, Keller superimposes Induk/Akiko onto Soon Hyo such that even the naming of this comfort woman with a Japanese name is a jarring reminder of the incredible injustices inflicted upon Induk and Soon Hyo. By taking on the name “Akiko”, Soon Hyo assumes the position of specter of death in order to allow Induk to be the living reminder of how to survive without capitulating to the hegemonic myth of power. It is not until her death that Soon Hyo reclaims her birth name. Keller demonstrates how Soon Hyo’s lived life as a dead woman stands as testament to the grossly transgressed boundaries of sanity and justice. By revealing how this comfort woman’s life is a transgression in itself, Keller emphasizes how the indeterminate nature of identity can make the most compelling political statement.

It is through Akiko’s eyes that Keller sharply contrasts what might be recognized as the insanity of the state as opposed to the insanity of the individual. Keller’s narrative reveals how the insanity enacted through male-dominant state power is most often left unpunished — much less even recognized. However, the insanity “committed” by the individual, and in this novel, a woman, is punished severely. Induk’s “insanity” costs her her life. Akiko’s “insanity” costs her acceptance at the mission as well as social enfranchisement for both herself and Beccah in their community in Hawaii. Akiko’s
“insanity” is also further exacerbated by the racist culture of dominant white America of post-World War II. By perpetually asking her readers to question Akiko’s sanity, Keller invites us to reconsider what is actually “sane”.

Akiko’s treatment at the mission bitingly illustrates the hypocrisy of the missionaries in Korea on multiple levels. Not only does Keller mock the Christian mission in Korea to charitably aid the Koreans by placing their headquarters in a corporate factory, she depicts the women as petty and jealous of a girl clearly traumatized by war. Focusing on the lack of sympathy for Akiko at the mission, Keller underscores the political indifference the U.S. treated Korea at the time. Perhaps the most damning portrayal of the role that U.S. missionaries played in Korea is Keller’s depiction of Akiko’s future husband, the minister. His pedophilic tendencies and sexual attraction to a girl, clearly brutalized at the hands of war criminals, illustrates a barely sane human being. Keller unflinchingly walks along this thin boundary of sanity and justice when she describes Akiko’s relationship with the minister:

I mean, I noticed your uniform, and — if it is true, then know that God will love the greater debtor. He has said of the fallen woman, Her sins which are many are forgiven, for she loved much. Akiko, the minister cried, the sins of the body will be washed away by the blood of the lamb. His body will become your body; your flesh, His. Just give yourself to Him! (Keller 94)

Here, the minister explicitly reveals his awareness of Akiko’s experience in the war camp. But rather than recognize the gross injustice done to Akiko, he offers a Christian rhetoric that implicates culpability upon Akiko instead. Even more perversely, his final words express his carnal desire for her, an overture that becomes yet another form of patriarchal oppression for Akiko. Keller blisteringly portrays the minister in a
particularly depraved light when he couches his carnal desire for Akiko within the rhetoric of salvation. Using the words that Christ’s body will save Akiko from her wicked sins, Keller allows the minister to allude to his own desire to merge with Akiko’s. Additionally, the minister’s words take on a triple entendre in that Keller underscores the hegemonic power the U.S. white church wields over both Korean nation and female subject.

The fact that even in the supposedly safe confines of the church, injustice so grossly committed and disregarded reveals how Keller challenges the sanctity of social norms and the power behind implicit hegemonic constructs of sanity. The question whether Akiko actually killed Beccah’s father lurks behind Keller’s narrative such that we must consider Akiko’s sanity, and more importantly, we must consider the justice behind her motive (whether committed or not). Not only does Keller give the minister a voice that articulates the simultaneous denial and indictment upon women that patriarchy has historically used to oppress, she aligns him in Akiko’s eyes right alongside the Japanese soldiers in terms of culpability:

He cooed to me and petted me, then grabbed and swore at me, as he stripped the clothes from our bodies. When he pushed me into the bed, positioned himself above me, fitting himself between my thighs, I let my mind fly away. For I knew then that my body was, and always would be, locked in a cubicle at the camps, trapped under the bodies of innumerable men. (Keller 106)

Keller’s description of the minister’s despicable behavior is augmented by the fact that narratively-speaking, she has loaded his actions with the historic burden of political injustice. At this point, one could hardly doubt Akiko’s disdain and repulsion for her husband. Moreover, it is hard to doubt she could have actually murdered her husband.
The catch in this plot twist is that Keller clearly seeks to portray Akiko as a sympathetic character. For Akiko to commit homicide, Keller creates an ethical problem for her reader. Is it “sane” to sympathize with a murderer?

Whether Akiko kills her husband, ultimately for Keller, is not her primary point. It is the narrative strategy by which Keller presents the dilemma of justice and sanity throughout the novel that beckons us to ponder our faith in the kind of political subject as defined by state and dominant cultural power. Through a narrative that persistently underscores Akiko’s ostensible insanity, Keller offers a deconstructed subject in terms of its relationship with hegemonic power and the problematic contradictions we must negotiate. In other words, Keller puts Akiko’s sanity at stake in order to highlight the boundaries of in/justice as circumscribed by systems of oppression that discipline marked bodies.

Just as Keller’s super-realist narrative underscores the illusion of reality, Keller underscores the illusion of sanity by narrating Akiko’s sanity in terms of its relationship with justice and injustice. Keller articulates this illusion of sanity through Beccah’s ambivalence over her mother’s sanity. Through Beccah’s eyes, with help from Auntie Reno, we realize how Akiko’s sanity is not so much about her clinical condition as recognized by the state, but rather, Akiko’s indomitable war with injustice: “Dis what I see,” Reno said. “One tough woman. You tink she so out of it all the time, Beccah? Dat she so lolo I can jus’ steal her money — not dat I would, mine you — an’ she not goin’ know it?” (Keller 203) Beccah’s eyes are the lens that Keller uses to reveal the illusions of sanity and justice that are so often obfuscated by social norms. Beccah is the
American-born girl who has the sense to cover up Akiko’s episodes. However, it is this American sensibility that blinds Beccah into accepting the social norms that shackle her mother down:

“Who you see?” Reno asked, gesturing toward my mother.
“My mom,” I said, without looking, without thinking. Then: “I don’t know.”
Reno shook her head. “You better tink long and hard, Beccah. Den you better look again.” (Keller 205)

Beccah’s journey is about sifting through the pattern/randomness of sanity/insanity in order to finally recognize what is just and unjust.

If Keller’s narrative is about the pattern/randomness of sanity/insanity, guilt and shame are the instruments Keller deploys to sharpen the contrast amidst the noise of justice/injustice. Mixed with sharp pangs of guilt over not defending her mother, Beccah struggles to make sense of her simultaneous feelings of doubt about her mother’s sanity.

When I first saw the frail, wild-haired lady in pajamas throwing handfuls of pebbles into the crowd, I did not realize she was my mother. Only when she raised her arms into the air and pivoted toward me for a moment, only when I caught the faint cry of “Induk,” did I recognize her. I wanted to scream, to tell the kids to shut their mouths and go to hell. I wanted to pound the laughing heads into their necks. (Keller 87)

Guilt reveals Beccah’s affective need to protect her mother from the injustice that Beccah vaguely senses on behalf of her mother. On the other hand, shame reveals Beccah’s sensitivity to how dominant cultural norms have relegated her mother to the margins.

Despite feeling protective and indignant for her mother, in the midst of the crowd of children persecuting her mother as that “crazy” lady, Beccah feels shame as well:

I wanted to help my mother, shield her from the children’s sharp-toothed barbs, and take her home. And yet I didn’t want to. Because for the first time, as I watched and listened to the children taunting my
mother, using their tongues to mangle what she said into what they heard, I saw and heard what they did. And I was ashamed. (Keller 87-8)

Beccah’s ambivalent emotions exemplify the kind of pattern/randomness that Keller deploys in order to transgress the boundaries that circumscribe sanity and justice. According to Beccah, Akiko says, “Shame on you! Your mothers must be so sad to have given birth to monsters” (Keller 87), yet the passage repeatedly narrates what the children hear, saying, “Shame-u shame-u, sad-u sad-u!” (Keller 88). Keller reveals how mutable perspectives become in the face of injustice; signifiers for who is sane and who is not sane change in the face of what is just and what is unjust. Beccah’s account illustrates how incommensurable a singular perspective of sanity and justice becomes in opposition to the lens of dominant U.S. cultural norms.

In Beccah’s recollection triggered by Akiko’s final death chant, she remembers her father’s sense of shame when he says, “What if Beccah hears you? Think of how she would feel, knowing her mother was a prostitute? …. I ask you to protect our daughter, with your silence, from that shame.” (Keller 196) Shame plays a key role in limning the pattern/randomness of how sanity and justice are shuffled around in Keller’s narrative. It is what Hayles would call the mutation point where pattern and randomness bifurcate, initiating the evolution of a new system:

Mutation is crucial because it names the bifurcation point at which the interplay between pattern and randomness causes the system to evolve in a new direction. Mutation implies both the replication of pattern--the morphological standard against which it can be measured and understood as a mutation--and the interjection of randomness—the variations that mark it as a deviation so decisive it can no longer be assimilated into the same. (Hayles, www.english.ucla.edu/faculty/hayles/Flick.html)
In other words, shame is the affective trope where Keller posits the boundaries of sanity and justice to cross thereby indicating the initiation of a new system of thought — one that allows for the contradictions that thus far have confused Beccah. Shame repeatedly highlights the contradictions that reveal hegemonic circumscriptions of sanity and justice.

Affectively speaking, shame is the emotional capture of a phenomenon that locates where embodied experience contradicts what dominant culture and state power narrates to be “just”. Just like Huck Finn’s “shame” for befriending his African American travel companion, Jim, Keller depicts Beccah’s shame for her mother as that moment of contradiction between herself and hegemonic power. In Foucault’s language of biopolitics, Beccah’s shame comes from the conditions of her politicized existence as conflated with her right to live; Beccah’s shame denotes the schism where the illusion of this conflation is disrupted by the incommensurability between a hegemonically constructed sense of justice and an “other” sense of justice that arises elsewhere within Beccah’s being. Shame reveals how this “other” sense of justice marks the affective capture of the marked body experiencing disenfranchisement. In Hayles’s language of flickering signifiers, Beccah’s shame is the mutation point where we might locate a particularized affective moment in Korean American subjection via the trauma and consequences of her mother’s experiences. In other words, Beccah’s shame affectively resonates a particularized identification with Korean American subjectivity in relation to the state and dominant U.S. white culture. It is a beginning divergence that leads to a deconstructive Asian American subjectivity.
Keller’s text plays out this kind of pattern/randomness that demonstrates how subjectivity flickers in a sea of value judgments that instantly reference state values just as significantly as individual values — and reveals how individual values are often subordinated to state values. Keller reveals how Akiko’s sanity is more about how labile Asian American subjectivity is in the context of state and dominant cultural power than it is about the irrationality of the intellect. Moreover, Keller’s text of pattern/randomness deconstructs not only the subject and its relationship to hegemonic power but hegemonic power itself. Not only does Comfort Woman indict the abuses of war, patriarchy and dominant white culture, it asks us to reconsider how we conceive of these abuses by indicting our own complicity with hegemony as well. Thus we see how deconstructing the Korean American female subject via the process of indeterminacy hardly effaces political immanence but rather acutely augments it. By examining affect as embedded in both indeterminacy and embodied experience, Asian Americans can begin to develop coalitions based on affinities of affect rather than representations of identity.

III. Transgressing boundaries between life and death in search of affect and agency

Conceptualizing indeterminacy as constitutive to identity necessitates the notion of affect as constitutive to embodied experience. Without affect, identity via embodied experience would be a narrow set of criterion for subjectivity indeed. The particularized experience of Korean female comfort women of the World War II Japanese war camps would reach none other than the very women of this experience. In order to catalyze the power behind coalitions of affinity for Asian American subjectivity, indeterminacy and
affect are two cogent tools that deconstruct the overdetermined Asian American subject and allow the kind of coalition-forming envisioned by Haraway. By overdetermined, I refer to the excess of conditions that have developed in defining this once-originally purely-politically constructed term, the Asian American. In her argument for Asian American studies to become a subjectless discourse, Kandice Chuh suggests that although focusing on representation is a necessary task for Asian Americanists, we might yet examine more closely how we construct our own subjectivity:

If Asian Americanists have mounted sophisticated interrogations of representational objectifications of Asian-raced peoples in the United States, of dehumanizing images that affiliate certain object-ive meanings to certain bodies, we have not, I think, always paid such critical attention to “Asian Americans” and to “Asian American studies” as “subjects” that emerge through epistemological objectification. (Chuh 9-10)

On the other hand, Chuh is careful to note that despite “claims about the death of the Subject” (Chuh 10), Asian American identity politics continues to dispute the U.S. nation-state on the basis of the subject because “the idea and importance of a consummate subjectivity remains unabashedly vital in state apparatuses of the law.” (Chuh 10) Therefore, if Chuh’s contention is that we must counter hegemonic constructions of the subject both representationally as well as epistemologically, Giorgio Agamben does precisely that by addressing how the notion of subjectivity is vital to U.S. jurisprudence. In Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, Agamben explores how state/sovereign power is premised on the boundaries of a subject’s life and death. Moreover, he underscores how indeterminacy functions at the very core of modern biopolitics.
Along with the emergence of biopolitics, we can observe a displacement and gradual expansion beyond the limits of the decision on bare life, in the state of exception, in which sovereignty consisted. If there is a line in every modern state marking the point at which the decision on life becomes a decision on death, and biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics, this line no longer appears today as a stable border dividing two clearly distinct zones [my emphasis]. This line is now in motion and gradually moving into areas other than that of political life, areas in which the sovereign is entering into an ever more intimate symbiosis not only with the jurist but also with the doctor, the scientist, the expert, and the priest. (Agamben 122)

Agamben expatiates on the notion of the homo sacer as the body that exists in these two unclear indistinct zones of life and death. Thus we see the deconstruction of the subject as a requisite technology in today’s state systems of power.

Keller’s narrative transgresses the boundary between life and death such that it points incisively to Agamben’s notions of the camp, biopolitics and bare life. Comfort Woman is about Akiko’s living death within the Japanese war camp and her metaphorically dead life afterwards; Keller’s text illustrates the paradox that Agamben defines as the quintessential state of exception that not only exists in the camp but has expanded into everyday life in modern-day political existence. Akiko is the primary figure of Keller’s novel who is both the site of contestation for the boundary between life and death as well as the contender who fights for this boundary. After her life beyond the camp, Akiko never lets go of Induk and the spirit world. In fact, all of Akiko’s psychic negotiations with the world beyond the camp are facilitated through her negotiations with the spirit world. It is as if Akiko is caught between life and death; despite being located in a space where the boundary between life and death are lost, Akiko explicitly fights to
sustain that boundary endlessly. This seeming paradox illustrates the critically cogent nature of transnationality and the transgressions of its boundaries.

Agamben’s crucial contention is that the camp is that space which demonstrates the facile movement of power that traverses the boundary between a subject’s bare life and state/sovereign power. In other words, state power recognizes bare life based on the premise that the subject is only a subject given its political recognition. This indistinction between bare life and politicized life is what Agamben refers to as the phenomenon of *dislocating localization* that not only explicitly occurs in the camp but now occurs everywhere:

The camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and it is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognize in all its metamorphoses into the *zones d’attentes* of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities. The camp is the fourth, inseparable element that has not added itself to— and so broken— the old trinity composed of the state, the nation (birth), and land. (Agamben 176)

Keller not only investigates the phenomenon and trauma of the military camp, she also depicts the camp as the U.S. dominant cultural phenomenon that Agamben warns about. Akiko’s body illustrates the disjunction between state, nation and land as illuminated by her transnationality— not only in the camp but in U.S. suburbia as well. In other words, Keller makes it clear that the absolute power of the state over marked bodies witnessed in the military camp is not exclusive to the military camp. Not only does dominant U.S. white culture exert exceptionalized power over Akiko’s body, it does so with impunity as it is invisibly commensurate with racist cultural norms. Keller’s narrative depicts how Akiko’s and Beccah’s lives in the margins of U.S. society are indeed dislocating
localizations — lives oppressed by a power differential outside of the discourse of state, nation and land.

If we are to envision transnationality as the incisive tool that deconstructs Asian American subjectivity, it is key to understand Agamben’s notions of the camp and bare life. Agamben asserts that the camp occurs when the boundaries between bare life and state power disintegrate such that the boundary between life and death evaporate as well: “When life and politics — originally divided, and linked together by means of the no-man’s-land of the state of exception that is inhabited by bare life — begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception.” (Agamben 148) What is crucial to ascertain is that Haraway’s boundary transgressions are trenchantly about their recognition and not about their dissolution. The camp, where life is taken with impunity via absolute state power, occurs when boundaries are lost. We must be mindful that transnationals never lose their boundaries; transnationals reveal boundaries and their attending aporias of subjectivity and identity due to the very nature of their crossing those boundaries.

Keller’s transgressions over the boundary between life and death in her narratives for Akiko, Induk and Beccah are deployed such that she underscores the meanings of life and death as incommensurable with those of state and dominant cultural grand narratives. Not only does her narrative fragment reality as well as sanity/justice, Keller’s text shatters the illusion that the state purely protects life. Keller’s account of Akiko and Induk as homo sacer (individuals reduced to bare life) in the camp unflinchingly depicts what Agamben describes as the human body’s utter conscription to state power: “There
is no clearer way to say that the first foundation of political life is a life that may be killed, which is politicized through its very capacity to be killed.” (Agamben 89) Keller’s narrative illuminates Agamben’s assertion that, ultimately, sovereign/state power does not simply protect life but necessarily must exercise its right to take life in order to recognize a body’s political existence: “Contrary to our modern habit of representing the political realm in terms of citizens’ rights, free will, and social contracts, from the point of view of sovereignty only bare life is authentically political.” (Agamben 106) Agamben asserts that to recognize bare life is to recognize how sovereign/state power actually works — not on the popular rhetoric of democracy and freedom — but on the logic of the boundary between life and death.

The key distinction of the camp, in terms of boundaries, is that within the camp, the boundaries between life and death disintegrate along with the boundary that separates bare life from the politically-recognized citizen. Those reduced to bare life no longer hold the status of a person recognized by the state; thus, killing that person is no longer considered homicide. Akiko and her fellow camp companions lived in a paradox where state powers deemed them separate from the body politic such that the state was no longer culpable for their abuses and deaths. Keller illustrates this reduction to bare life through Akiko’s account: “There was nothing special about [Induk’s] life at the recreation camps; only her death was special. In front of the men, we all tried to walk the same, tie our hair the same, keep the same blank looks on our faces. To be special there meant only that we would be used more, that we would die faster.” (Keller 143) Akiko’s language reveals how bodies become reduced to bare commodities in the space of the
camp; her words indicate how the destruction of these human lives are simply considered as the consumption of material goods. Agamben further parallels the threat of the camp when he urges its investigation: “It would be more honest and, above all, more useful to investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime. (At this point, in fact, everything had truly become possible.)” (Agamben 171)

Therefore, if the body reduced to bare life has lost the boundary between life and death, it is in this space of the camp where we witness the incontrovertible loss of agency. Akiko’s narrative reflects this utter loss when she states her envy of a fellow cohort who could have owned a knife, “The rest of us were envious, not of the rich things she indicated having, not of her aristocracy, but of her right to kill herself.” (Keller 144) Subsequently, in Induk, Keller creates the specter of agency in that Induk uses her captors to destroy herself:

That is what, in the end, made Induk so special: she chose her own death. Using the Japanese as her dagger, she taunted them with the language and truths they perceived as insults. She sharpened their anger to the point where it equaled and fused with their black hungers. She used them to end her life, to find release. (Keller 144)

It is important to note that Keller creates a specter of agency in that Induk never articulates as a living character in her narrative. Rather, throughout the novel, Induk is a ghost who sustains Akiko into life beyond the “death” they experience in the camp. Ultimately, the agentive force behind Keller’s narrative lies in Akiko’s ability to survive and give birth to her daughter. Thus, Induk functions as the apparition that affectively
mobilizes Akiko to fight for her life. In other words, Induk is that which escapes corporeality yet arises from the material conditions of Akiko’s life. Although Induk is never quite an embodied character in Comfort Woman, she is a dominating force that cannot be discussed outside of the context of Akiko’s embodied identity.

It is in this way that Keller illustrates Agamben’s notion of dissolved boundaries within the camp and still demonstrates the transgressive power behind Akiko’s identity. Sacrificed within the space of the camp, the bodies of Induk and Akiko are bodies that have lost political recognition as citizens. Reduced to bare life, the boundary between life and death disappears. However, Induk’s choice to articulate her subjectivity, to hail herself, in the face of this boundary dissolution reconstitutes that boundary such that despite the fact that she pays for this act with her life, Induk becomes the enduring affective force of agentive power throughout the novel.

Speaking for both herself and Akiko, Induk decries the historical elision of so many Korean women’s lives lost without a trace. They are who Agamben has termed homo sacer in that they have no voice, no recognition and have been executed without retribution. Hence, it is within Keller’s virtual narrative that recreates this zone of indistinction where Induk’s voice rises out of the ashes of obscurity in order to reify that which was historically lost:

[Induk] spoke for me: No one performed the proper rites of the dead. For me. For you. Who was there to cry for us in kok, announcing our death? Or to fulfill the duties of yom: bathing and dressing our bodies, combing our hair, trimming our nails, laying us out? Who was there to write our names, to even know our names and to remember us? (Keller 38)
Meta-textually speaking, it is actually Keller’s text that hails the material realities of so many lost women. Keller’s novel becomes the vehicle that transports Induk’s voice from the camp to current sociopolitical immanence. Specifically, then, Akiko subsumes Induk for two significant reasons. The first is that Akiko becomes Induk in order to survive the atrocities of the camp; the second is that Akiko needs Induk’s strength to decry justice and defy normative sanity beyond the camp. Through Induk, Akiko becomes the lasting figure who evokes not only the injustice of the camp, but of sovereign power as manifest in modern-day hegemonic technologies such as the state, religion and other dominant U.S. cultural institutions.

For Induk’s voice to carry over the ocean from Korea to the U.S., Keller acerbically metaphorizes multiple U.S. apparatuses as facilitators for this phenomenon. Not does Keller portray an overly-eager minister to religiously convert Akiko, Keller hardly disguises his eagerness to sexually oppress her as well. Symbolically, we see how Akiko’s transportation from Korea to the U.S. is facilitated through not only the U.S. institution of church, but through the U.S. institution of marriage as well. Even though Akiko escapes the horrifying boundaries of the camp, Keller depicts how Akiko must perpetually fight to recognize the unceasing boundaries that work to contain and oppress her. Beginning with the confines of the mission and the missionaries’ objective to convert Akiko, Keller underscores how it is ultimately only Induk who offers Akiko any sort of salvation.
When Akiko stays at the mission orphanage, she temporarily cannot commune with Induk. Keller embeds Akiko’s experience at the mission orphanage in a dream-like language that cannot forget the horrors of the camp:

In the basement meeting room, he placed me on a bench between two other missionaries. I concentrated on watching him walk down the aisle to the pulpit, but my vision narrowed and buckled under the increasing intensity of camp sounds. During his speech, each time I saw him slap the pulpit for emphasis, I heard the sounds of women’s naked buttocks being slapped as they were paraded in front of a new arrival of troops. (Keller 70)

Keller emphasizes how impotent the salvation rhetoric of religion is in the face of what Akiko experienced in the camp. Not only does Keller satirically portray the impotency of the church for Akiko, she biting underscores how much the church is just as much another technology of oppression for Akiko. Akiko does not hear what the church rhetorically offers to her in the name of salvation. Instead, she superimposes the abusive role of the Japanese in the camp onto the image of the minister slapping his pulpit. For Akiko, affect dissolves the boundaries between the mission and the Japanese military camp thereby revealing how both function to contain and oppress. Akiko’s affect, it turns out, is her intense need for Induk; in fact, Induk is not only a need but an extension of Akiko’s will to survive.

For all of the missionaries’ efforts to convert Akiko to the power of prayer and its deliverance from evil, Akiko never stops seeking Induk:

During the silences when we were supposed to commune privately with God, I prayed for Induk to return to me. I spiraled my mind away from my body, trying to find her, to catch a glimpse of her. I listened for her in the empty spaces of my days and nights: in the spaces between the beats of words and music, of my breath and my heart. I waited, wondering if she had abandoned me; I called out, Where are you, Where are you? until
the words lost their meaning and I was nothing but a bag of skin. (Keller 92)

In the absence of Induk’s comfort, Akiko is reduced to the shell of a body, “a bag of skin” (ibid). Keller’s passage relies heavily on the notion of boundaries in that Akiko struggles to reconvene with the one “deity” who understands the hell of no boundary between life and death. Keller’s language in Akiko’s prayer for Induk reveals the kind of affective intensity that Massumi describes as extra-corporeal, yet originary of the body. When Akiko spirals her mind away from her body in search of Induk, she goes to spaces outside of the body as well as inside the body. She goes to the spaces “between the beats of words and music” as well as spaces “of my breath and my heart” (ibid). Keller echoes Massumi’s affective intensity such that Akiko’s need for Induk is both outside of the body as well as originating from the body. In the end, Keller reveals how Induk provides what the church cannot provide, the call for justice for the homo sacer — one who has lost the boundary between life and death.

When Induk finally returns to Akiko, Keller vividly describes Induk’s body as a corporeal and decaying one:

I looked and saw: hair tangled through and around maggoty eye sockets and nostrils. Gnawed arms ripped from the body but still dangling from the hands to the skewering pole. Ribs broken and sucked clean of marrow. Flapping strips of skin stuck to sections of the backbone. I forced myself to look, to linger over the details of her body. I found her beautiful, for she had come back to me. I grabbed her hand, and my fingers slipped into bloated flesh. I kissed it and offered her my own hands, my eyes, my skin. She offered me salvation. (Keller 96)

Not only dwelling on Induk’s corporeality, Keller limns Akiko’s own corporeal participation in reuniting with Induk’s dead body when she describes how Akiko “looked
and saw” and “grabbed her hand” “kissed it” and offered her own hands, eyes and skin. The tight association Keller establishes in this dramatically corporeal passage is Akiko’s and Induk’s relationship with life and death through the body. Affect becomes a powerful tool in recognizing how this relationship exceeds any narrative of the body in that Induk is a corporealized specter of death.

Massumi strenuously emphasizes that affect is not emotion — that emotion is simply the affective capture of a residual of what we perceive as affect. Keller’s narrative of the camp where the boundary between life and death disintegrates demonstrates this intensity that is not so much emotion but the horror (or rather an understanding that exceeds the body) in recognizing this phenomenon. When ascribing the affective power behind Ronald Reagan’s persona, Massumi points out that it stemmed from the various negations of Reagan’s corporeality. Affect ideologically moves people via non-ideological means in the absence of identification. By abstracting Akiko and Induk from their bodies, Keller creates identificatory negations that augment this degree of affect (such that horror indicates shock or the intense experience of the unknown). Keller’s description of Induk’s decaying maggot-infested body and Akiko’s devoted attendance of that body conveys Akiko’s intense need to hold on to the specter of death. More than the ineffectual words of the church, the vision of Induk’s death is what offers Akiko salvation because it is Induk’s body that cries for justice, not religious rhetoric.

Induk offers Akiko salvation because Induk’s death enables Akiko to recognize the dissolution of the boundary between life and death in the camp as a form of absolute sovereign power. Induk’s bloated body implicates death as the gross injustice and reality
of hegemonic power inequity. Akiko also finds Induk’s dead body beautiful because in the face of Christianity, Akiko’s truth of injustice disappears whereas Induk’s dead body does not deny Akiko’s truth. Induk’s return to Akiko indicates how Akiko refuses to forget this truth of injustice. In fact, for the rest of the novel, Akiko never embraces life as hegemonically circumscribed for her; she defies social, religious and even moral laws such that her sanity is constantly questioned. Ironically, one could argue that she is more sane and more alive than anyone else in Keller’s entire narrative.

The salient feature in recognizing the Asian American transnational is that Keller pinpoints the very boundary-transgressive nature of Asian American subjectivity. By recognizing Akiko as that transnational, she highlights both how a subject can be destroyed through the dissolution of boundaries yet sustained through the recognition and transgression of those boundaries. In the chapter where Beccah discovers her mother’s taped death chant, Keller constructs a narrative that focuses on boundaries. From the boundaries that define Beccah’s menstruating body to the boundary that defines their home, Akiko touches each of these boundaries as if affirming the precious and constitutive value of each of these boundaries — by crossing them.

With Beccah’s first menstruation, Akiko defines it as the flow of blood that frees the spirit:

According to my mother, the rituals that accompanied the major transitions in a woman’s life — birth, puberty, childbirth, and death — involved the flow of blood and the freeing of the spirit. Slipping out of the body along pathways forged by blood, the spirit traveled and roamed free, giving the body permission to transform itself. Necessary but dangerous, these were times when the spirit could spin away forever, lost and aimless, severed from the body. (Keller 186)
Akiko defines the flow of blood as that which forges the boundary between life and death; however, she advocates the transgression of this boundary as “necessary but dangerous” (ibid). When the spirit is severed from the body as boundary-holder, transformation is not possible. On the other hand, allowing the spirit to slip out of the body and roam free gives “the body permission to transform itself” (ibid). Keller’s language strikingly parallels Massumi’s notion of affect in that affect autonomously escapes the body but never quite departs the body: “Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is.” (Massumi 35) Affect arises from embodied experience but cannot be confined only to bodily experience but such that it locates potentiality in that body. This could not be more dramatically apparent in the argument that Akiko’s affective intensity would be mitigated if Keller’s narrative remained wholly entrenched in a language limited by the familiar material reality of the everyday. Instead, the affective intensity located in Akiko’s body arises from the fact that it is constructed through Keller’s virtual narrative that transgresses the boundary between the everyday materiality and the supernatural.

Akiko is precisely a character about recognizing and crossing boundaries:

I followed her to the back of our lot. When we reached the chicken wire enclosing our property, my mother raised her hands and, like Moses parting the Red Sea, stepped through the fence. I reached the spot where my mother had crossed over, expecting to see some kind of gate worked into the fence, but I couldn’t see an opening of any kind. My mother waited. I slipped my fingers through the loops and shook. The fence rattled. (Keller 189)
Beccah follows her mother to the back of their yard, but she cannot see how to cross the fence without locating a fence opening of any kind. Beccah must rely on her mother to transgress the boundary of their house. Keller beautifully illustrates Akiko’s natural ability to transgress boundaries in the simple language that follows:

“Here,” my mother said. “Look here.” She grasped the barrier between us and gently eased the wire apart. Creaking, the fence split wide enough for me to insert my body, then snapped shut behind me. (Keller 189)

We see how easily Akiko negotiates the fence so that it will allow herself and Beccah to cross it.

Further along the passage, Beccah follows her mother not only geographically, but she mimics her mother’s bodily movements, such that Beccah begins to share her mother’s body: “I felt my body move like my mother’s bend and dip with hers, as if I lived within her skin.” (Keller 190) Immediately following this statement, Akiko calls out to her daughter to cross yet another boundary in search of the spirit:

“She has crossed the dangerous stream in search of the spirit,” my mother called out into the moist air.
“Dance,” she said to me. “Free your spirit, Beccah-chan, let it loose.” She leaped into the air, twirling and pivoting in a space of her own, dancing and singing a song with no words. (Keller 190)

Keller’s language again invokes the image of affect as a spirit that loosens from the body — a practice Akiko is clearly well accustomed to. In Comfort Woman, Akiko is the figure who best knows the art of transgressing boundaries because she has been in a place where those boundaries were erased. Beckoning to her daughter to celebrate the transgressing of boundaries, Akiko calls out to Beccah: “Dance with me, Beccah … Don’t you hear the singing?” (ibid) But when Beccah refuses and threatens to leave,
Akiko instead slashes Becca’s finger, thereby puncturing a hole into the boundary of Becca’s body in order to allow Becca’s blood to flow with the water of the river, saying: “Spirit, fly with the river, then follow it back home.” (Keller 191) Calling to Becca’s spirit to transgress its boundaries and then find its way back to Becca’s body, Akiko commands her daughter to drink the bloody river water explaining:

“Now you share the river’s body,” my mother said. “Its blood is your blood, and when you are ready to let your spirit fly, it will always follow the water back to its source.” (ibid)

Presenting Becca’s blood as that which transgresses the boundaries of the body, Keller’s text beautifully illustrates the notion of affect as loosened from the body in order to empower that body. Although Akiko’s lesson for Becca is to celebrate the transgression of corporeal boundaries, she nevertheless reaffirms how essential it is to remain anchored to the body as home.

Following the passage of Becca’s memory of her mother leading her beyond the boundaries of their home, is Becca’s account of listening to her mother’s final tape recording made to her. Here, Akiko chants the final death rites for her own mother as well as the many other women who died without recognition and retribution for the injustices of their lives and their deaths. It is in this passage that Akiko finally asserts her identity as Soon Hyo and as one who survived the Japanese military camps. It is here that Becca recalls overhearing her mother’s outrage and her father’s attempt to silence her. And with this recollection, Becca begins to suspect that perhaps her mother did indeed kill her father. When Sanford, Becca’s boyfriend comes to her door to try to silence her mother’s tape, she says to him through the door, “I’m speaking to my mother”
(Keller 198) whereas Sanford answers “Your mother is dead” (ibid). Keller emphasizes the power behind Akiko’s death when she attributes Sanford’s dubious voice as a wariness of sanity; Beccah hears this when she hears Sanford “speaking to me as I had spoken to my mother, as if she were unstable. Dangerous.” (ibid)

Beccah’s reaction to Sanford’s presence underscores Akiko’s power to transgress. In response to Sanford’s interruption, Beccah reflects how she blocked out her mother by attempting to contain her:

When I was in high school, the art teacher taught us to look through a square made by our fingers, in order to focus on what we wanted to paint. I often looked at my mother through the finger frame, trying to put her in perspective. I liked the way my fingers captured her, making her manageable. Squinting my eye through the lens, I could make her any size I wanted. I could make her shrink, smaller and smaller, until she disappeared with a blink. (Keller 198)

Using her fingers to mimic the kinds of boundaries that manage life, Beccah narrates the process of framing her perspective and then shrinking that frame until the focus of that perspective disappeared altogether. Not only does she realize how her perspective boxed in her mother until she could not really see her mother anymore, she limns the power that boundaries have to manage, contain and suppress/oppress. And although she devises that same process to make Sanford disappear, she does so while the power of her mother’s presence fills the entirety of her apartment. Her final words underscore how despite her childhood attempts in trying to manage her mother, in the end, her mother’s life (and death) is uncontainable. With the small gesture of her fingers and a nonchalant statement “I have to leave you, Sanford” (Keller 198), Beccah breaks up with Sanford in order to respond to her mother’s dangerous call from beyond death.
Akiko’s power to reach Beccah beyond her death is yet another boundary transgression that produces the kind of affective intensity that exceeds the boundaries of the body yet does not alienate the body. Just as Induk is the spectral figure that conveys the affect of the camp, the affective power of Akiko’s death is the power that allows Beccah to finally speak her mind. In the chapter following her communion with her mother through Akiko’s final recorded death chant, Beccah fights with Auntie Reno. Interestingly, Beccah’s narrative drops the title “Auntie” in this chapter and refers to “Reno”, the woman who recognizes Akiko’s powers of the supernatural and allegedly exploits it. Empowered by her intimate communion with her mother, Beccah is emboldened to confront Reno about what Beccah sees as a lifetime of material exploitation by Reno. However, upon airing out all her complaints against Reno, Reno’s response reveals a deeper understanding of Akiko than Beccah ever suspected.

By previously setting up a narrative about Reno in Beccah’s perspective, this chapter particularly highlights the affective power invested in Akiko’s body. Beginning the chapter with Beccah’s statement “Reno and I fought over my mother’s body” (Keller 199), Keller builds up the impact of Beccah’s final realizations that both Akiko and Reno are survivors who know how to deftly negotiate boundaries.

… I telling you I know what I know. Your maddah was one survivah. Das how come she can read other people. Das how come she can see their wishes and their fears. Das how come she can travel out of dis world into hell, cause she already been there and back and know the way. (Keller 203)

Rather than explicitly stating it, Keller portrays how Beccah comes to realize that Reno is more than the stock Hawaiian character Keller leads us to believe. Reno’s understanding
of Akiko highlights the particular potency located in Korean American transnationality. As Reno states, “You was her daughter, dah one come from her own body. But you nevah know shit about her, did you?” (Keller 203) Emphasizing Beccah’s blind spot not only to her mother, but Reno as well, Reno’s words imply a stronger bond between Akiko and Reno than Beccah suspected. Although Reno never directly answers Beccah’s question “Reno … what did you know about —”, Keller reveals how Reno either already knows of Akiko’s past or always suspected it. Regardless, through Reno’s eyes, Beccah finally begins to see how her framing fingers minimized her mother’s life to the point that it grossly underestimated the affective intensity of her mother’s life.

Akiko lived in order to affirm one primary boundary, and that is the boundary that enclosed herself and Beccah: “I will call her Bek-hap, the lily, purest white. Blooming in the boundary between Korea and America, between life and death, this child, with the tendril of her body, keeps me from crossing over and roots me to this earth.” (Keller 116-7) When Akiko succumbs to death, Beccah’s cleansing and caring of Akiko’s dead body illustrates how in the end, Akiko is given the dignity in death that was denied to her so long ago in the camp. In transgressing the boundaries of reality, sanity and even life, Akiko challenged the boundaries of justice and power by living a life anchored by love. By depicting Akiko’s suffering in crossing these boundaries, Keller reveals the kind of power that arises from the struggles of the marked body and makes a case that it is precisely this struggle that affectively empowers boundary transgression.

If boundary transgression can produce the kind of affect that comes from indeterminate subjectivity, then it is this kind of affect that can lead to coalitions of
affinity rather than identity. Akiko’s life illustrates how the subject is not a determinate being. In fact, Keller’s narrative demonstrates how hegemonic technologies have the power to entirely erase the limitations of subjectivity and its catastrophic effects on the body, mind and spirit. By listening to Akiko more keenly after death — in other words by being more attuned to Akiko’s transgressions of the boundary between life and death — Beccah finally recognizes her mother’s body for the historically marked body that it is:

“I remember,” I sang without knowing the words. “Omoni, I remember the care. Of the living and the dead.” …. “I will care for you body as your spirit crosses the river. I will stand guard. I will send you on your way.” (Keller 208)

Using the language of her mother’s death rites, Beccah reassures her mother that she finally understands Akiko’s need to cross boundaries. By tenderly and assiduously attending to Akiko’s body, Beccah nurtures the many boundaries Akiko crossed.

In a ceremonial gesture of not only filial piety, rather an intimate communion between daughter and mother, Beccah fastidiously cleanses and prepares her mother’s body for cremation. Using the sheets she transcribed Akiko’s recorded words onto, Beccah applies strips of these words onto her mother’s body:

After I washed her, I shook out the damp strips of cloth and, one by one, draped them over the length of her body, wrapped her arms and legs. Her words, coiled tightly in my script, tied her spirit to her body and bound her to this life. When they burned, they would travel with her across the waters, free. (Keller 209)

Beccah wraps Akiko in her own words as if to lend Akiko the articulation of injustice that she was denied during her lifetime. Moreover, Beccah encloses her mother such that she restores the boundary between life and death that the camp had destroyed. In this way,
Beccah embraces her mother in words and spirit such that her mother is finally able to cross the restored boundary between life and death.

As Beccah dips these strips into water, Akiko’s words, written in ink on the sheets, bleed into the water and “cross” from being mere words to transforming the water into a kind of holy water that sanctifies Akiko’s body — once-denied any sanctity:

…I dipped a strip of linen into the water. Ink-black spider legs, fragile and minute as cracks in glazed porcelain, wiggled out from the words I had scribbled on the material. I touched the ink, and when my finger came away clean, I touched my mother’s eyelids and her cheeks, dipping her in blessed water. I rinsed the strip in the bowl of water, wrung it dry, and blotted her lips. “This is for your name, Omoni, so you can speak it true: Soon Hyo. Soon Hyo. Soon Hyo.” (Keller 208-9)

The words Beccah transcribed onto the linen strips become a final invocation for her mother’s life and death. Not only is this invocation about returning the lost dignity and sanctity to her mother’s life, Beccah returns her mother’s name to her, thereby repairing the cracked silence of her mother’s bare life. Calling out to her mother as “Soon Hyo” Beccah finally hails her mother with the identity she was born with, thereby again restoring the boundary between life and death. Shedding the name “Akiko” indicates how Soon Hyo is no longer the living dead. She is now simply “Omoni” (mother) and Soon Hyo. In this way, Beccah’s holy water annuls the homo sacer as well as releases her mother across the boundary between life and death.

Finally, Beccah’s death ritual for her mother elegantly illustrates how the corporeal body transcends mere identification. Examining every contour of her mother’s naked body, Beccah struggles with shame — that mutation point where pattern/randomness bifurcate into new systems of thought thereby resisting assimilation:
“Mutation is crucial because it names the bifurcation point at which the interplay between pattern and randomness causes the system to evolve in a new direction. … the variations that mark it as a deviation so decisive it can no longer be assimilated into the same.” (Hayles, www.english.ucla.edu/faculty/hayles/Flick.html)

By examining her shame through her mother’s body, Beccah resolves that schism between sanity and justice that blinded her from seeing her mother before:

My mother lay naked under her dress, in the body that had always embarrassed me both in its foreignness and in its similarity to mine. I looked now, fighting my shame, taking her body piece by piece — her face, her arms, her legs, working in a spiral toward the center — until I could see her in her entirety, without guilt or judgment. (Keller 209)

“Taking her [mother’s] body piece by piece”, Beccah is finally able to release her mother from the hegemonic framing Beccah replayed with her fingers throughout her childhood. Hence we see how Beccah affectively recognizes her mother’s body; through her shame, Beccah is able to see her mother anew. Beccah identifies her mother beyond merely the corporeal.

Although Comfort Woman is about Akiko’s journey towards wholeness, it is also about Beccah learning to recognize her own wholeness. If we conceptualize wholeness as the state of existing boundaries (as opposed to erased boundaries), then wholeness implies the ability to transgress those boundaries. Keller’s account of the camp reveals how state/sovereign power severs the body from bare life and how affect negotiates the body’s perpetual journey back towards wholeness. Keller depicts how the severance of one woman’s body from bare life extends into her daughter’s life as well; how state/sovereign power can viciously oppress the marked body and how it can do so just as
invisibly. Keller’s novel underscores how identity stems from the body but that it must go beyond the mere body to transgress and triumph over the hegemonic means that oppress it. When Beccah realizes that she did not bring a container large enough to hold her mother’s ashes, she starts to cry thinking, “there was more to a body than there should be, and less.” (Keller 212) Perhaps wholeness is precisely this concept — that the body is indeed in excess of itself; that we might learn more from it if we focus less on it in order to recognize that excess.

By recognizing the excesses of the body, Keller demonstrates subjective indeterminacy. Illustrating how not only state/sovereign power disrupts the subject but how it is constantly in negotiation within ourselves, Keller portrays indeterminacy as an ontological mobility necessary for survival. Not only is Keller’s virtual narrative about subjective indeterminacy, it is about how indeterminacy does not negate subjectivity. By examining the very particularized subjectivity of a Korean American comfort woman, Keller unpacks Akiko’s identity as profoundly transgressive of the many boundaries that broadly circumscribe Asian American subjectivity altogether. The boundaries that separate reality from super-reality, sanity from insanity, justice from injustice, and life from death, are all boundaries that concern the Asian American subject. But it is not about how we transgress these boundaries, rather the recognition of these boundaries in itself, that lends political immanence. In this way, Keller reveals how one individual’s experience lends to the agency of many more. Ultimately, Comfort Woman celebrates how Akiko’s subjectivity triumphs over hegemonic oppression via the very indeterminate nature of the Asian American transnational subject.
Like water that constitutes much of the body but easily flows beyond the body, Keller deploys the notion of this mobility in her final passage where Beccah says farewell to her mother:

Bending down, I cupped a handful of my mother’s river and held it over her box of ashes. “Mommy,” I said as the water dribbled through my fingers. “Ononi, please drink. Share this meal with me, a sip to know how much I love you.” (Keller 212)

Not only is water uncontainable as it dribbles through Beccah’s fingers, it is sustenance to both drink and eat as a meal as well as the material signification for her love to her mother. Keller’s inclusive troping of water can prefigure the theoretical troping of affect in our understanding of identity in that it flows beyond our understanding of the body. Essential to recognizing ourselves through our bodies, affect helps us locate what is in excess of corporeality such that we might learn to transgress the boundaries that circumscribe us. In Beccah’s dream that night, she swims in that river again, “for hours, for weeks, for years” (Keller 213) and when she is finally too tired to swim any more, she decides to yield: “I opened my mouth to drown, expecting to suck in heavy water, but instead I breathed in air, clear and blue.” (ibid) Like Beccah, we might decide to cease wrestling with our bodies and incorporate the notion of that which exceeds our bodies. Just as water allows Beccah to find her mother, affect as the trope that mobilizes identity might allow us to coalesce on terms beyond the body. Hence, imagining indeterminacy as processual of emergence, deconstructive Asian American subjectivity introduces the political immanence behind transnationality. Asian American transnationality demonstrates a self-conscious space that disallows the sedimentation of identity and sustains political kinship via affinity over naturalized identity. It is in this way that the
indeterminate nature of Asian American transnationality reveals the very material conditions and consequences of hegemonic power inequity.
Works Cited


Hayles, N. Katherine. “Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers,” http://www.english.ucla.edu/faculty/hayles/Flick.html


