

ASIAN AMERICAN WAR STORIES: TRAUMA AND HEALING IN CONTEMPORARY  
ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

Jeffrey Tyler Gibbons: Asian American War Stories: Trauma and Healing in Contemporary  
Asian American Literature  
(Under the direction of Jennifer Ho)

My dissertation argues that an important, though little acknowledged, aspect of Asian American subjectivity is the capacity to struggle with the traumatic effects of American wars in Asia and develop unique paths to healing and post-traumatic growth. Asian immigration to the United States in the twentieth century was profoundly influenced by the United States' wars in Asia—from the war in the Philippines at the turn of the century, to the war in the Pacific, to the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Each of these wars produced enduring traumatic effects on the unintended casualties of war—those civilians, immigrants, and refugees affected by the violence and who grapple with their symptoms decades after the war's end. Yet, in American war literature we rarely encounter narratives that reflect the post-war, post-traumatic journeys of these survivors, the unintended casualties. In this project I examine texts published between 1990 and 2014 that depict the war traumas and subsequent healing journeys of Asian American immigrants, refugees, and civilians affected by American wars in Asia. The narratives by Chang-rae Lee, Lan Cao, Nora Okja Keller, Julie Otsuka, and Lawson Inada reveal both the enduring impact and legacy of these wars that inevitably remain with the traumatic survivors and the diverse means by which they discover healing in the face of tremendous suffering. The remarkable texts in this dissertation demonstrate that while war and trauma are a constitutive part

of Asian American history and identity, it does not come to define Asian American subjectivity—the struggle for survival and the desire for healing does.

To my wife and best friend, Soung-a.

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## Introduction

This past fall the Asian American Literary Review published a special collection of scholarship and art that commemorated the fortieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon in April 1975, which marked the end of combat in Vietnam. The collection edited by Cathy Schlund-Vials and Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, “(Re)Collecting the Vietnam War,” presents a wide-ranging perspective into the diverse impact of the war, even four decades after its “end.” In particular, Viet Nguyen, author of both *Race and Resistance* and the recently published novel, *The Sympathizer*, offers a critique of American “war literature” in his essay, “On True War Stories.” In the essay Nguyen reacts to a quotation from Tim O’Brien’s canonical text, *The Things They Carried*, in which the narrator states that “[w]ar is hell, but that’s not the half of it, because war is mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory” (O’Brien 86-7). The son of Vietnamese refugees who escaped from war’s violence, Nguyen takes great umbrage with the idea that “war is fun” and, on a larger scale, the minimal acknowledgement of the plights of civilians in American war literature and discourse. He argues the following:

what if we understood immigrant stories to be war stories? And what if we understood that war stories disturb even more when they are not about soldiers, when they show us how normal war is, how war touches and transforms everything and everybody, including, most of all, civilians? War stories that thrill may be true, but they only make war more alluring, something happens somewhere else, over there. Another kind of true war story reminds us of something much more uncomfortable, that war begins, and ends, over here, with the support of citizens for the war machine, with the arrival of frightened refugees fleeing wars that we have instigated. Telling these kinds of stories, or learning to

read, see, and hear boring war stories as war stories, is an important way to treat the disorder of our military-industrial complex. Rather than being disturbed by the idea that war is hell, this complex thrives on it. (145)

Nguyen raises the powerful point that dominant American discourse simultaneously makes war alluring and subjugates the plight of those rarely acknowledged—civilians, immigrants, refugees. For my project I embrace his plea to consider “immigrant stories” as “war stories.” The Asian American texts that I examine in this project depict the diverse experiences of those individuals often overlooked and rarely considered in war literature. Indeed, the Asian American war stories in this project demonstrate just how much “war touches and transforms everything and everybody, including, most of all, civilians.” Lan Cao’s *The Lotus and the Storm* focuses on the decades-long physical and psychological burden that a Vietnamese immigrant struggles through as a result of the violence of the Vietnam War and that she carries with her to the United States. Chang-rae Lee’s *The Surrendered* reveals a similarly prolonged journey of a Korean War orphan who loses her entire family and leaves her native land for the United States. Lawson Inada’s poetry about the reverberating, multi-generational impact of Japanese American internment during World War II emphasizes that war “touches and transforms everything and everybody,” just as his work reinforces the spectral quality of America’s history of minority oppression. These narratives of civilians, immigrants, and refugees disturb the reader and force the reader to consider the extensive, incessant, seemingly never-ending impact of war on multiple populations. Furthermore, these Asian American texts highlight the spectral legacy of the United States’ wars in Asia and how the traumas inflicted upon multiple generations, across multiple continents, echo into the present day. Consequently, I ask the reader to embrace just these types of American war stories. Immigrant war stories. Civilian war stories. Stories that reflect upon the post-war, post-trauma journeys of the “frightened refugees fleeing wars.” Stories that remind us that, indeed, “war begins, and ends, over here.” My project examines what these narratives

reveal to us about the enduring impact of United States' wars in Asia, the myriad paths of survival that trauma survivors embrace, and the diverse forms of healing that they discover.

The significance of these Asian American texts that examine war trauma expands more broadly than simply revealing deeper insight into the overwhelming effects of the wars on individuals and communities—the narratives inform and expand our understanding of war's impact on Asian American cultural production. In his recent monograph, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, And Not Writing, as an Asian American*, Min Hyoung Song studies the generation of Asian American writers that arose as a result of the implementation of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. He notes that in the decade prior to the Congressional act, “most Asians in America were born in the U.S.; in the decades after, they became numerically more foreign born” (31). In his monograph Song stresses the “notion of children to refer to the ways in which the Immigration and Nationality Act helped give birth to a whole generation of Asian Americans who started to reach the age and full adulthood in the early 1990s and to the ways in which this generation has entered into the popular imagination as embodying the many promises and anxieties surrounding the imagination of children in the United States” (38). Thus, Song embraces the implementation of the Immigration and Nationality Act to study the transformation of Asian American cultural production and subjectivity post-1965; he examines texts produced by authors directly affected by the shift in the United States' immigration policy towards Asia. My project adds a further, significant layer to this transformation by studying the emphasis that Asian American authors place on the transformative impact of American wars in Asia that parallel this same time period. Moreover, my project spans the gap that Song illuminates between the pre-1965 and post-1965 Asian American population. Lan Cao, Nora Okja Keller, and Chang-rae Lee were all born overseas and immigrated to the United States with their

families post-1965, while both Lawson Inada and Julie Otsuka were born in California pre-1965. Collectively they offer a diverse perspective into the extensive, cross-generational impact of war on individuals, families, and communities—an impact that continues to influence theirs and subsequent generations, just as their diversity gestures to the heterogeneity of Asian Americans.

Yet, even more important than their personal histories, their work expands our understanding of both Asian American and American literature in the early stages of this new century. As Song argues in his monograph, “one does not read and study Asian American literature to understand only Asian Americans. One also does so in order to understand American literature in its expansive plasticity and its potential for constant renewal” (8). He adds that reading Asian American literature as American literature “calls attention to the ways in which Asian Americans bring their constitutive histories, characteristic concerns, and heterogeneous perspectives to bear on the writing of contemporary American literature as a whole” (10). While my project emphasizes the diverse perspectives into war, trauma, and healing that we discover in the works of these writers, the conclusions that I draw speak not only to an Asian American audience, but to an American audience writ large—to a population whose lives continue to be inundated with American military adventures abroad, via the interminable “Global War on Terror.” Moreover, these authors’ reflections upon war trauma’s lasting impact on civilians illuminate consequences of our nation’s foreign policy that rarely find voice in our national discourse—a discourse that is increasingly dominated by portrayals of refugees and immigrants as threats to American culture, tradition, heritage, and security. “Asian American literature is at its best when it refuses conventions and helps readers see their past, present, and future in dramatically different ways,” Song notes (11). Indeed, the works in this project

demonstrate just how much the past histories of American military interventions in Asia continue to reverberate into and inform the present.

While each of the texts that I examine in my project portrays war and trauma and the associated legacies from diverse, even divergent, perspectives, the combined significance of their writing is noteworthy. Together they speak to the incessant presence and wide-ranging impact of war's violence on not just soldiers, but civilians and refugees, children and adults, long after combat has ceased and long after many of the unintended victims of war have fled their homes and their countries. These war stories reflect both the individual and collective traumas generated by American wars in Asia. They similarly emphasize that the journey of post-traumatic healing is not just an individual struggle, but a collective one as well; each of these works speak to the profound healing that is possible, even in the midst of persistent post-traumatic suffering. Consequently, even as we unravel the distinctly unique portrayals of war trauma in these Asian American texts, the similarities between them speak to the implication that the lessons of former wars continue to inform the present day. They highlight the myriad consequences of the United States' extensive military engagements and underscore the problematic ramifications of disregarding such long-term, seemingly unforeseen, effects. They inform our understanding of the continued persecution and maltreatment of refugees and immigrants. They illuminate the resounding implications of a nationalistic discourse that seeks out solutions to conflict through war and violence. Most important, in spite of this emphasis on the detrimental, enduring effects of war that these Asian American texts present, they simultaneously add to our understanding of the hope and the healing that trauma survivors discover in their long journeys towards recovery.

### **Theories of Trauma and Healing**

The most significant link between all of the texts in this project is the presence and influence of trauma in the trajectory of each narrative. The protagonists experience both the psychological and physical violence of war at various stages of their lives. The violence varies—from unjust incarceration, to forced prostitution, to the indiscriminant deaths of relatives, to the severing of family relationships—and the texts reveal the diverse repercussions of such war trauma. Moreover, the lineage of trauma that connects these texts results from the wars in Asia engaged by the United States. This project examines the ways in which these texts depict the immense difficulties associated with life after war and the various ways that these authors reflect upon the obstacles conveying life in the post-traumatic world. Cathy Caruth's work in *Unclaimed Experience* stresses the significant consequences of trauma on an individual's memory and psyche, as well as its impact on an individual's ability to convey traumatic memory in language. First, she notes how trauma is located "in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). This is the "unclaimed experience" of her theory: the way(s) that the traumatic experience is not fully known or assimilated fully into memory. This lack of assimilation and comprehension results in both a "latency" and "traumatic repetition," whereby the survivor only comes to "know," to understand, the traumatic event later in life. On the surface, such a definition screams of doubt and unremitting suffering—of a desire and struggle to understand one's pain and a simultaneous wish to simply forget, in order to alleviate the pain. For Caruth these memories arise out of the traumatic wound that ultimately offers hope in "the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*" [emphasis in original] (2). This paradoxical nature of the traumatic wound forms a vital part of my readings; this connection to the past, while destabilizing and at times debilitating,

nevertheless also offers a unique means of eventually navigating the post-traumatic world. Yet, the paradox of the wound “that cries out” points to the epistemological question of how one comes to know trauma and the associated difficulty in representation. In each of the ensuing chapters I examine the unique means by which these Asian American writers grapple with a central problem of trauma: “what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands witness” (Caruth 5). Consequently, given a wound that “demands witness,” Caruth’s work points to the interconnectivity of trauma, of not only how individuals are implicated in another’s wound(s) but also how they are implicated in another’s healing; she stresses “the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (8). This interconnectivity—the ways that individuals are connected in both the traumatic event and in post-traumatic healing—provides a foundation for my project. These Asian American war stories demonstrate that while the traumatic event uniquely affects each individual, the ensuing healing journey implicates another—just as the fragmented nature of memory obscures one’s ability to make one’s traumatic memory “whole,” it also offers one the chance to rewrite the past, to generate a narrative anew and to (re)tell one’s story.

In order to unravel the intersections between trauma, war, and Asian American subjectivity, I embrace a perspective on post-traumatic suffering that emphasizes the potential for healing and recovery, even in the midst of debilitating, enduring consequences. To start, I utilize a contemporary interpretation of melancholia that suggests viewing one’s connection to past traumas in a depathologized way. Even though their work does not focus specifically on the



impact of war on Asian American subjectivity, scholars David Eng and Shinhee Han's theory of racial melancholia introduces a concept that gestures to the predicament in which Asian Americans uniquely find themselves in broader American discourse—a position of liminality that is uniquely affected by the legacy of United States' wars in Asia. Eng and Han argue that “discourses of American exceptionalism and democratic myths of liberty, individualism, and inclusion force a misremembering of these exclusions, an enforced psychic amnesia that can return only as a type of repetitive national haunting—a type of negative or absent presence” (347). The diverse narratives of refugees and immigrants displaced by wars in Asia speak to the type of haunting invoked by Eng and Han. The former comfort woman in Hawaii. The orphaned Korean woman in New York City. The former South Vietnamese officer and his daughter in Virginia. The Japanese Americans formerly incarcerated during World War II. Each separate narrative in this project presents a unique examination of this “negative or absent presence” that contradicts the traditional, nationalistic discourses of exceptionalism and inclusion. For Eng and Han racial melancholia defines the process of assimilation such Asian Americans face; it reflects not only the “haunting,” or an “absent presence,” but also the racialization process that they encounter in a culture typically defined by a black-white binary. In other words, this “negative or absent presence” speaks to the racialization of Asian Americans as “foreigner,” as perpetually “foreign.” As Lisa Lowe argues, “‘immigrant acts,’ then, attempts to name the *contradictions* of Asian immigration, which at different moments in the last century and a half of Asian entry into the United States have placed Asians ‘within’ the U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets, yet linguistically, culturally, and racially marked Asians as ‘foreign’ and ‘outside’ the national polity” [emphasis in original] (8). Thus, the immigrant displaced by war in her home country encounters a culture and discourse in the United States

hostile to her presence, just as a previously-incarcerated Japanese American citizen stands as a contradictory testament to the exceptionalism and “democratic myths” that ground American nationalist discourse. Despite this status, though, Eng and Han argue that they are “more concerned with exploring this psychic condition as a depathologized structure of feeling. From this particular vantage, melancholia might be thought of as underpinning our everyday conflict and struggles with experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization” (ibid). This transition is important: by depathologizing this connection to the past, we simultaneously acknowledge the predicament of Asian Americans in the United States and establish a potential means of coping with and overcoming such subjugation and racism. In his work with David Kazanjian on the collection *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Eng argues further for the significance of depathologization to not just Asian American subjectivity but trauma and healing on an even larger scale: “while the twentieth century resounds with catastrophic losses of bodies, spaces, and ideals, psychic and material practices of loss and its remains are productive for history and for politics. Avowals of and attachments to loss can produce a world of remains as a world of new representations and alternative meanings” (5). The connection to the past afforded by melancholia ultimately offers the survivor the capacity to produce “new representations and alternative meanings.” While the consequences of war and conflict, of displacement and immigration, inevitably continue years and decades after the event, the traumatic “remains” present the trauma survivor with a means of confronting such history—a history that, again, often remains silenced and subjugated as part of national discourse. Lowe formulates a description of Asian American subjectivity that similarly speaks to the unique power of such a condition: “[r]ather than expressing a ‘failed’ integration of Asians into the American cultural sphere, this distance [from the national culture] preserves Asian American

culture as an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlike varieties of silence emerge into articularity” (6). The texts in this project collectively emphasize the significance of this “alternative site.” While these narratives of war and trauma highlight the healing engendered by the connection to the past, they likewise convey narratives of the United States’ wars in Asia that run counter to the dominant traditional discourse associated with each. As such, these Asian American texts undeniably “fracture and retrace” the histories of American violence in Asia and collectively articulate an oppositional narrative. For Eng and Kazanjian, “loss is inseparable from what remains,” for both bad *and* good—this is what makes the connection to the traumatic past potentially fruitful, productive, and even defiant (2).

One of the primary ways I wish to investigate the paths that the individuals from these texts take to overcome their post-traumatic symptoms is through an acknowledgement of the corporeality and materiality of the unique bodies that these texts offer, in conjunction with examining the ways in which psychological and physical illness are tied together. In her groundbreaking work on disability, *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson simultaneously acknowledges physical disability and impairment, while arguing against the cultural discourse that renders the disabled body deviant and non-normative. She argues that “representation thus simultaneously buttresses an embodied version of normative identity and shapes a narrative of corporeal difference that excludes those whose bodies or behaviors do not conform” (7). Indeed, many of the victims of trauma that we find in these Asian American texts face not only the stigmatization of being a minority within the United States, but also the stigma of inhabiting a body that does not adhere to cultural norms of “able” bodies. As Thomson further asserts, “disability, then, is the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property

of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (5). The texts, however, demonstrate the extraordinary nature of their bodies—and minds—as they traverse their post-traumatic worlds. While they undeniably suffer at times, the narratives instead emphasize their capacity for healing. Most significant, Thomson argues that “the physical impairments that render someone ‘disabled’ are almost never absolute or static; they are dynamic, contingent conditions affected by many external factors and usually fluctuating over time” (13). This dynamic quality of disability and the associated instability of the body destabilizes the cultural construct of the disabled as “other” and suggests a way of understanding disability as temporary. The conditions that create “disability” are indeed “dynamic” and fluctuate over time, just as one’s normativized status as “disabled” does; this instability thus offers a means of finding common ground between those “able” bodies whose normative status is actually quite insecure, just as it offers us a method of reading and understanding these Asian American narratives of post-traumatic suffering and healing.

Thomson’s theory of extraordinary bodies informs more recent work by Suzanne Bost, who similarly emphasizes both the corporeality and fluidity of the body. Bost writes that “illness leads to new forms of identification based on the permeability, suffering, and interdependence of bodies” (5). This interdependence is a common thread throughout my project. The traumatized individuals that we encounter in these texts inhabit bodies that are constantly in flux, from their physical suffering, from their traumatic memories and flashbacks, from the instability that trauma injects into their relationships. Still, through the course of their post-traumatic journeys they ultimately come to the understanding that their healing, however that might be defined, relies on the support and recognition of others. Later in her work Bost elaborates further on the associated concept of permeability: “*in reality*, boundaries and bodies are infinitely permeable.

It is only *in theory* that identity is clearly demarcated and only *in theory* that biology, temporality, and social situations are fixed limitations” [emphasis in original] (26). Much like Thomson, Bost argues for the acknowledgement of the materiality of the body, as well as the body’s (and the mind’s) ability to adapt and to change. Thus, the concepts of “able” and “disabled” become quite problematic—an instability that simultaneously offers a means of recognizing others’ suffering, acknowledging their pain and previous trauma, and ultimately allowing for collective healing, instead of individual torment. Bost argues that viewing the body through the lens of permeability allows for a more “accurate way of understanding the complexity of identity and an effective way to shift politics from essentialist, exclusionary, or homogenizing understandings of identity toward a politics based on shared needs, shared vulnerability, and shared permeability” (21). The healing that comes after war and trauma that we find in these texts indeed gestures to and asks the reader to embrace such a politics of “shared needs, shared vulnerability, and shared permeability.”

Clearly the potential for healing, even in the face of life-altering trauma and debilitating illness, is what interests me in each of the texts in my project. There is no question that the violence of war generates suffering on a massive scale—frankly, on a scale larger than most national discourse acknowledges. The collection of Asian American texts in this project forces us to consider the plight of those poorly addressed in American war literature: the refugees forced to evacuate their homes, the immigrants displaced by wars they did not seek, the citizens unjustly incarcerated by their own government, the women forced into prostitution by occupying militaries. These narratives explore the immense psychological and physical toll exacted by American wars in Asia that produce myriad consequences that continue decades after the violence of combat has ceased. Just as important, however, these same stories also ask us to

consider what healing means in the face of such suffering and how individuals navigate their respective paths. Judith Herman asserts in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*, her groundbreaking work on traumatic growth, that “recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (133). She observes how “survivors challenge us to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, to make meaning of present symptoms in light of past events,” and this is exactly what these Asian American texts ask us to do with respect to American wars in Asia (3). The journeys of these trauma survivors compel us to reconsider the standard historical discourse that dominates the United States’ military combat in Asia through the course of the twentieth century—and they push us to consider the current “global war on terror” through the same lens. In her analysis of the evolution of the disabled female body, Thomson argues that the extraordinary bodies of individuals like Sethe from *Beloved* “bear the etchings of individual and collective history” (18). Undoubtedly the trauma survivors found in *The Surrendered*, *The Lotus and the Storm*, *Comfort Woman*, and the other texts I examine bear the same; their post-traumatic suffering reflects not just the individual wounds that they experienced during war, but the larger collective history that informs their trauma. While many of the wounds that we encounter in these narratives remain hidden, their bodies’ extended suffering reflects the “etchings” of both “individual and collective history.” Their individual pain is inextricably linked to the history associated with the wars they experienced. Their journeys toward healing are thus both individual and collective pursuits. Near the conclusion of her work on traumatic growth Herman writes:

Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group recreates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and

affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exults her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity. (214)

The narratives that I examine in this project undoubtedly portray post-traumatic suffering on an individual level. The former internee's pain, the former comfort woman's psychological distress, the Korean immigrant's cancer, the Vietnamese refugee's multiple personality disorder: each post-war journey we encounter is unique and dominated by individual circumstances. However, at the same time their suffering gestures to a plight that connects across wars and ethnicities: their traumas "degrade" them; their traumas "dehumanize" them; their traumas "isolate" them. And in the end, the healing that they discover, however minor and minimal it might appear, likewise gestures to the "sustaining bonds" of a friend, a family member, another trauma survivor, or even the community writ large. The restoration of their humanity requires not only the massive individual struggles that we encounter but also the collective support that comes from acknowledging their histories and witnessing their stories.

As I have noted throughout this introduction, the texts that I examine in this project reveal the myriad paths of post-traumatic healing that individuals must grapple with and embrace in the aftermath of war trauma. Each of the protagonists experiences this war trauma in different ways across different periods of United States history in Asia—a family incarcerated in the United States during World War II, a young woman forced into prostitution at the hands of the Japanese army, a young girl orphaned during the Korean War, a young girl engulfed by chaos in the middle of Saigon. Their traumas and the associated histories are unique. Yet, what unites these narratives—what unites these characters as Asian American—is the healing that they discover by acknowledging and confronting their illnesses, sharing their struggles, and ultimately offering testimony to the enduring repercussions of the United States' interventions in Asia. By assuming agency in the face of post-traumatic suffering and giving voice to their traumas, these

characters illuminate the collective work—the collective healing—that Asian American writing can accomplish. Thus, Asian American war literature simultaneously gives voice to the stories that traditional war literature ignores—those of the immigrants, the refugees, the civilians—and demonstrates the healing that is possible, both textually and discursively.

### **The Chapters**

With “Discovering Beauty through Illness and Failure in Chang-rae Lee’s *The Surrendered*” I begin my exploration of trauma and healing in Asian American literature by examining Chang-rae Lee’s Korean War novel *The Surrendered*. The novel presents the stories of three individuals—June Han, Hector Brennan, and Sylvie Tanner—whose lives intersect in an orphanage at the end of the Korean War and through whom Lee portrays and studies the legacies of war in modern society. The intersection of life and death ultimately comes to define each of the above characters—all suffer multiple, lasting physical and psychological wounds in war and subsequently embrace individual paths of post-war survival. I engage two interrelated arguments in my reading of Lee’s text. First, I argue for reading the myriad post-traumatic failures of Sylvie, Hector, and June in a liberating way. To do so I invoke the lens offered by Judith Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*, who argues that “to live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die; rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite...rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures” (186-7). Halberstam’s rendering of queer failure allows a reading of the characters’ post-war struggles in a much more redemptive light. With this in mind, I also argue for reading their related negotiation of illness, disability, and post-traumatic stress in a generative way—as a means of embracing their bodies and coming to terms with their war-time traumas.



Ultimately, I assert that by emphasizing the myriad failures of the characters in *The Surrendered*, as well as the queer identities they assume, we simultaneously acknowledge their woundedness and reveal a beauty that is possible in the midst of incessant trauma.

To continue my examination of trauma and healing, I transition in my second chapter, “Open Wounds and Half Lives: Post-traumatic Illness and the Struggle to Heal in Lan Cao’s *The Lotus and the Storm*,” to an analysis of Lan Cao’s most recent work, *The Lotus and the Storm*, a Vietnam War narrative involving multiple forms of loss and trauma. Cao’s text particularly emphasizes the fracturing effects of trauma on both individuals and families. Three individuals narrate the story—Minh, the patriarch of a South Vietnamese family; Mai, his youngest daughter; and Bao, one of Mai’s multiple personalities. No individual in the narrative survives the war without suffering some form of loss, whether it is death, wounding, amputation, or even unrequited love. In the end, however, the fractured narrative focuses on the trajectory of Mai’s efforts, across three decades, to overcome the multiple losses she suffers as a child during the war in Vietnam. Cao’s text continually forces the reader to question identity and “reality” as the narrative progresses, as well as individuals’ different survival choices in the aftermath of trauma. At one point Mai describes her post-traumatic state of consciousness:

Everything that occurred then occurs right here, right now, and repeats in a perpetual present-tense time loop. Every moment I spent with my sister before this moment also occurs again and again in the present tense. It is time bending, taking away my breath. I am still there, at that moment when God or fate or a split second before or after could have made a difference but did not. And that is still how I am today, in a half-life that only waits and sometimes hopes. (106-7)

This “half-life” is what I explore in the chapter: the Vietnam War splits Mai’s life in multiple ways, through the killing of her sister, through the fracturing of her mind into multiple personalities, through the division of her family, through her eventual displacement from Vietnam to the United States. Yet, by embracing a depathologized reading of melancholia and

concepts of traumatic growth, I argue that Mai's multiple personalities ultimately allow her to confront the myriad traumas that she experienced during the war, to reconcile with her illness, and to embrace a more sustainable path in her present-day life.

In the third chapter, "Testimony in Asian American Literature," I examine two disparate forms of testimony found in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* and Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*. Lisa Lowe argues in *Immigrant Acts* that "[t]o consider testimony and testimonial as constituting a 'genre' of cultural production is significant for Asian immigrant women, for it extends the scope of what constitutes legitimate knowledges, to include other forms and practices that have been traditionally excluded from both empirical and aesthetic modes of evaluation" (156). In this chapter I embrace Lowe's call to consider testimony as a genre of cultural production and emphasize how the fictional testimonies in Keller's and Otsuka's texts are crucial to our understanding of the concept of healing in the aftermath of war and trauma. Keller's text introduces a relatively traditional form, in which the former comfort woman, Akiko, offers a recorded testimony that she provides to her daughter, Beccah. The testimony correspondingly represents a final act of healing for Akiko (and on a larger scale, her fellow comfort women), as well as the means of passing on the historical legacy to Beccah. In contrast, Otsuka's text introduces a more complicated example: the narrative concludes with the "confession" by the patriarch of a Japanese American family. His statement ends the narrative and seemingly offers little in the form of testimonial healing; nevertheless, it is just as significant as the testimony in *Comfort Woman* towards an understanding of the significance of this form of cultural production. Both narratives gesture to the significance of testimony and witnessing in fostering individual and collective healing in the face of post-traumatic suffering, and they likewise delineate the connection between this individual suffering and political struggle for

recognition and subjectivity. The disparity in the two texts reinforces the seemingly innumerable paths that trauma survivors encounter in the post-war environment.

For my final chapter, “The Trauma of Citizenship: Collective Healing in Lawson Inada’s Internment Poetry,” I examine several long poems from Lawson Inada, the Japanese American poet and scholar who was incarcerated in multiple internment camps during World War II. I conclude with Inada’s work because the long poems expand the study of trauma and healing to the collective level, by reflecting upon the traumatic rupture inflicted on the Japanese American community by the United States government’s unjust incarceration. His poetry offers the most temporal distance between the tragedies of war and the present day—we encounter war trauma literature inspired by decades of reflection and healing. As such, Inada’s internment camp poetry offers a unique contribution to our understanding of both the long-term historical and cultural significance of the internment and its traumatic effects on the Japanese American community. In the chapter I focus on two poems, “At the Stronghold” and “Drawing the Line,” in which Inada depicts returns to specific internment camp locations in the present day and reframes the history of Japanese American no-no boys and draft resisters to foster healing on a collective level. He embraces two historical figures that represent defiance and integrity in the face of unjust oppression; in doing so, he unearths the collision and layering of history at the sites, to examine the long-term historical and cultural significance of internment. He strives to ensure that the lessons and history of internment are not subjugated within the dominant national discourse surrounding World War II. Consequently, the poetic returns to the internment camp sites are not simply reflections on the trauma experienced by Japanese Americans, they also afford the poet the opportunity to critique an even longer history of United States government oppression of minorities. Inada’s poetic returns thus ultimately suggest that the post-war healing associated

with internment is not confined solely to the Japanese American community—for the poet the healing of the wounds of internment is an American journey.

In my project on trauma and healing in Asian American literature I will illuminate both the diversity of paths that Asian Americans have embraced in the aftermath of the United States' wars in Asia, as well as the common experiences and struggles that they have faced. Song asserts that “[i]t is no easy task for the imagination to look at a population as diverse as the one called into being by the term Asian American and see in that population shared experiences, common causes, and structural affinities” (10). The texts in my project speak to the heterogeneity of a population “called into being by the term Asian American.” Nevertheless, at the same time these fictional narratives reflect the “shared experiences” of a heterogeneous population affected in similar ways by war, trauma, displacement, and immigration. In essence, healing and survival is a “common cause”—reflecting the necessity and desire not to submit to the troubling consequences of war trauma, dislocation, and subjugation, but rather to grapple with their symptoms and histories and discover a means of shaping their own futures. As Lowe writes, “‘immigrant acts’ names the *agency* of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans: the *acts* of labor, resistance, memory, and survival, as well as the politicized cultural work that emerges from dislocation and identification” [emphasis in original] (9). Each of the narratives depicted in the works of Lee, Cao, Otsuka, Keller, and Inada speak to just these type efforts. Their texts reveal the myriad journeys and struggles that Asian Americans have grappled with over the past century—in the face of significant war trauma and post-traumatic suffering the survivors reveal the unique “*acts* of labor, resistance, memory, and survival” as they negotiate their post-war lives and discover the means to adapt to dislocation and heal their suffering. This is the “politicized cultural work,” the “labor” and “resistance” and “survival” of which Lowe speaks: these Asian

American war stories illuminate a perspective rarely addressed in American war literature—that of the refugee, the immigrant, the civilian traumatized and displaced by war, forced to reestablish their identity and agency in the midst of their wounding. In doing so these texts resist a standard narrative and work to revise the nation’s cultural memories associated with its wars over the past century. These narratives depict the “lived experiences” of the thousands of Asian Americans affected and transformed by the United States’ wars in Asia; in doing so they discursively shift our understanding of war trauma’s impact on not only Asian Americans but the nation writ large (Song 13). The remarkable texts by Lee, Cao, Otsuka, Keller, and Inada reveal that while war and trauma are a “constitutive” part of Asian American history and identity, it does not come to define them—the struggle for survival and the desire for healing does.

## Chapter 1: Discovering Beauty through Illness and Failure in Chang-rae Lee's *The Surrendered*

At the end of Chang-rae Lee's evocative Korean War novel *The Surrendered*, the novel's protagonists, Hector Brennan and June Han, journey to a centuries-old ossuary in Solferino, Italy. In Solferino Lee offers a final scene that reminds us of the incredibly destructive nature of war. The ossuary—layered with thousands of bones from top to bottom—commemorates the Battle of Solferino, a particularly gruesome battle in Italy's Second Independence War in the mid-nineteenth century that resulted in thousands killed and tens of thousands wounded. The battle and its aftermath ultimately served as the inspiration for Henry Dunant to establish the International Red Cross later in the century. At this point in Lee's narrative June suffers from an especially virulent form of stomach cancer and has lost her eyesight, and Hector must carry her to the ossuary and describe the site of their pilgrimage to her. As they enter the chapel, June asks of Hector, "It must be beautiful. Is it beautiful?" (483). Despite being surrounded by thousands of skulls, femurs, pelvises, and myriad other bones, despite both he and June spending their entire adult lives recovering from the traumatic memories and physical scars incurred in the Korean War, Hector surprisingly responds, "*It is beautiful... This is our place*" [emphasis in original] (ibid). Inevitably, one must question how they could find such a macabre location *beautiful*—it would seem that a person in June's situation, an individual bordering on death, would prefer a brighter, more encouraging place to visit in her final hours. Instead, as I will show in this chapter, the chapel at Solferino couldn't be a more appropriate place for June to spend her final hours with Hector—seemingly everything about both of their lives speaks to their

abilities to navigate the world against the grain, on a non-normative path. James Kyung-jin Lee, in his essay “Illness, Disability, and the Beautiful Life,” offers a particularly insightful reading of Hector’s surprising response to June’s query; Lee asserts that this beauty “is made possible only when woundedness—disability, illness, bodies deemed unhealthy or imperfect—is neither segregated nor avoided, but instead made a crucial dimension of human relationality” (xii). I want to expand on Lee’s argument that woundedness, illness, and disability illuminates and makes beauty possible, even through relentless suffering. Throughout *The Surrendered*, via the narratives of June, Hector, and Sylvie Tanner, we encounter the diverse, non-normative routes that individuals take in their struggles with post-traumatic stress, illness, and disability in the aftermath of war. Each character experiences myriad traumas in their youths that remain with them through adulthood, and each embraces a subsequent path of coping and healing that does not abide by the conventions of “normal” society. Through the perspectives offered by contemporary trauma and disability theory, as well as Judith Halberstam’s recent work *The Queer Art of Failure*, I will argue that by emphasizing the myriad failures of the characters in *The Surrendered*, as well as the queer identities they assume, we simultaneously acknowledge their woundedness and reveal the beauty that is possible in the midst of incessant trauma.

### **Foundational Trauma**

The traumas that Hector, Sylvie, and June each experience in their youth come to dominate their adult lives and inform our understanding of each character. As Cathy Caruth writes in *Unclaimed Experience*, “the story of trauma, then, as the narrative of belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality...rather attests to its endless impact on life” (7). Needless to say, *The Surrendered* is a “story of trauma,” as the characters’ war-time traumas undoubtedly generate an “endless impact” on their lives—they experience devastating losses

during their youths and the narrative centers on how they suffer through the traumatic effects in their individual ways. The losses of loved ones that they experience leave holes in their lives that they struggle, and for the most part fail, to fill. And their traumatic memories sporadically, yet consistently, erupt and dominate their consciousness as adults. As Caruth writes in her foundational trauma theory collection, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, “trauma is not experienced as a mere repression or defense, but as a temporal delay that carries beyond the shock of the first moment” (10). This “temporal delay” is what makes *The Surrendered* so fascinating: while each character undoubtedly struggles with similar post-traumatic symptoms—recurring memories, flashbacks that erupt unexpectedly, the paradoxical desire to forget and remember, the knowledge of trauma that arises years after the fact—their lives initially intersect at different stages of individual suffering and recovery. This temporal conflict complicates their ability to understand and connect with each other, even as they each grapple with the similar “temporal delay” that Caruth emphasizes.

While June is the youngest of the three, the narrative actually begins with the initial tragedies that befall her during the war. Just eleven years of age at the start of the war, June’s trauma entails the loss of her entire family—both parents and three siblings. First, June’s father is executed by Republic of Korea (ROK) Army soldiers who believe he is a communist sympathizer. June does not witness the actual execution; she only watches the initial act from a ROK Army truck evacuating her village’s civilians: “her father and the others were pushed to their knees. The officer paused for a moment and then waved the driver of their truck to pull away. June never heard any shots” (16). Of course, this lack of closure is only one of several traumatic losses that she experiences. Her father’s execution then begins a months-long ordeal for June—the tortuous evacuation south, fleeing combat—that results in the loss of the rest of her



family and that eventually ends at New Hope orphanage. During the journey June witnesses the bombing of her mother and sister. Their deaths highlight the indiscriminate nature of war: after a ROK Army convoy stops to harass some of the refugees, including her mother and sister, a United States Air Force jet passing overhead errantly bombs the ROK truck. June watched as “[her sister and mother] were embracing, kissing, clothing each other in their arms, before the terrible onrush of sound and light” (24). Thus, her mother and sister are literally obliterated, and they disappear from June’s life just as her father did. She cannot find any of their remains or any mementos; they simply vanish in the explosion. June is left to care for her younger twin siblings, Hee-Soo and Ji-Young; yet, shortly afterwards, in a food- and sleep-deprived stupor, she loses them in a train accident. After finding space on the roof of an overstuffed train car, “[June] wanted to sleep, to sleep a little bit again. But the train violently bucked, sending her hurtling against the metal rib on the front side of the wall...it was only when she checked her own skin for blood that she realized they were gone. Her brother and her sister” (28). June finds both of them thrown from the train—her sister is clearly dead, but her brother survived the crash with one of his legs amputated. In this, her third foundational trauma, June must leave behind her dying brother Ji-Young, in order to save herself. As Ji-Young loses consciousness he asks her to promise to come back for him, and she accedes. However, he knowingly consoles her, ““It’s okay. You don’t have to.”” (31). Thus, in the short span of just a couple months, June loses her father, her mother and sister, and her two remaining siblings at the start of the Korean War, which renders her an orphan. Moreover, at the age of just eleven, she actually witnesses each of their deaths. Thus, even though the first lines of the narrative state “THE JOURNEY WAS NEARLY OVER,” *The Surrendered* demonstrates that June’s traumatic journey is just beginning [emphasis in original] (1).

Hector and Sylvie both suffer similar wartime losses as well, albeit during separate conflicts. Hector's foundational trauma is the death of his father, Jackie, during World War II. Jackie is famous in their hometown of Ilion, New York. He has multiple disabilities that keep him from serving overseas in the war and is described as "a wisp of a man, and had a right foot turned permanently sideways at birth, his right hand unnaturally angled as well" (61). Given the patriotic fervor of the time, his inability to serve marginalizes him from local society; as a result of his marginalization he drinks heavily and becomes a vocal critic of the war. Hector's mother tasks Hector with looking after Jackie when he goes out for drinks. One particular night of drinking, however, Hector abandons Jackie to sleep with a local widowed woman, Patricia Cahill, whose husband was missing in action. Hector achieves instant gratification and loses his virginity—but consequently loses his father after failing to protect him. This loss and failure haunts Hector for the remainder of his life and ultimately motivates him to serve in the Korean War; he feels the need to atone for his loss by punishing himself. Yet, Hector ironically experiences a second traumatic episode during the Korean War. On the battlefield he seemingly embodies the mythic Hector incarnate—he is a natural fighter who kills without remorse, embraces battle, and feels no pain. Despite this heroic stature, he remains ostracized from his comrades, and they harass him. His trauma comes when he is ordered to kill a young Chinese POW for whom Hector's unit no longer wants to be responsible. Despite killing enemies at will, Hector cannot follow through on this order—the "boy," as Hector will always call him and remember him, even asks Hector to kill him, to put him out of his misery, but "Hector could not make himself deliver him. He flung the bayonet down the hill. The boy began to cry. Hector retrieved his helmet, trying not to hear him" (78). Shortly afterwards, the boy blows himself up with a grenade, as Hector "sprinted away, getting nearly all the way back to the rear line before

he heard the distant, blunted blast” (79). This trauma—the moral predicament Hector faced in the midst of his comrades, the torture of the prisoner that he witnesses, the boy’s voice that speaks to him, the “blunted blast” that rings in his ears—is the second major event of his young life. The boy’s death, along with his father’s, remains with him throughout the decades that follow. As Hector notes at the time of the POW’s suicide, “death, he would come to learn, was in fact a tendency. Inevitably the dead came back” (78).

In much the same manner as both June and Hector, Sylvie’s foundational trauma occurs with the brutal death of her parents during wartime. Sylvie’s parents, Francis and Jane Binet, were missionaries, and their efforts led Sylvie in her youth to various locations throughout the world. The 1930s find them in Manchuria, China, in the midst of the Japanese military occupation. As missionaries they attempt to remain a-political throughout the turmoil, careful to avoid taking sides yet particularly leery of the gradually encroaching Japanese Army. In the end, however, unbeknownst to them, they harbor an anti-Japanese subversive from Hong Kong, Benjamin Li, and this connection leads to their murders. As the Japanese interrogate each person in the Binets’ house, Francis becomes combative while protecting his wife, and a soldier stabs him: the “soldier lunged at [Francis] from behind with his rifle, a dull glint of metal flashing in the lamplight. Her father groaned and fell” (236). Shortly thereafter, in one of many gruesome scenes in the narrative, a Japanese officer forces Li to rape Sylvie’s mother, as everyone watches: “on the officer’s command one of the soldiers dragged Benjamin to Jane as she was held down by the others and shoved him on [Jane], making him kiss her on the mouth and the neck and the belly and down below. Then they forced them to copulate” (237). And finally, after Francis succumbs to the bayonet wound, Jane attempts to steal an officer’s pistol, to no avail: “[f]or a moment she had it in her grasp before he wrested it from her, striking her in the

ear with its grip. But she did not pause and came at him and shot her twice in the chest. After she fell to the floor her shot her again” (238). Thus, just as June and Hector lost their parents in their youths and the traumatic episodes become a foundational aspect of their psyche for the remainder of their lives, Sylvie’s loss of her parents—and particularly her first-hand viewing of their macabre, sudden executions—remains a crucial, and ultimately debilitating, trauma. In both the short and the long-term, Sylvie’s witnessing of her parents’ murders creates a psychological hurdle that she cannot overcome.

While I have delineated these three characters’ traumas individually, Lee’s narrative demonstrates the profound rippling effects that their post-traumatic symptoms have on each other, as well as the myriad other individuals that they encounter. Trauma is the foundation both for the individual and the relationships that they seek out and experience. In *Unclaimed Experience* Cathy Caruth writes that “at the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double-telling, the oscillation between *a crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” [emphasis in original] (7). Through the individual—and yet intersecting—post-traumatic lives that June, Hector, and Sylvie embark upon, the narrative reveals just how debilitating and frustrating this “oscillation” can be for an individual. The incessant presence of their traumatic memories in their lives complicates their survival and their abilities to navigate their post-war lives; this is the “unbearable nature” of their survival. They strive to move past their histories, but inevitably their memories shadow them. Arthur Frank in his seminal study *The Wounded Storyteller* notes, “the person who has lived chaos can only be responsible to that experience retrospectively, when distance allows reflection and some narrative ordering of temporality. The body-self that is immersed in a chaos lives only in immediacy. Whenever

events seem to be sorted out, the chaos generates another crisis of survival” (108-9). The primary characters in *The Surrendered* demonstrate this need for “distance” to assist in reflection, understanding, and healing, as well as the desire for “ordering of temporality”; however, the text also shows that trauma, much like Frank’s “chaos,” inevitably arises again. The chaotic nature of trauma and traumatic memory consistently complicates and stifles the characters’ attempts at healing. As the rest of this chapter will demonstrate, each takes a unique path in negotiating their post-traumatic lives. Their diverse paths reveal the individual battles they engage in order to simply live with their traumatic histories and memories—and still, just as important, said battles ultimately involve close confidants and/or other survivors. As Kai Erikson observes, “trauma is normally understood as a somewhat lonely and isolated business because the persons who experience it so often drift away from the everyday moods and understandings that govern social life. But, paradoxically, the drifting away is accompanied by revised views of the world that, in their turn, become the basis for communality” (198). Erikson’s observations astutely inform my forthcoming study of June’s, Hector’s, and Sylvie’s negotiation of trauma: while each becomes mired in the “lonely and isolated business” that is the post-traumatic life, their narratives likewise reveal their individual needs for “communality.”

### **Defining Queer Failure**

To understand how June, Hector, and Sylvie pursue their paths to healing following the debilitating traumas noted above, I turn to Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam’s 2011 text offers a study of a diverse set of contemporary visual art, both film and photography, ranging from animated movies like *Finding Nemo*, *Chicken Run*, and *Toy Story*, to the stoner comedy *Dude, Where’s My Car?* and the “indie” comedy *Little Miss Sunshine*, to

contemporary photography exhibits. In the introduction she<sup>1</sup> describes her project in the following way: “[a]ll in all, this is a book about alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends. It is a book about failing well, failing often, and learning, in the words of Samuel Beckett, how to fail better” (24). Given the destructive nature of war and the longevity with which the trauma inflicted by war endures, I am attracted to Halberstam’s “alternative ways of knowing and being”—undoubtedly, as my study will show, all three of the aforementioned characters must embrace such “alternative” means of navigating the post-war lives that they experience. As each of their individual narratives demonstrates, it is difficult to embrace a worldview that is “unduly optimistic” when the foundations of their adulthoods were formed through death, loss, and various physical and psychological traumas. At the same time, however, their narratives also demonstrate that a lack of optimism is not necessarily detrimental—through the course of their lives they each attempt, at varying levels of success (or should I say, *failure*), to learn to “fail better.”

Halberstam develops his theory of the “queer art of failure” by examining texts that emphasize the paradoxically liberating nature of concepts such as losing, forgetting, negativity, failure, etc. Most important, he argues for subverting and combatting the normative values found in contemporary society. In his introduction he writes that “[r]ather than just arguing for a reevaluation of these standards of passing and failing, *The Queer Art of Failure* dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live. Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, unknowing may in fact offer more creative,

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<sup>1</sup> Halberstam alternates between “Jack” and “Judith.” On the University of Southern California website she uses the female pronoun, but she uses both the male and female pronouns interchangeably.

more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2). He goes on to demonstrate how such “logics” are defined by those who occupy the dominant, normative positions within society. Halberstam argues further that “failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods” (3). *The Surrendered* shows that not only are childhoods unruly, post-war life is as well. Post-traumatic stress is far from “orderly and predictable.” And, the characters within *The Surrendered* demonstrate how failing, losing, undoing, and unknowing ultimately offer more creative, cooperative and surprising “ways of being in the world.” The post-war—and *post-failure*—lives that they inhabit speak to the “punishing norms” that society inflicts upon us as we engage the world. None of the three characters—June, Hector, or Sylvie—ever fully adhere to such norms, regardless of their inclination. And frankly, after the traumas they experience, simply reintegrating into “normal” society after war is not possible. Consequently, they adapt to their non-normative paths and experiences and discover “surprising ways of being” in their worlds. “While failure certainly comes with a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair,” Halberstam writes, “it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (3). As *The Surrendered* reveals, the traumas of war offer very little positivity for its victims, whether soldier or civilian. Death is gruesome and indiscriminate. Relationships shatter. Psychological trauma inevitably returns. Cancer erupts without warning. And failure is the foundation for all three characters’ adult lives: Hector fails to protect his father on his final night of drinking; June fails to save her brother and sister from the train wreck; and Sylvie fails to establish a normative family with her husband Ames. Thus, *The Surrendered* offers a powerful example against “the toxic positivity of life”—very little

about war or trauma calls for positivity. Yet, for my own analysis, I also want to lean on Halberstam's emphasis on failure providing "more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world." While Chang-rae Lee's text floods its reader with demonstrations of death, trauma, illness, sadness, and loss, reading Lee's narrative through Halberstam's lens—and with James Kyung-jin Lee's interpretation in mind—suggests a productive way of understanding the non-normative means of survival and healing that June, Hector, and Sylvie embrace. Viewing the characters' failures in *The Surrendered* in a productive way does not reduce or ignore the suffering they endure; on the contrary, only by embracing their failures and the queer positions they inhabit can we fully acknowledge their woundedness and, as James Kyung-jin Lee asserts, ultimately comprehend how beauty remains possible through such illness and suffering.

Finally, in addition to grounding my analysis in Halberstam's concept of queer failure, I also need to emphasize how the concept of "queer" informs our understanding of *The Surrendered*, by turning to Michael Warner, as well as Halberstam once more. In his foundational work on queer politics, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner defines "queer" against ideas of the normal and normativity, not strictly against heteronormativity. He writes that "[f]or both academics and activists, 'queer' gets a political edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual, and normal includes normal business in the academy" (xxvi). This expansion of the concept of "queer" is vitally important for the lens of "queer failure" in *The Surrendered*; while we do find a sexually queer relationship in the text that I will explore, the majority of the queer positions that the characters inhabit are defined against "the normal." As Warner expands later in his introduction, "[t]he preference for 'queer' represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of



toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (xxvi). This “resistance to regimes of the normal” is just as important when applied to disability and illness in *The Surrendered*, as it is to the characters’ queer positioning and identities. The intersectionality of the characters’ illnesses and disabilities and their queer identities cannot be ignored. Warner also emphasizes a deeper connotation of his terminology; he argues that “[t]he insistence on ‘queer’—a term initially generated in the context of terror—has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence. Its brilliance as a naming strategy lies in combining resistance on that broad social terrain with more specific on the terrains of phobia and queer-bashing, on one hand, or of pleasure, on the other” (xxvi). I believe that Warner’s observation of the *violence* associated with normalization, while undoubtedly a reference to actual physical violence experienced by gays and other people of queer identity, might also be expanded to include the violence of war, as depicted in *The Surrendered*, as it significantly affects each individual’s ability to exist in the normative, post-war society. As I already noted, violence—particularly the death of parents and close family—provides the foundation for each of the primary characters in *The Surrendered*; undoubtedly, this violence significantly, and negatively, affects their ability to navigate the “broad social terrain” of normalization that they encounter in a post-violence, post-war setting.

To augment Warner’s definition of “queer,” I want to add Halberstam’s related ideas of queer time and space. Much like Warner’s delineation of “queer” as anti-normative and against regimes of the normal, Halberstam defines queer time against a normativized definition. He writes in *In a Queer Time and Place* that “by articulating and elaborating a concept of queer time, I suggest new ways of understanding the nonnormative behaviors that have clear but not

essential relations to gay and lesbian subjects. For the purpose of this book, ‘queer’ refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time. ‘Queer time’ is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (6). He adds that “reproductive time and family time are, above all, heteronormative time/space constructs” (10). As I will delineate, June, Hector, and Sylvie occupy a nonnormative organization of “community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity” in the aftermath of war at New Hope orphanage. In another, similar sense, we might even conclude that the orphanage itself is a queer community—a randomized selection of Korean orphans organized under the structure of Western, Christian leaders, existing outside the normal boundaries of society, “family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance.” Moreover, the orphans, and to an extent, even the Christian missionaries Ames and Sylvie Tanner, reside outside the normal “temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family.” In short, war itself disrupts the normative logics that dominate contemporary time and space—and in many ways produces queer populations. Halberstam writes that “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). *The Surrendered*, through its narrative of death, loss, trauma, and illness, reveals a unique—but uniquely informative—“queer subculture” produced by war. In order to navigate their war traumas, post-traumatic stress, and illness, June, Hector, and Sylvie must embrace “alternate temporalities” and, in Halberstam’s terms, embrace different paths “according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience.”

## June's Queer Sexuality

As noted above, June suffers the most traumatic losses of the three primary characters in *The Surrendered*, and to compound those losses, she suffers them at the earliest age. The traumatic losses clearly affect her ability to cope at the New Hope orphanage, which serves as the focal point for the narrative, where June's, Hector's, and Sylvie's lives intersect for the one and only time. Needless to say, June's familial losses in quick succession during the war leave her with a significant emptiness that she seeks to fill during her time in the orphanage, and, not surprisingly, her losses profoundly impact her ability to develop close relationships with others. Furthermore, her experience as a young, traumatized refugee forces her to become an individual that focuses solely on herself and avoids relying on anyone else, if at all possible. However, June eventually develops an attraction to Sylvie Tanner—the wife of the minister, Ames Tanner, who arrives to run the orphanage. Sylvie's foreignness attracts June, and, given that June has lost all of her close family members, she looks to Sylvie as a mother figure. Their relationship eventually turns queer—and ultimately ends in failure.

At the beginning of June's stay at New Hope orphanage she demonstrates a lack of normativization unlike the rest of the orphans, which could be a product of both her age and her trauma.<sup>2</sup> While the other children attempt to develop external support and participate in the activities around the orphanage, June does not. During their communal soccer games, “the only child who never played or cheered was June” (Lee 152). Moreover, “June was moody and aggressive and when she wished she could be unrelentingly cruel, as harsh to the youngest ones as she was to those nearer her age” (140). And even when June eventually decides to participate, particularly in the soccer matches, June plays on the boys' side and with an aggression unlike the

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<sup>2</sup> Notably, at the age of eleven June actually is one of the oldest children at the orphanage.

others: “the boys had been holding back somewhat in checking the girls, but this was not the case with June; she threw herself at whoever had the ball” (155). In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam, in describing the character Dory from the animated film *Finding Nemo*, offers a particularly apt description of June’s non-normativity: “[Dory] actually signals a new version of selfhood, a queer version that depends on disconnection from the family and contingent relations to friends and improvised relations to community” (80). With the loss of her entire family, June must embrace a queer path to negotiate life as an eleven year-old orphan. Given the sudden nature of her losses, she struggles to develop normative relationships with those around her in the orphanage, instead choosing to navigate her new existence almost entirely on her own terms. She even goes so far as to sabotage her best opportunity for adoption. When an American couple, the Stolzes, visit New Hope with the intent to adopt multiple orphans, they set their sights clearly on June. They tell her “you’re going to begin a whole new joyous life” with them in the United States (402). June is genuinely confused by the love they show her; for a brief moment she gives in to them and admits to herself, “even more than death, she was sure, she hated this enduring. This awful striving that was not truly living” (402). Yet, despite this opportunity that every other orphan at New Hope embraces, June instead reacts violently: she breaks away from Mrs. Stolz, stomps on Mr. Stolz’s foot to escape further, and then “[runs] as fast as she could, up into the bare hills, climbing until she started to descend” (403). June’s post-trauma “version of selfhood” is a conflicted, confused existence that avoids developing close relationships and avoids the normative roles that the other orphans embrace. Instead June becomes attracted to Sylvie, the minister’s wife.

June simultaneously views Sylvie as a mother figure and as a sexual attraction. The narrator notes that “after Sylvie took an interest in [June], [June] visibly softened...it was always

just June who was with [Sylvie], the two of them sitting on the stoop gently brushing each other's hair, or else coolly whispering to each other like a pair of thieves" (141). In this and in other instances, June clearly looks to Sylvie as the individual who will replace the loss of her parents (and to an extent, her siblings). Yet what makes June's relationship with Sylvie queer is her sexual attraction to this mother figure. She watches Sylvie undress: "June, her chest burning, finally understood her discomfort might be the expression of a desire...she sometimes wondered, naturally enough, if Sylvie could ever have a similar feeling for her" (336). She surreptitiously watches Sylvie and Hector have sex in his room at the orphanage: "[June's] eye kept resting upon Sylvie's calf, her knee, the way her belly would grow shallow under his kisses and dip far enough below the spur of her hip that she appeared starved herself" (344). And to consummate her attraction, if not their relationship, one particular night after Sylvie passes out in "deepest sleep," June explores Sylvie's body:

one night June could not help herself; she pulled back the blanket as if it were the frail leaf of an antique book. Her hands crept to Sylvie's throat, where her nightgown opened, and undid the mother-of-pearl buttons that ran down to the hem; she took them one by one, the near half of the nightgown falling away, exposing the whole length of Sylvie now to the cold night air. June touched the belly, grazed the lowest rib, the small, flattish breast, no fuller than one of her own. The nipple pushed up between her fingers, as dense as clay, and without knowing what she was doing she put her mouth over it, closing her eyes. She couldn't breathe again, her heart as if collapsed in her chest, this tiny leaden note, poised for Sylvie to protest, to stir. But she did not. Nor did she when June's hand slid down and nestled in the burning cup of her long legs, not moving, nor stirring, neither wanting the other to wake. (345-6)

June explores and tests the boundaries of their relationship, and Sylvie acquiesces. Sylvie offers June an outlet for her unique, traumatized personality, even as June marginalizes herself in the orphanage and explicitly avoids interaction with the other orphans—choosing to engage with Sylvie alone rather than as part of their shared community. And as this excerpt shows, June's

desire for Sylvie extends beyond the familial, and Sylvie acquiesces to June's advances and exploration, thus encouraging their queer relationship.<sup>3</sup>

June's non-normative assimilation into New Hope orphanage is a key part of her post-war coping strategy. Halberstam's "queer version" of "selfhood," whereby an individual disconnects from family and embraces non-normative relationships with friends and community is key to understanding June's efforts at New Hope and with Sylvie. Given the massive losses of her closest relatives that she experiences at the start of the war, not surprisingly June's relationships with everyone at New Hope are non-normative. Even more fascinating, near the end of her time at New Hope June actually attempts a life of normativity to convince Sylvie and Ames to adopt her. She is kind to the other orphans; she eats all of her meals; she participates in chores with everyone else. Her attempt at normativity stems also from her conflicted desire towards Sylvie: "in the morning she'd awake enervated and bewildered and loathing herself yet again for pushing away the only person she loved. [June's] desire, she could see, was only ruining her chances for the future. She must only be a good daughter" (388). In the end, however, June's attempt at normativity fails. Sylvie's drug addiction is too much of an obstacle. Ames's jealousy of both Hector and June is an obstacle. June's jealousy of Hector and Sylvie gets in the way as well. In other words, in June's case, her attempt at normativity and heteronormativity perpetuates queer failure. June's inability to normativize pushes Sylvie away; June cannot conform to what she perceives is the norm in New Hope, and she loses what she perceives to be her only and best opportunity for adoption, love, and escape from Korea. In the short term this failure hurts: she loses yet another individual that she holds close, Sylvie. Still,

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<sup>3</sup> During this scene Sylvie is under the influence of opium and may not be completely lucid but she does seem complicit, especially since the narrator, in the above extended quotation, says that "neither [person] wanted the other to wake"—suggesting that Sylvie wanted this sexual exploration of her body that June initiates.

in the long term June adheres to the queer coping strategy described by Halberstam—  
“disconnection from the family and contingent relations to friends and improvised relations to  
community.”

### **Sylvie’s Queer Failure: Addiction & Forgetting**

Sylvie Tanner embraces a completely different coping strategy in her struggle with post-traumatic symptoms—she develops a drug addiction in an attempt to forget her past traumas. As noted above, she lost both of her parents in an earlier war: her mother was raped and both parents were murdered by Japanese soldiers invading Manchuria, China. Needless to say, such jarring losses significantly affect Sylvie—repeatedly through the text she is described as hollow or empty or seeking wholeness. Yet, her initial trauma is compounded by successive traumas later in adulthood. Following her marriage to Ames, Sylvie suffers five miscarriages. She never receives a precise diagnosis for the miscarriages, only that “her body simply [was] unable to nurture to term” (230). Hence, Sylvie’s life, too, is one grounded in trauma. Sylvie’s life embodies the “endless impact” of trauma that Caruth describes—while she, just like June, attempts to overcome her traumatic memories, leave behind her trauma, and forget, she cannot do so in the end. She seeks out opium as a means of healing and forgetting, yet that drug ultimately engenders failure.

Sylvie’s first experiment with opium occurs as part of her first sexual relationship, following her parents’ deaths. After their murders she settles in the state of Washington and develops a relationship with a disabled veteran of World War I named Jim. Jim is both physically and psychologically wounded from his own war experience. The narrator notes that “there was something ruined about him,” and this is what attracts Sylvie to him: “it was in fact

because he was so frail, if not somehow wrecked, that she was drawn to him” (221, 222). In this instance Sylvie’s coping strategy echoes June’s at New Hope—to refer back to Halberstam from above, Sylvie chooses her own form of “contingent relations to friends and improvised relations to community” (*QAOF* 80). Sylvie absconds from her teenage friends from school and develops an erotic relationship with a man at least twice her age—and a “contingent” relationship with him at that, a relationship focused on sexual experimentation and drug use. Jim is impotent from his war wounds and uses opium to salve himself; Sylvie acquires this habit from him: “the thick, sweetly fragrant syrup instantly coated her entire insides, the sensation the exact opposite, it would turn out, of the precipitous detachment she would later suffer, hotly fusing herself in a manner that made her feel whole again” (223). Intriguingly, even at her young age, she attempts to “feel whole again,” suggesting the debilitating effect of her parents’ murders.

Sylvie carries this habit with her for the remainder of her life; although she attempts to rid herself of the habit, and she makes other gestures towards a more normative life, her addiction remains and, much like traumatic memories, erupts periodically. The most significant coping strategy Sylvie attempts in lieu of opium, in order to forget her parents’ murders, is to marry Ames, the Catholic minister. He represents stability: an older man, with an upright, normative profession, who offers her the normative married life that society projects to her. Yet, Halberstam argues the opposite about contemporary family; he writes that “as a kind of false narrative of continuity, as a construction that makes connection and succession seem organic and natural, family also gets in the way of all sorts of other alliances and coalitions” (*QAOF* 71). Halberstam argues further that “in her work Kath Weston examines how kinship discourses invest in normative temporalities which privilege longevity over temporariness and permanence over contingency. These normative conceptions of time and relation give permanent (even if



estranged) connections precedence over random (even if intense) associations. So an authenticating notion of longevity renders all other relations meaningless and superficial, and family ties, by virtue of being early bonds, seem more important than friendships” (72). As Sylvie’s experience shows, war and war trauma disrupts the “normative temporalities which privilege longevity over temporariness and permanence over contingency.” When one’s parents are murdered at the squeeze of a trigger or the stab of a knife, or in June’s case, when they are executed and obliterated by a “friendly” bomb, the concept of familial longevity and permanence goes out the window. Sylvie strives for this normativity—embracing the married life with Ames, trying to settle down into a routine. Yet, her traumatic memories do not allow it. She is drawn to the “random,” “intense” associations that Halberstam references. Her life is defined by temporariness and impermanence. Her and her husband’s work traumatizes her: “for what had she witnessed daily from her earliest memory of their missions but the fragility of the body, every needless face of sickness and hunger, of merciless injury and death?” (412). Furthermore, after suffering through five inexplicable miscarriages that exacerbate her earlier traumas, the normative concept of “family” becomes traumatic in and of itself.

At New Hope, after a period of “normalcy,” Sylvie returns to her addiction. The stress of the setting, of the plight of the orphans, her affair with Hector and her special relationship with June, all serve to unhinge her traumatic memories—and she attempts to forget everything all over again. At first Sylvie tries to hide her use: “her leg slipped over the edge of the cot and when he lifted her cool ankle to set it right [Hector] could see them, a perfect line, a dozen tiny healed marks tattooing the nook of her heel, the last one still weeping a pin-dot of red” (150). Over time, however, as she drifts further from the present and attempts to forget the past, her addiction controls her once again. The addiction seems to hollow her out and make her appear

ghostly: “the rest of [the people at the orphanage] could somehow sense a growing rime of hollowness developing inside her” and “she didn’t look thinner so much as hollowed out, in certain bright morning light her skin seeming practically diaphanous, the veins of her throat through with such a deep died blue” (159). In short, Sylvie’s addiction helps her withdraw from life and attempt to forget her past. For Halberstam such attempts at forgetting are not to be dismissed. He writes that “*forgetting* becomes a way of resisting heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription” [emphasis in original] (*QAOF* 15). He goes on to describe the powerful agency that forgetting offers. In discussing Toni Morrison’s use of forgetting in *Beloved*, he observes that “the ghost...disappears and allows Sethe and Denver to enter a space of forgetfulness, a space where the horrors of slavery do not have to haunt them at every turn” (82). He asserts further that Morrison “situates forgetting as contingent, necessary, impermanent, but also as a rupture in the logic of remembering (the conventional slave narrative, for example) that shapes memories into acceptable and palatable forms of knowing the past” (82). Thus, Sylvie’s willful attempts at forgetting, albeit under the use of opium, afford her a way of controlling the memories that incessantly return. While trauma introduces a rupture in one’s memory, inevitably the memories return, and Sylvie’s attempts at normativization are not successful at fending off her own. Her inability to normativize in fact traumatizes her—she concludes “that she was finally as unfit to be a mother as she had been a wife, and even a mistress? That she was a bleeding heart and a coward, a person unfit, it turned out, to be herself” (419). Sylvie “often felt a great part of her had been fixed in time, that despite appearances she had been simply stuck in place, never quite getting anywhere” (40). The needle and the opium offer Sylvie a semblance of both escape and control: she can escape from her

traumatic memories and attempt to forget her past, if only temporarily. And even she points to this paradoxical concept of agential forgetting: “she was suffering because she had to suffer, because she needed to, every pincer and tremor and hard drum of craving deserved punishment, yes, but also a reminder that she was still vital, still alive” (408). Thus, when Sylvie’s attempts at normativity fail her—when subsuming her addiction, marrying a Catholic minister, and attempting to build a nuclear family fail to heal her traumatic memories—she embraces a queer form of failure, embarks upon yet another, prolonged opium binge, reminds herself “that she was still vital, still alive,” and forgets the past (if only for several hours).

### **Hector’s Coping Strategy: Alcohol and Pugilism**

Hector is the least queer subject within the text; however, like June and Sylvie, he remains just as marginalized due to his inability to navigate his post-war traumatic symptoms and integrate back into normative society. As noted before, Hector suffers two traumatic events in his youth. First, he fails to protect his father, Jackie, after a night of binge-drinking—the role of protector that Hector typically embraced—which leads to his father’s death. Second, during the Korean War Hector cannot follow through on an implied order to execute a POW, and his interaction with the young Chinese soldier repeatedly erupts in his memory as an adult. This psychological pain forces Hector to choose several coping strategies—like his father, he turns to binge drinking; like June at New Hope, he withdraws from other people; and he engages in drunken brawling at times. In the end, Hector fails to live a normative life and offers an intriguing example of queer failure.

After the death of his father, Hector repeatedly views his life through the lens of failure, and he seeks both to punish himself and to forget his failure to protect his father. Jackie viewed Hector as an “ideal figure, a body supreme” and prior to his death he warned Hector that

“[y]ou’ll live forever, anyone with eyes can see that. Just never go to war” (68, 62). Jackie had been one of the minority voices during World War II that spoke against the war and had been ostracized from his town; given his father’s ostracism, Hector wanted to protect him. His failure to do so is devastating. His mother initially would not speak to Hector following Jackie’s death, and after World War II ended “Hector was hoping for another war to break out...not for the sake of fighting or killing anyone or defending his country, but for the selfish cause of punishing himself” (69). The punishment works, just not the way that Hector expected. He realizes during the war that he is a ruthless killing machine and, much like his father asserted in hyperbole, he realized “that by fate or nature he was strangely, miraculously, impervious” to injury (72). Thus, his seemingly immortal body saves him from punishment during the war and instead unleashes even deeper psychological punishment afterwards. Hector’s ability to survive the war in which he sought to punish himself ensures that he cannot forget his failure to protect his father, let alone the Chinese POW he encounters and the dead bodies that he cleans in the mortuary affairs unit. In discussing Saidiya Hartman’s work on slavery in the United States, Halberstam observes how “Hartman wonders about the contemporary tendency to restore memory and recognizes that to connect to a traumatic past is also to connect to shame and guilt” (*QAOF* 85-6). Much like the case with Sylvie, and now in this instance with Hector, “Survival, Hartman implies, requires a certain amount of forgetting, repressing, moving on” (86). Thus, like Sylvie, Hector’s post-war coping strategy is an attempt to *forget* his past; instead of opium, he turns to alcohol and brawling. For Hector, his past indeed represents “shame and guilt”; for him to survive the post-war, post-traumatic world, he desires “forgetting, repressing.” In the early post-war era in Korea or later in the United States, he drinks heavily to erase his memories and forget the past, and the drinking inevitably leads to a fistfight with other, random individuals.

Additionally, though, like his initial encounter with Patricia Cahill that led to his father's death, Hector also engages in numerous short-term liaisons and relationships with women. In much the same vein as June, he avoids developing long-term relationships in the aftermath of his trauma. Hector reflects upon his tendency towards abbreviated relationships, observing that "he never meant to cause unhappiness or heartbreak but he couldn't bear anything but serial connections, and with each union's demise it was their angry tears and shouts that would echo in his head, causing him to move on only quicker" (270). Such short-term relationships go against the normative temporalities that Halberstam critiques; as she writes, "normative conceptions of time and relation given permanent (even if estranged) connections precedence over random (even if intense) associations" (*QAOF* 72). Despite this tendency, however, at New Hope Hector engages in a relatively long-term affair with Sylvie, which ultimately ends in further trauma for him. Sylvie and Hector use each other to satisfy their sexual passions, and their physical attraction turns into a more problematic psychological attraction for the both of them, which generates confusion for themselves, as well as for the rest of their love quadrilateral, June and Ames. Sylvie is Hector's first love, and it is a painful experience: "he was too brutal and stupid, just a rig of flesh that selfishly craved and rebelled. He didn't understand then how deeply he needed her" (323). And, after their inevitable crash, initially from Sylvie's choice and then from her death at New Hope, Hector's loss exacerbates his earlier traumas; he has yet another traumatic memory added to his psyche that he cannot forget: "[Sylvie] was more than thirty years gone now, though it could be a mere day, and he felt his heart suddenly unstitch, the wire twine instantly rusting, falling away, to reveal again the cold box, the great dark underworld of his guilt" (323). Kaja Silverman, in *World Spectators*, writes that "the loss of our first love-object is always tragic but it is the precondition for care. Only if we pay this exorbitant price

early in our lives can things and other people ‘matter’ to us. Indeed, the case could be stated even more starkly: only because we are thrown into a kinship structure can there *be* a world” (38-9). For Silverman, loss is a precondition for life, a foundational experience that allows us to develop even stronger, more meaningful relationships with others in the future. Undoubtedly, in Hector’s case the loss of Sylvie, his first love-object, becomes a lens through which he views every future relationship; as the quotation above notes, the loss of Sylvie felt like “mere day” ago and turns his heart into a “cold box.” Yet as we will see in his adult relationship to June, indeed, the loss of Sylvie eventually allows for a more substantial, deeper relationship later in life, as Silverman argues.

Despite the eventual redemption Hector discovers in his relationship with June, the majority of his life revolves around failure. Near the end of the narrative we discover that “he wanted his own sentence, for all his deeds and non-deeds, for every instance when he had failed. For when had he not? If he were truly eternal, as his father Jackie madly fantasized, the sum of his persistence had so far only added up to failure. Failure grand and total” (468). And why would Hector not come to this conclusion? He had failed his mother and father by not protecting Jackie on his weekly night of binge-drinking and this had led to Jackie’s death. He had failed to find the punishment he sought in the Korean War, discovering his body impervious to pain and death, thus ensuring a life governed by post-traumatic stress. He failed in his relationship with Sylvie. He failed in his numerous short-term relationships back in the United States. He held down only menial jobs after war. His life is governed by failure and fear of even more: “the specter of something infinitely more disturbing: the prospect of him failing yet another person, even in the smallest way, someone else he should honor or protect or love better than he ever could” (311). This ostensible life of failure skews his perspective of his self-worth; he feels that

he is a “loser-for-eternity, world-class self-pitier, tireless batterer of men and embodied doom of women, this now wholly bereft last man standing” (321). He even seems to embody failure—at one point he is described as “a bane on otherwise decent people, somehow instantly embodying the exact cast of their most profane weakness. He inspired only homely acts of Eros” (133).

Nevertheless, in spite of this bombardment of negativity and disappointment, and in spite of Hector’s conclusion that the “sum of his persistence” added up solely to failure, I argue for the opposite—that Hector actually is another emblem of queer failure in *The Surrendered*. Hector’s lack of self-worth results from defining himself against models of normativity and conformity. Indeed, he fails to follow the traditional path of normative America—in Halberstam’s terms, “birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.” War and trauma has that effect on civilians and soldiers alike—war interrupts traditional trajectories of life. Given Hector’s losses and given the trauma he experiences in Korea, the normative path of marriage, reproduction, and death is no longer feasible. Yet, Hector’s actions throughout his life speak to a level of mercy and understanding that the “normal” individuals in *The Surrendered* struggle to obtain. As a youth, Hector demonstrates care for his father (really, for both parents) by continually watching out for his disabled and oft-inebriated parent. During the Korean War he demonstrates mercy by ignoring his commander’s implied order to execute a prisoner of war. Later in the war he cleanses and prepares dead American soldiers’ bodies for shipment back to the United States for burial. He saves June from eventual starvation and brings her to New Hope. At New Hope he offers his manual labor to make the orphanage a better place for the abandoned and orphaned Korean children. And back in the United States he demonstrates care and understanding for many of the people that he encounters, even if he does not overtly convey it to them. In this way Hector offers yet another example of queer failure, in addition to June and Sylvie. While he

deems himself a failure, Hector does so through a lens of normativity that defines a traditional trajectory of “normal” time governed by marriage and procreation. He deems himself as a failure because he cannot sustain a long-term relationship, get married, and develop a family—in his view, governed by the normative values of society, his life was “failure grand and total.” Consequently, if we step outside the boundaries of this normative concept of time and employ a lens governed instead by queer time and queer failure, we find that Hector actually embodies an example of mercy and devotion: he may not abide by the progression or trajectory defined “normal” by society but his actions—his “failures”—suggest an impulse towards sacrificing for and mercy towards other individuals.

### **June’s Choice**

The temporal end of narrative brings Hector and June back together after decades apart. Their reconnection is appropriate—without each other they would not have survived the early post-war era in Korea. Shortly after the war ended, Hector discovered a starving June along the roadside, as he made his way to the New Hope orphanage. At this stage, after losing her entire family, she struggled mightily for subsistence; just before Hector discovered her, she went as far as to drink mud: “there was only thick, stinking mud in the paddies and I was so thirsty that I tried it” (476). Hector coaxed her with Chiclets, and she eventually followed him to the orphanage. In a not-so-ironic twist, June saved Hector months later, as the orphanage’s chapel burned. Hector, along with Sylvie and Ames, had gone into the burning chapel to attempt to save June but instead the chapel collapsed on all of them. In a reversal of fortune, June instead saved Hector at the last second: “[Hector] was more than ready to pass; maybe at last transmogrify. But a hand gripped his wrist, another lifting the beam from his back. The girl was inordinately strong. And she dragged him through the collapsed back wall and out into the cold,



quenching night” (471). Therefore, their connection is more than just symbolic—they owe their lives to each other, each saving the other at their weakest points. Furthermore, they embark on a short-term marriage of convenience so that June can escape Korea to the United States after the orphanage ceases to exist. And, despite Hector not knowing for decades, they also have a child together: the night preceding their mutually-agreed separation, June “plied [Hector] with more liquor after he’d come home from a night’s drinking and then later startled him from his dead man’s sleep, straddling as he spasmed awake,” thus producing their only child, Nicholas (316). Their relationship is non-normative—neither is invested in the other, and neither is focused on the traditional route of marriage, procreation, and death. Their marriage, much like their overall relationship, is invested in what can each individual gain—and, given the analysis of queer failure above, their lack of investment in their relationship is not surprising, especially since their connection is grounded in loss, trauma, and, most significant, survival by any means.

After decades apart, trauma once again brings them together, in the form of June’s terminal stomach cancer and her conscious decision to forgo treatment. Not surprisingly, June’s cancer generates significant pain, which simultaneously generates trauma and emphasizes her vitality. In her 1985 book, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry observes, “the recognition of the way pain enters into our midst is at once something that cannot be denied and something that cannot be confirmed... To have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have doubt” [emphasis in original] (13). After years of surviving and navigating the world of antique dealing and trading in New York City, of attempting to live a normative life with her son Nicholas, after decades of attempting to eschew her traumatic memories from Korea and the wounds left behind as markers on her body, June’s cancer brings certainty. Furthermore, it paradoxically confirms her vitality and her mortality. James Kyung-jin Lee observes that “illness and beauty disabuse us

of the notion of a perfectable body, and of a body that is immortal, instead pointing us to human finitude and frailty not as possibility but as inevitability, as *telos*” [emphasis in original] (xii). As I noted in my own introduction, Lee points us to a reading of June’s illness as one that does not stigmatize illness and disability—a reading that does not reinforce the normalized binaries of able and disable, of perfect and imperfect bodies—but rather one that emphasizes the reality of “human finitude,” something that June, Hector, and Sylvie continually grapple with throughout the narrative.

*The Surrendered* emphasizes the sheer pain that June’s cancer produces. June’s hands are scarred from her war-time injury: “the palms and pads of her fingers looked like they were somehow unfinished, being putty-smooth and only faintly lined” (35). As her cancer gradually consumes her body, every inch becomes sensitive. The gentle touch of her doctor’s hands “felt as if he were abrading her skin, this wildfire skittering over her back and neck” (244). When she does not have enough morphine, “little shatters of pain were expanding, the small world of her was fracturing” (300). Even when she kneels down on a floor, “her kneecaps felt like cracked glass, strums of icy pain conducting instantly up her legs, through her spine, fanning out to every last cell of her, whether good or renegade” (301). Her body becomes turbulent like a summer storm: “a pointed, angry sickness, her flesh and skin feeling as though they wished to pull away from her...her head was sodden, as with a bad cold, but her limbs felt alternatively prickly and number...in a matter of a day harsh flashes of hot and cold swept through her body like vengeful weather” (408). And her pain even becomes personified—at one point she hears her pain speaking to her: “[s]he took it as Sylvie’s voice, then the cancer’s, and then, finally, a version of her own...but she could endure it” (370). Unlike all of the other traumas that June had faced, she lacks the ability to control cancer. It unleashes unpredictable and mercury-like pain throughout

her body, and she suffers mightily. Tobin Siebers emphasizes the failure of body theorists to adequately acknowledge just this debilitating aspect of pain in recent theoretical work; he asserts that “[w]hen body theorists do represent pain as physical—infrequent as this is—the conventional model still dominates their descriptions. They present suffering and disability either as a way of reconfiguring the physical resources of the body or of opening up new possibilities of pleasure. Pain is most often soothed by the joy of conceiving the body differently from the norm...Rare is the theoretical account where physical suffering remains harmful for very long” (745). He goes on to argue that “[p]ain is not a friend to humanity. It is not a secret resource for political change. It is not a well of delight for the individual” (746). Indeed, in *The Surrendered* June suffers, and as these excerpts demonstrate, she hurts. *The Surrendered* is not necessarily about social change for the disabled. However, I would argue that it is about dignity. And mercy. And the impact of illness and trauma on the body. And yes, war. In that sense, while the social change suggested by body theorists and critiqued by Siebers may not apply, Lee’s text does offer an acknowledgement of the body and pain, and this recognition—and Lee’s attempt to overcome the difficulty of translating pain and suffering into text—is indeed significant and important for recognition. According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson, in her foundational text *Extraordinary Bodies*, “[d]isability, then, can be painful, comfortable, familiar, alienating, bonding, isolating, disturbing, endearing, challenging, infuriating, or ordinary. Embedded in the complexity of human relations, it is always more than the disabled figure can signify” (14). Without a doubt, in June’s struggle with cancer—and with pain—we find examples of each of the characteristics that Thomson notes; June’s disability is a fluid entity that unpredictably controls her body and mind. Her life demonstrates this fluidity—shifting from an “able” young girl, to a post-war refugee with permanent disfiguration of her hands, to an

“extraordinary” adult woman who runs her own business and raises a son, and finally to a body wracked by internal disease. Furthermore, we find examples of Thomson’s larger argument regarding extraordinary bodies—of characters with illness or disability who represent empowerment and exceptionality, not the normalized, debilitating, stigmatized perspective that normal societal discourse emphasizes. In Thomson’s analysis of characters within African American literature, she writes that the bodies of characters such as Baby Suggs and Eva Peace from Toni Morrison’s novels “bear the etchings of individual and collective history” (18). Indeed, in *The Surrendered* the characters bodies’ are etched as well with their histories—not just June’s body with her disfigured, seemingly erased hands, but also Sylvie’s body marked sporadically from her drug addiction, and even Hector’s ostensibly impervious body with wounds that heal miraculously quick. Their bodies carry their histories with them.

After months of treatment, June makes the extraordinary decision to forgo further cancer treatment and allow the illness to take its course. Any individual’s decision to cease medical treatment for a terminal illness is a significant and dramatic one; June’s choice is especially notable in that it demonstrates a reassertment of control over her own body and it signifies yet another, final instance of queer failure. In *The Wounded Storyteller* Arthur Frank describes the quasi-tyranny allocated to doctors in modern medicine, whereby the patient in suffering cedes all control to the omnipotent doctor and science. He observes how “[t]he *modern* experience of illness begins when popular experience is overtaken by modern expertise, including complex organizations of treatment” [emphasis in original] (5). This trust in medicine, science, and “the doctor” has come to dominate modern medicine and essentially de-humanizes the patient; Frank asserts that “this is exactly the colonization that Spivak speaks of: the master text of the medical journal article needs the suffering person, but the individuality of that suffering cannot be

acknowledged” (12). This is the predicament in which June finds herself. As a normalized patient, June accedes control to her physician, Dr. Koenig, following her diagnosis of terminal stomach cancer. It is not a coincidence that her physician’s name signifies “Doctor King”<sup>4</sup>—his reputation and “success” garners him a powerful reputation in the medical world. He becomes king of June’s existence: “she placed herself at his disposal, completely, never declining or even hesitating” (242). June is the model patient, colonized—to use Frank’s terminology—by the master of medicine. Just as she had done as a young orphan during the war, June becomes a fighter and refuses to give in to her illness, and she is attracted initially to her doctor’s reputation and approach: “Dr. Koenig said the pain would change and evolve, grow worse, much worse, and that eventually it would overwhelm her. She liked his frankness, even before she quit as his patient....He wouldn’t say [that there was little hope] of course, Dr. Koenig being famous for his aggressive, innovative techniques, but also for his utter refusal to relent, no matter the circumstance” (241). Thus, June’s initial response to her diagnosis is much like any other normativized individual’s in contemporary society—she decides to fight it at all costs, even in the midst of the pain described above, and even at the risk of exacerbating such pain. As Frank notes, “[s]ociety prefers medical diagnoses that admit treatment, not social diagnoses that require massive change in the premises of what that social body includes as parts of itself” (113). Halberstam takes this critique even further in *The Queer Art of Failure*. In his criticism of the American attraction to “positive thinking,” he refers to Barbara Ehrenreich’s tome *Bright-sided*, which “uses the example of American women’s application of positive thinking to breast cancer to demonstrate how dangerous the belief in optimism can be and how deeply Americans want to believe that health is a matter of attitude rather than environmental degradation” (3-4). After

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<sup>4</sup> “Koenig” means “king” in German.

months of treatment, after proceeding through various medicine regimens and multiple surgeries, after disparate and debilitating pain, June finally decides to eschew this “positive thinking,” stop treatment and allow the cancer to take its course. For months she had ceded complete control to Dr. Koenig and his squad of physicians; as she realizes the end of her life is near, she makes the decision to reclaim control over her body and reassert her own agency. Frank claims that “control and chaos exist at opposite ends of a continuum...The chaos story presupposes *lack* of control, and the ill person’s loss of control is complemented by medicine’s inability to control the disease” (100). June realizes this predicament after months of treatment—that even her renowned doctor, Dr. Koenig, and all of Koenig’s subordinates, ultimately couldn’t “control” her disease. Thus, June takes control herself. In quitting treatment June is a failure to the medical system that defines her as a cancer patient. Koenig tells her that she is giving up, “with the ample authority and startling egoism of a celebrated healer” (244). She informs him that actually she is not: “*My whole life I cheated days. Please give the rest of mine to someone else*” [emphasis in original] (245). While June may be a failure as a patient under the contemporary medical system that defines her, she succeeds in regaining control of her own body, if only for the last remaining months of her life. In other words, she embodies the queer art of failure: by reasserting control over her own body and her journey, she ultimately succeeds in living life on her own terms—as non-normative a path as that may be—even as her body is failing her.

### **Solferino**

June’s decision to quit treatment sets off a chain of events that ultimately leads to her reunion with Hector and their journey to the tiny chapel in Solferino, Italy. The chapel presents a level of spectrality not seen in the rest of the text. The Binets traveled to the chapel in Solferino when Sylvie was a child, a memory that remained with her for the rest of her life.

Solferino was the site of a massively destructive battle during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the aftermath of which ultimately inspired Henry Dunant to write his *Memory of Solferino* and create the International Red Cross—the Binets particularly held the memoir in a spiritual reverence, “reading the Red Cross founder’s account of the battle and aftermath to each other aloud” on the train to the chapel with Sylvie (Lee 192). After the pilgrimage Sylvie’s parents gifted her a copy of Dunant’s *Memory*, with the inscription “*To our steadfast daughter. May you be an angel of mercy*” [emphasis in original] (258). The single relic that Sylvie keeps after her parents’ executions is their copy of Dunant’s *Memory*, and during their stay at New Hope Hector and June both develop a respect for the significance of the memoir. In fact, the only artifact that June maintains from her time at New Hope is the copy of the memoir. Certainly we might view the copy of Dunant’s *Memory* through the lens of Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory— “[p]ostmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (22). Indeed, the chapel of Solferino acquires a level of significance for Hector and June that is only possible through the physical copy of Dunant’s memoir, which Sylvie held so dear. The text reminds Sylvie of her parents, but it also reminds her of the chapel itself, which spoke to her as a child: “she heard [the bones], as if she were on the stage peering out at the audience of a macabre opera house, the coaly voids of countless eyes speaking to her all at once” (194-5). Likewise, Dunant’s depictions of war speak to Hector: “the descriptions matched any number of his memories from the war, and as much as they pained him—an icy clawing at his lungs, puncturing his breath—the feeling soon gave way to a numbing pause” (146). And up to the present day, June retains Sylvie’s copy “in a large jewelry box on her bureau” (258). Given this significance of the book, Hector and June come to associate the copy

of Dunant's memoir and the associated chapel at Solferino with their lost love, Sylvie. After June reasserts control over her body, she determines to journey to Solferino for her death and burial. June's initial motivation is that she had promised her son, Nicholas, to go to the chapel together (261). However, the chapel clearly holds even deeper significance for her. The ossuary in Solferino mirrors the site of Sylvie's death at the New Hope orphanage, and June presumably envisions a death that mirrors Sylvie's—a death engendered by June's own attempt at suicide, as Sylvie attempted to be “an angel of mercy,” as her parents once wished, and save June. From this perspective, June herself becomes an angel of mercy—assuming control over her body and ostensibly releasing Hector from his own trauma from the war. Their three lives have been intertwined in trauma since New Hope, and June and Hector's pilgrimage to the ossuary at Solferino unites them one final time. June demands of Hector that “she should be cremated and then her ashes spread about the grounds of the church” (462). Halberstam maintains that the queer art of failure supposes “alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends. It is a book about failing well, failing often, and learning, in the words of Samuel Beckett, how to fail better” (24). In this way, June's embrace of the ossuary as her resting place gestures to this queer art of failure. She has embraced a path that eschews the normative route of acquiescing to modern medicine, instead choosing to quit treatment and die as she chooses—just as she has learned how to “fail better” in her life of trauma. She lost her love Sylvie long ago; she embarked on a marriage with Hector doomed from the beginning; she raised a son who was a thief who abandoned her and eventually died alone. Yet, in this final step, this pilgrimage to the ossuary at Solferino—she finds a death of her own preference, surrounded by the innumerable memories of trauma that dominated her life.



I want to return in full to the powerful closing scene of *The Surrendered* to which I referred at the start of this chapter—the scene where Hector and June visit the chapel in Solferino. The ossuary is an apt setting for the characters of *The Surrendered*. Not an ornate cathedral in Rome or a historic duomo in Florence but a plain, gray chapel in Lombardy, stuffed only with bones and a giant wooden cross, much like a chapel that Hector built decades ago at New Hope. Moreover, the chapel is not a typical memorial. As Halberstam notes, “many contemporary texts, literary and theoretical, actually argue against memorialization. [Texts like *Beloved* and *Ghostly Matters*] all advocate for certain forms of erasure over memory precisely memorialization has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories (of slavery, the Holocaust, wars, etc). Memory itself is a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls ‘a ritual of power’; it selects for what is important (the histories of triumph), it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions” (*QAOF* 15). Thus, war memorials are sites imbued with the power to shape how people and countries remember history. The stark simplicity in Solferino does not “tidy up” history; instead it offers thousands of bones to remind visitors of the indiscriminate and lasting destruction that war breeds. The ossuary speaks to the “ruptures and contradictions” that June’s and Hector’s post-war lives entail. In her recent work *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, Wai Chee Dimock introduces a complementary argument to Halberstam’s; she writes, “[f]allability is not the end here. Rather, it is the beginning of a measure of time humanized by our finite efforts, our failures to complete what we set out to do. Embracing these failures, we embrace the unfinished task of the dead even as we embrace their unexpired membership in our species. This membership gives them the right to come back once in a while and to make noise in the ethics, politics, and aesthetics of the living” (66). Thus, through the perspective provided by Dimock, the ossuary’s bones suggest an

unspoken connection with Hector and June. The bones which inspired Henry Dunant's desire to create the International Red Cross—their representation of the massive destruction caused by war—inevitably “come back once in a while” and serve as reminders of this destruction. They inspire visitors like Sylvie, who in turn influences Hector and June. The “fallability” of Sylvie and of Hector and of June indeed is “not the end.” And the ossuary ironically offers June and Hector a peculiar vitality after decades of avoiding pain and attempting to forget their pasts. The skulls grimace and grin at Hector, and he responds with a grimace of his own, “his own teeth tasting of iron and blood” (483). Shortly after entering the chapel, Hector must describe the scene to June, as the cancer has taken her eyesight:

‘Are we inside?’ June murmured, her eyes shiny pieces of coal. ‘Are we here?’  
He said yes.  
‘It must be beautiful. Is it beautiful?’  
‘*It is beautiful*, he whispered, not hearing his own voice. *This is our place.* (483)

We do not know what Hector specifically finds “beautiful.” It may be the bones that were “touched only by time” (483). Or that he finally understands Sylvie. Or the unspoken understanding between him and June. Or the vibrant awareness for life that June's illness has offered him. Regardless, the beauty for both of them only becomes viable after numerous failures and by ultimately acknowledging their suffering.

Furthermore, it is important to note that to get to this point—for June to physically visit the ossuary—she must rely on Hector. She tells him, “I can no longer exert myself. I have no strength at all. You're my body now. You'll be my limbs” (333). In this sense their bodies become one—Hector must not only describe the chapel to her now that her cancer has caused her blindness, but he also must carry her, he must become her “body” and “limbs.” This connection, along with the unspoken understanding between them that comes from their experiences in Korea, also makes this final scene *beautiful*. After decades of surviving on their own, June's

illness reveals the mutual reliance they have for one another. To return once more to Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller*, he writes regarding the chaos narrative that "the challenge is to *hear*. Hearing is difficult not only because listeners have trouble facing what is being said as a possibility or a reality in their own lives. Hearing is also difficult because the chaos narrative is probably the most embodied form of story. If chaos stories are told on the edges of a wound, they are also told on the edges of speech. Ultimately, chaos is told in the silences that speech cannot penetrate or illuminate" (101). Put another way, Frank asserts that "[l]istening is hard, but it is also a fundamental moral act; to realize the best potential in postmodern times requires an ethics of listening" (25). Just as June must simultaneously take control of her body from Dr. Koenig and ultimately relinquish control of it to Hector, Hector must learn to listen to her. After years, even decades, of trying not to hear, of trying to forget and move on, Hector must learn to give up himself and listen to June, even though listening to her forces him to recognize his own mortality—the "possibility" or "reality" the rest of his life has obscured.

Karen Barad offers yet another perspective into the significance of Hector and June's relationship in this final scene. In her poignant essay "On Touching," Barad—a quantum physicist writing on affect theory—asserts that touching, at the molecular level, ultimately engenders an inherent level of responsibility between all individuals. She writes "*[t]he very nature of matter entails an exposure to the Other. Responsibility is not an obligation that the subject chooses but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness. Responsibility is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation that is always already integral to the world's ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming*" [emphasis in original] (217). She adds that "*touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of 'us' is*

*constituted in response-ability. Each of 'us' is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other*" [emphasis in original] (215). Barad's insights into affect offer a powerful interpretation of our relationship to one another—and to the beauty of Hector and June's final interaction. Hector assumes this "response-ability" that Barad asserts. As I argued earlier, while Hector may be a failure under a normative lens, his actions consistently reveal a consciousness towards others and a focus on both mercy and dignity in his actions—he points us to the responsibility that Barad asserts is an "integral" part of our world and existence. As James Kyung-jin Lee argues, "in this final moment [in *The Surrendered*] what emerges is a kind of communicability and relationality—an intersubjectivity—in which what is beautiful is wholly experienced not in spite of but because of June's terminal illness" (xi). He maintains further that "the utterance of 'beautiful' emerges neither from Hector nor June alone, but from the deeply shared, deeply felt relationship borne of unearthed stories, of the stories that their bodies tell together in the presence of the dead" (xii). Indeed, the "intersubjectivity" and "deeply shared, deeply felt relationship" between June and Hector point to Barad's concept of touching—after both suffer significant traumas during the war and both navigate individual paths of living with their post-traumatic memories, they return to each other and acknowledge the "response-ability" inherent in and integral to their relationship with each other.

## **Conclusion**

On the surface Chang-rae Lee's *The Surrendered* is a macabre text—a narrative filled with the incomprehensible torture, rape, and death generated by war, as well as never-ending suffering in the post-war world. It also is a story of pain, both physical and psychological. As I emphasized throughout, Halberstam, Frank, Barad, and others offer powerful lenses through which we may find a level of understanding and redemption even in the midst of Lee's dark text.

Elaine Scarry argues that “the story of *physical pain* becomes as well a story about the expansive nature of human *sentience*, the felt-fact aliveness that is often sheerly happy, just as the story of *expressing* human pain eventually opens into the wider frame of *invention*” [emphasis in original] (22). Indeed, June’s narrative ultimately emphasizes just this *sentience*. She, along with Sylvie and Hector, continually attempt to forget the past and avoid such *sentience*; only after her cancer wreaks havoc on her body does she finally embrace this *sentience* and acknowledge a mutual reliance with Hector. In doing so, she fulfills yet another attribute of Frank’s wounded storyteller: “the ill, and all those who suffer, can also be healers. Their injuries become the source of the potency of their stories” (xii). I do not want to fall into the predicament that Tobin Siebers finds in many disability theorists’ work—I am not suggesting that the massive, debilitating pain that June suffers is “a friend to humanity” or “a well of delight,” in Siebers’ terms. Without a doubt June’s cancer inflicts pain that generates suffering, requires gradually greater morphine injections, and that ultimately takes away her sight and her life. Her cancer is lethal. Yet, we still can acknowledge this pain and discover the beauty that comes from her woundedness and the “intersubjectivity” and “deeply felt relationship” between her and Hector, as James Kyung-jin Lee suggests. And Barad complements Lee’s assertions even further; in “On Touching” she also argues that “[l]iving compassionately, sharing in the suffering of the other, does not require anything like complete understanding (and might, in fact, necessitate the disruption of this very yearning). Rather, living compassionately requires recognizing and facing our responsibility to the infinitude of the other, welcoming the stranger whose very existence is the possibility of touching and being touched, who gifts us with both the ability to respond and the longing for justice to come” (219). June’s illness affords both her and Hector the opportunity to finally comprehend this compassion and responsibility towards one

another. The narrative suggests that June and Hector actually shared such compassion and responsibility from the start—they reciprocally saved each other’s lives during the war—yet it required decades and June’s cancer to acknowledge their interconnectedness, the intersubjectivity to which Lee alludes in his essay. As Barad argues, living compassionately “does not require anything like *complete* understanding” [emphasis added]. June’s cancer allows Hector to do just what Barad suggests—he lives with compassion and comes to share in June’s suffering. And, after decades, both reach a level of understanding; if not “complete” understanding, a mutual understanding nonetheless, born through decades of trauma.

Intriguingly, *The Surrendered* is bookended with two bolded statements regarding June’s escape from combat as a young refugee: “THE JOURNEY WAS NEARLY OVER” at the beginning of the text and “NOT YET” at the conclusion (1, 483). Much like Hector’s statement regarding the beauty of the ossuary at Solferino, we can interpret these statements in myriad ways beyond their face values. Most significant, though, they point to the narrative of trauma—of trauma’s incessant and unpredictable nature, of its “endless impact on life,” of a journey that is never really *over*. Indeed, June’s physical “journey” south was nearly complete at the start of the text—she was about to lose her last two siblings and begin her post-war life as an orphan at New Hope. However, her post-traumatic journey undoubtedly was just beginning. June’s struggles, much like Hector’s and Sylvie’s, extended far beyond the immediate aftermath of her losses into the subsequent decades. And, as *The Surrendered* reveals, until her death. Their traumas in war remained with each of them, and, as I tried to demonstrate in this chapter, each of their journeys reveals the different paths individuals take in order to cope with trauma and attempt to discover some level of healing. To return once more to *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam argues that “[t]o live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die;

rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly and the hopelessly goofy. Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures” (186-7). Consequently, after myriad failures and wounds to their bodies and psyches, after constant attempts to ignore their bodies, June’s cancer offers her and Hector a final opportunity to do the opposite—to succeed in acknowledging the corporeal pain and suffering they’ve experienced. In the end, by rebelling against doctor’s orders and quitting her cancer treatment, June finally controls her “dominion,” allowing Hector to do the same.

## Chapter 2: Open Wounds and Half Lives: Post-traumatic Illness and the Struggle to Heal in Lan Cao's *The Lotus and the Storm*

Prior to the start of *The Lotus and the Storm*, Lan Cao's second novel focusing on the Vietnam War and its staggering effects on one South Vietnamese family, Cao incorporates an excerpt from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as an epigraph. The excerpt includes a mysterious, though prescient, tone as an introduction to the ensuing narrative. The epigraph reads:

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
I do not know whether a man or a woman  
--But who is that on the other side of you? [emphasis in original]*

The excerpt from Eliot's poem introduces an image of a few people walking together—the speaker is confident that two people are present, yet at a distance a mysterious third person potentially lingers as well and attracts the speaker's attention. Given that Cao's novel includes multiple narrators, two of whom are multiple personalities of the same individual, the mystery of Eliot's poem is particularly apt. Even before the start of the novel, Cao's selection points us to the diverse questions that arise through the course of her text: questions of identity, of perception and reliability, and of, simply, relationships. Just as we are drawn to the mysterious presence of the entity “*on the other side,*” the fractured narrative of *The Lotus and the Storm* similarly intrigues the reader with constant shifts between narrators and temporality. And, just as important, the excerpt's emphasis on walking (and to an extent, looking forward) likewise



suggests an element of movement and progression that gestures to the characters' journeys of recovery.

These concepts are a crucial introduction to *The Lotus and the Storm*—a text filled with myriad forms of physical and psychological trauma wrought by the Vietnam War. Cao's novel examines the war-time losses suffered by multiple members of a single family and the post-traumatic symptoms that they navigate in the decades following the war. She utilizes three narrators—Minh, the patriarch of the South Vietnamese family; Mai, his youngest daughter; and Bao, one of Mai's multiple personalities—to demonstrate both the disorienting nature of war's psychological trauma as well as the turbulence of a decades-long struggle towards healing the wounds of war. No individual in the narrative survives the war without suffering some sort of loss, whether that is death, wounding, amputation, or unrequited love, and the text continually forces us to question identity and “reality” as the narrative progresses, as well as individuals' different survival choices in the aftermath of trauma. Michela Borzaga asserts that “human beings do not conceive of time as a linear succession; the way time is lived and experienced presupposes complex, simultaneous temporalities, each going in different directions” (78). Cao's text suggests just this complexity: that the extended process of traumatic recovery is not linear nor does the path necessarily offer an “end”; instead, the novel suggests that progress and healing are different for each individual. Ultimately, the fractured narrative focuses primarily on the story of Mai's efforts, across three decades, to overcome the multiple losses she suffers as a child during the war in South Vietnam. At one point Mai describes her post-traumatic state of consciousness in a rather unique way:

everything that occurred [during the war] occurs right here, right now, and repeats in a perpetual present-tense time loop. Every moment I spent with my sister before this moment also occurs again and again, in the present tense. It is time bending, taking away my breath. I am still there, at that moment when God or

fate or a split second before or after could have made a difference but did not. And that is still how I am today, in a half-life that only waits and sometimes hopes. (Cao 106-7)

This half-life is what I will explore throughout this chapter—a life caught simultaneously between the traumatic events of her childhood, the memories and fragments that erupt unpredictably in the present, and the multiple personalities that she has navigated from the past into the present. However, instead of focusing solely on the debilitating consequences of her post-traumatic symptoms, I argue that Mai's multiple personalities allow her to embrace a more sustainable path in the present without abandoning her history or her pain—she has the desire to reconcile with her illness, to live with her personalities, and potentially to unify the different perspectives that they offer.<sup>5</sup> Cao's novel examines the extensive legacy of the Vietnam War from the perspective of those rarely accorded a voice in the war's narrative—the experiences of those citizens, refugees, and displaced immigrants who were affected by the war just as significantly as the uniformed soldiers on the battlefields. Mai experienced her traumas, as a young girl, not on the battlefields near the DMZ or Khe Sanh, but rather on the streets of Saigon and in her own backyard. Consequently, *The Lotus and the Storm* forces us to recognize that the trauma experienced by those outside of the confines of the battlefield are just as debilitating as those of soldiers on the battlefield and the consequences and post-traumatic symptoms haunt those less visible casualties for just as long.

### **Depathologizing Melancholia**

In her 1995 work *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* Cathy Caruth asserts that “the attempt to understand trauma brings us repeatedly to this peculiar paradox: that in trauma the

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<sup>5</sup> Mai develops two other personalities as a result of her war trauma; they are named Bao and Cecile. As noted, Bao is one of the text's three narrators and plays a crucial role in the narrative. On the other hand, Cecile has a very limited role, does not assume a narrative voice, and thus does not impact the narrative. Consequently, in this chapter I will not examine Cecile's role.

greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (6). Undoubtedly each of the narrators in *The Lotus and the Storm* grapples with this paradox; Minh, Mai, and Bao all must navigate their respective reactions to the “belatedness” through which they experience their individual and collective traumas. This paradoxically belated characteristic of trauma is key to understanding the narrators within the text—they remain connected to the past (and their past traumas) via the recurring memories that erupt in the years that follow their war-time experiences, yet their individual narratives reveal the disparate means by which they wrestle with and learn to live with their traumatic pasts.

Just as I believe the trio of narrators ultimately offers a more complete and compelling perspective into Mai’s journey (as opposed to collapsing the narrative and confusing the reader), I find that a hybrid approach employing theorists from a variety of fields produces the most illuminating approach to the text. As a means of understanding the narrators’ persistent struggles with post-traumatic symptoms—especially Mai’s—I particularly want to embrace the lens proposed by David Eng and David Kazanjian in their edited collection from 2002, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. In their introduction Eng and Kazanjian argue for a method of reading (and understanding) Freud’s concept of melancholia in a less debilitating way than Freud’s original rendering. Freud’s portrayal of melancholia depicts a pathological, seemingly incapacitating psychosis. In his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” he compares the similarities and differences between the two forms of grieving. For Freud, while the loss associated with mourning eventually is resolved, the grief in melancholia never ends and the patient becomes pathological. He asserts that “the complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energy from all sides” and subsuming the patient in a

seemingly endless search for wholeness (134). In contrast Eng and Kazanjian argue for a re-interpretation of this open wound and melancholia's unresolved grief; they "suggest that a better understanding of melancholic attachments to loss might depathologize those attachments, making visible not only their social bases but also their creative, unpredictable, political aspects" (3). To achieve this step—to allow for an understanding that depathologizes melancholia—they assert two key readings of the connection to the past. First, they argue that "[u]nlike mourning, in which the past is declared resolved, finished, and dead, in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present. By engaging in 'countless separate struggles' with loss, melancholia might be said to constitute, as Benjamin would describe it, an ongoing and open relationship with the past—bringing its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present" (3). This "ongoing and open relationship with the past" is key to my reading of *The Lotus and the Storm*. On the one hand, the post-traumatic symptoms that Mai suffers through are indeed debilitating and hinder her ability to heal; however, as the narrative demonstrates, her "ongoing and open relationship with the past" eventually enables her to resolve many of the issues that stemmed from her war wounds. Mai's ultimate "healing" is not complete per se—she does not leave behind her illness or her traumas completely—but she discovers a level of resolution that allows her to live with less instability in the present. Similarly, Eng and Kazanjian write that "we find Freud's conception of melancholia's persistent struggle with its lost objects not simply a 'grasping' and 'holding' on to a fixed notion of the past but rather a continuous engagement with loss and its remains. This engagement generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future. While mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia's continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of

lost objects” (3). This “continuous engagement” affords those who suffer prolonged symptoms more time to work through their pain. Rather than viewing the connection to the past in a pathological way, Eng and Kazanjian assert that their revised rendering of melancholia affords victims of trauma a means of greater agency, a way of eventually taking greater control of their tragic pasts and reducing the effects on their lives in the present-day. As I will demonstrate shortly, *The Lotus and the Storm* supports such a reading, as the protagonists ultimately gain “new perspectives” and “new understandings” of their individual and collective pasts via Mai’s extended illness. Indeed, Eng and Kazanjian write that “loss is inseparable from what remains,” and Lan Cao’s novel offers a narrative (or rather, three narratives) that suggests we read the “remains” of such losses as vital to overcoming—or at least *living with*—those losses (2).

To augment the perspective advanced by Eng and Kazanjian, I also want to turn to two scholars of Latina literature—Suzanne Bost and Laura Halperin. Bost directly complements Eng and Kazanjian’s work by focusing on the fluidity of the body and the opportunities for healing that such fluidity presents. In her 2009 work, *Encarnación: Illness and Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Literature*, Bost notes that “[u]nlike other texts, our bodies are never static” and later suggests that “illness leads to new forms of identification based on the permeability, suffering, and interdependence of bodies” (1, 5). The psychological splitting that Mai suffers undoubtedly speaks to both the “permeability” of bodies and how bodies “are never static”—the multiple narrators in *The Lotus and the Storm* depict just how malleable Mai’s identity is through the evolution of her illness, as well as how much she must rely on her other personalities and her father in order to eventually heal. Bost also argues that “pain opens up new perceptions of the relationship between one’s body and the world around it and creates new ways of moving through the world” (31). Indeed, as I will show, while Mai’s struggles with trauma are

massively debilitating at times, her journey towards healing ultimately affords her a new perception of the world and her relation to it, as well as a new means of navigating her life.

Halperin builds on the work of both Bost and Gloria Anzaldúa in her own study of trauma and harm in contemporary Latina literature. In her recent monograph, *Intersections of Harm: Narratives of Latina Deviance and Defiance*, Halperin argues that even in the face of massive trauma one finds hope and potential transformation. She writes that “hope exists in the attempts at resistance, however futile these attempts may be or seem. It exists in the sharing of often painful individual and collective histories and in the remembrance of harm in order to move past it and seek to rectify it” (3). This concept of sharing and remembrance is key to understanding the journeys that Mai, Minh, and Bao encounter. Through the sharing of their own memories and histories of the war they individually and collectively move past their traumas. Moreover, it is in the sharing of the collective memories that they formulate a “remembrance of harm” that allows them to comprehend their pasts and their pain more wholly, thus allowing them to grapple with their individual responses to trauma. Halperin also emphasizes that complicated nature of the harm found in Latina literature: “any literary understanding of the ways psychological harm affects protagonists of color must move beyond an intrapsychic analysis and must acknowledge how psychological harm is connected to physical and geopolitical harm” (6). Thus, while an examination of the psychological impact of violence and trauma on individuals is important, we cannot overlook the geopolitical forces that inflict such harm. Mai’s traumas—the murder of her sister, the abandonment she feels from her mother, her escape from South Vietnam—all generate significant psychological consequences; yet, as Halperin argues, we also must acknowledge the geopolitical actions that led to the violence and trauma she experiences. This forces us consider Mai as emblematic of those caught

between geopolitical forces of the governments and militaries embroiled in the war in South Vietnam. Finally, Halperin's work emphasizes the transformational nature of trauma. She asserts that "the multifaceted harm experienced by Latina protagonists is simultaneously disempowering and potentially transformative" (13). Inevitably, this speaks to Mai's journey throughout *The Lotus and the Storm*. Her war traumas undoubtedly are disempowering and sap her of any potential agency, yet through decades of struggle her experiences are indeed transformative. The traumas and subsequent illness transform the way she moves through the world and her ability to navigate present-day life in the midst of her never-ending struggle with post-traumatic stress. For my own project I want to embrace the lens that Halperin offers in *Intersections of Harm* by acknowledging the multifaceted trauma inflicted on Mai and her family but simultaneously emphasizing the eventual hope and transformation Mai discovers in the face of massive psychological—and geopolitical—harm.

### **Traumas of Mai and her family**

Much like Lan Cao's first novel, *Monkey Bridge*, *The Lotus and the Storm* is a Vietnam War narrative involving multiple forms of loss and trauma. Cao's second novel, however, emphasizes much more extensively the fracturing effects of the war's trauma on both individuals and families. The text presents the struggles of a single South Vietnamese family to overcome the myriad traumas they experience during the Vietnam War. The family—consisting of mother Quy, father Minh, elder daughter Khanh, and younger daughter Mai—suffers significant trauma throughout the war: Khanh is accidentally murdered in an apparent assassination attempt on the father; their house in Saigon is engulfed in fighting during the Tet Offensive, which shatters the family's stability and cohesiveness as Quy gradually estranges herself from Minh and Mai; Minh narrowly escapes a landmine explosion that wounds a close family friend; and most dramatically

Minh and Mai escape South Vietnam at the conclusion of the war in 1975, while Quy chooses to remain behind in her homeland. The narrative focuses especially on Mai's decades-long struggle with these traumas inflicted by the war and the multiple personality disorder she develops in the aftermath of Khanh's death. The text is organized into three sections: the first focuses predominantly on the family's experiences in South Vietnam from 1967 to 1975 (up to Mai and Minh's escape), while the subsequent two sections focus primarily on Mai and Minh's efforts both to adjust to life in the United States and to overcome Mai's illness. Yet, despite this general chronological organization the narration shifts dramatically throughout the narrative. Within these main sections the narration rotates each chapter among the three narrators—Minh, Mai, and one of Mai's personalities, Bao. Furthermore, the narration shifts temporally as well: Mai's narration remains solely in the present tense, while both Minh and Bao reflect back from the present day to explain past historical events. Thus, much like the effects of trauma, the narrative is fractured temporally and offers multiple perspectives into the post-traumatic struggles encountered by Mai, Minh, and Bao.

In order to understand the evolution of Mai's post-traumatic symptoms, I particularly want to examine three primary traumatic events that affect the narration, above all others: the murder of Mai's sister Khanh in 1967, the violent attacks during the Tet Offensive in Saigon in 1968, and Mai and Minh's escape from South Vietnam in 1975. These events span the length of Mai's formative childhood in Vietnam, from age nine to seventeen; moreover, their impact extends beyond the traumas that Mai experiences to affect the rest of her family. To begin, the foundational traumatic event in *The Lotus and the Storm* is the random murder of Mai's only sister, Khanh, on a Saigon street in 1967. Khanh is Mai's older sister, and, while they clearly have disparate interests—Khanh is interested in physics and mathematics; Mai prefers literature



and fantasy—Khanh is a crucial part of her sister’s young life. Mai describes her sister’s significance early in the text: “*Khanh*, a name I have known before speech, before memory. Hers is a presence I take on trust” (5) [emphasis in original]. While there are several other deaths and numerous forms of trauma in the text, Khanh’s accidental murder initiates the most powerful, fracturing, and enduring post-traumatic effects of any other event in the narrative. Just as significant, the murder occurs in the midst of the ongoing war in South Vietnam; as each of the traumas reveals, the impact of combat extends far beyond the battlefield and is not confined solely to soldiers. This is a concept that Cao does not overtly emphasize, but we cannot avoid acknowledging it, given that the most significant traumas of the text affect “civilians.”

Khanh’s murder on a Saigon street shocks and destabilizes Mai—it simultaneously fractures and freezes her memory. Her description of the event suggests a disorienting slow motion. At first, she sees an American friend, James, on the street, with whom she’d just spent the afternoon: “I am about to wave at him but I freeze instead. I find that I am gazing right through him, into a washed-out spot...a moment passes. My bare skin registers a sensation of dread...an enormous heaviness swoops through me, pressing my eyes shut” (105). The joy of seeing her friend shifts rapidly to an approaching dread. The cacophony of the street heightens her anxiety and inability to register the moment: “Several men gun their motorcycles down the street. Horns blare. Motors rumble. Heat blasts from the asphalt road. The windshield shatters. My sister is sitting next to me, then the entire weight of her body collapses into my arms” (106). Khanh collapses, bleeding, onto her sister, after being shot by an assassin passing on a motorcycle. In *Unclaimed Experience* Cathy Caruth asserts that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt

the survivor later on” (4). Hence, in Mai’s case, the ostensibly innocuous instance of taking a ride in the car with her family turns into a life-altering event—a violent loss that she can reconcile neither in the present nor in the ensuing future. The “unassimilated nature” of Khanh’s murder, not surprisingly, devastates and impairs the young nine-year old Mai and undoubtedly “returns to haunt” her throughout her life. Not surprisingly, the murder shatters the stability of Mai’s family, as both Minh (her father) and her mother, Quy, suffer dramatically from the indiscriminate loss of their first daughter.

Following the murder Mai emphasizes the incessant and seemingly omnipresent nature of the trauma in her life, almost from the immediate impact of Khanh’s death. To return to the “half-life” quotation from my introduction, she describes this feeling, how “[e]very moment I spent with my sister before this moment also occurs again and again, in the present tense. It is time bending, taking away my breath. I am still there, at that moment when God or fate or a split second before or after could have made a difference but did not. And that is how I still am today, in a half-life that only waits and sometimes hopes” (106-7). Caruth notes the negotiation of trauma entails “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (*UE* 7). Mai thus survives her sister’s murder but in her survival and Khanh’s death, she is torn between the two disparate events. She questions the event and her survival, where a “split second,” anything “could have made a difference.” She lives in a continual “half-life”—she lost her sister; her own existence was diminished; she waits and wonders if her memories might change. She emphasizes a type of stasis, a strange form of equilibrium her trauma initiates: a “time bending,” a “perpetual present-tense time loop” as she replays her memories with her sister and the murder itself, a “half-life.” For Caruth this

repetition is the heart of trauma—it “haunt[s] the survivor” repetitively. Yet, she also emphasizes that “the experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never fully be known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself” (17). Therefore, while Mai’s initial responses to the trauma immediately describe a skepticism towards the event and her survival, the “latency” associated with trauma ensures that she will wrestle repeatedly with her memories and intermittently discover (and re-discover) other memories associated with Khanh’s murder. This intertwining of trauma, latency, and discovery embodies the winding path in the narrative that ensues following Khanh’s death.

Mai, however, experiences a second life-altering trauma just months after her sister’s murder. During the Tet Offensive in February 1968, extensive combat occurs around Mai’s family’s house, and the violence of the fighting triggers massive, debilitating flashbacks. Mai describes the scene as it occurs: “I am aware that I need to go back inside, but my eyes are drawn to the dedicated movements of a column of leaf cutters ants....And then it all returns—as if in an interlocking reflex of events. A siren goes off. Streaks of light flash above, in front of me, and everywhere. The windowpanes of the house shatter” (158). In the midst of this attack Mai’s mother temporarily loses her sanity and abandons Mai, leaving her to survive on her own in the midst of the violence. Mai’s abandonment by her mother at this young stage in her life, during an especially violent and turbulent event during the war, produces serious consequences and pain that requires decades to overcome.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the cacophony of the violence inspires flashbacks—“it all returns” to Khanh’s murder. To compound the pain, during the attack Mai’s American friend attempts to rescue her, only to apparently die in the attempt: “James is coming

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<sup>6</sup> Mai’s mother’s loss of sanity demonstrates that the trauma of combat is felt and experienced at the collective level. Quy’s psychological trauma is more acute than her daughter’s, but the episode reveals the collective impact nonetheless, as well as how the trauma affects the mind.

for me. My heart leaps with relief and with fear. I crane my neck upward to look. The big metal gate opens. I hear his footsteps cross the graveled path, pass the mango tree, and head toward my bedroom door” (163). Mai, however, is too fearful of the situation, and she is unable to warn James of the threat: “I hear a shot go off. A body falls to the ground. Everything turns black yet again” (164). Therefore, in the course of just months, Mai suffers the traumatic loss of both her sister and her friend, as well as the sense of abandonment from her mother and her mother’s struggle with her own mental illness. The combination of the traumatic effects of Khanh’s murder compounded by the shock of combat at her home literally shatters Mai into multiple personalities. This second trauma reinforces the implication that the effects of combat extend far beyond the bullets and artillery that fall on the “normal” battlefield; Mai’s fracturing trauma is inflicted by street-to-street fighting in the confines of her own neighborhood. Moreover, much like the murder of her sister, Mai experiences her second trauma as an ostensibly innocent bystander—as a young girl not involved in combat or the geopolitics of the war. The narrative emphasizes throughout that the violence of war knows no boundaries. The violence fractures not just individuals, but families and communities and produces wounds that don’t heal.

The last significant war trauma that impacts and finally divides Mai and her family is the exodus at the end of the war in 1975. Once again, Cao’s text emphasizes the atypical traumas that one discovers in war; in this case, the trauma of forced migration. We find myriad narratives in other Vietnam War novels over the past several decades that examine the struggle that soldiers face returning home; Cao’s text, particularly the third war trauma, forces us as readers to consider the consequences of civilians forced from their homes, of political refugees who cannot remain in their home country due to anticipated political persecution and instead

must escape by any means possible to start life anew in a country not of their own choosing. The struggle for said civilians is not “returning home” after war, but rather finding a home, any “home,” in which they might reestablish a sense of normalcy and stability in their lives—such displaced migration is just as traumatic as the shock of combat. Thus, in order to save themselves from the persecution of the conquering Communist forces, Minh and Mai must leave South Vietnam; in doing so, however, they must also leave Quy (Mai’s mother), who wishes to remain in her native land.<sup>7</sup> Isabelle Thuy Pelaud notes in her work, *This is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature*, that the end of the war engendered massive trauma for the South Vietnamese: “[f]irst wave departure at the end of the war for those of all classes took place in a panicked state because of fear of retaliation by the communist government. Unlike most emigrants, South Vietnamese had very little time to prepare physically or emotionally for their departure. They did not know where they were going, when or if they would ever return, and how they would adapt to life in a new land” (10). Pelaud’s description of the exodus speaks to the trauma of Mai’s departure—she does not know where she and her father are going; she does not know if either of them will see her mother again; she has no time to prepare for the separation or the journey. The first part (of three) of *The Lotus and the Storm* concludes with this departure, and Mai describes the event in a single sentence: “I know, as Father and I get on a helicopter to fly out of Saigon, that my mother will stay behind, enfolded inside her tormented heart” (232). This single sentence chapter highlights the abrupt, distressing departure Mai experienced—no time for preparation, no discussion or goodbye, just escape and

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of their departure, Mai does not know the reasons behind her mother’s decision to remain behind in Vietnam, and this adds to her estrangement and feelings of abandonment by her mother. We learn near the end of the text that there were multiple reasons that forced Quy to remain: most significantly, she in fact was a member of the Viet Cong and she was pregnant from an extramarital relationship.

separation plain and simple. The “chapter” is a powerful end to the first part of the text, which represents Mai’s time in Vietnam. The lone sentence on an otherwise empty page offers an apt conclusion to the first part of the text that focused particularly on the traumas inflicted by war; the massive amount of blank space on the page gestures to all that cannot be said due to the trauma of war. Moreover, the chapter is the only one of the entire text that is “Untitled,” which speaks to the doubt and confusion sown by Mai and Minh’s chaotic departure, a departure further complicated by Mai’s lack of understanding for why her mother did not join them. Later in the text we receive slightly more exposition from Mai’s other personality, Bao, on the panicked nature of the departure, which closely parallels with Pelaud’s history: “I never got to say goodbye to our mother. Our father merely showed up at school and told me we had to go...I looked around. I could not see our mother...Father dabs my tears with a handkerchief but makes it seem as if he were merely wiping sweat off my face. I feel his urgent sense of responsibility. Life has pulled me in two, one part with our father and the other with our mother and sister” (247). Thus, the departure further divides Mai: while “one part” of her escapes with Minh, the other part remains in South Vietnam with her lost sister and mother. As I referenced above, Halperin asserts that we must shift an examination of psychological harm beyond just psychological analysis and emphasize the larger relationship to “physical and geopolitical harm” (6). The conclusion of this first part of the text speaks to the geopolitical implications of Mai’s suffering. Her splitting is not simply psychological; the war exacerbates her pain and illness by dividing her family, as her mother remains behind in their homeland. As Mai describes it, the war “pulled [her] in two, one part with [her] father and the other with [her] mother and sister” (247). Moreover, Mai, as a young girl, lacks any form of agency in the midst of the war’s chaos; her father abruptly takes her from school and forces her to leave with him. Consequently, her

traumas are multifaceted and speak to the much larger implications and consequences of the United States' war in South Vietnam. Mai typifies the experiences of innumerable Vietnamese: families split by the war and their different allegiances; civilians unintentionally maimed by the violent combat; individuals torn apart by both physical and psychological trauma.

In his seminal study of Holocaust survivors with Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Dori Laub describes the unusual nature and a-temporality of trauma; he writes that “[t]he traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place, and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. . . . trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion” (69). The incomplete and a-temporal nature of trauma underscores the lack of closure that Mai experiences with each successive trauma. Her sister's murder leaves her empty; the violence of Tet exacerbates her post-traumatic symptoms; and the panicked departure from South Vietnam severs her relationship with her mother and her place of birth: Mai experiences no completion or closure of any of these traumas. Consequently, Mai's struggles with her post-traumatic symptoms inevitably gesture back to the lack of “completion” she experiences.

Mai's trauma affects her life in two dramatic ways: first, by silencing her (she suffers muteness from the shock of her sister's murder), and second, by initiating the development of multiple personalities. Needless to say, both consequences obstruct her ability to navigate through her post-traumatic symptoms and to convey her narrative. Laub and Felman note the significance of silence amongst trauma victims. Laub observes that “speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to. That

while silence is defeat, it serves [victims] both as a sanctuary and a place of bondage. Silence is for them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath. To *not* return from this silence is rule rather than exception” [emphasis in original] (58). We see the immediate and remarkable tendency towards silence in Mai’s reaction to Khanh’s death. Quite pointedly, the chapter where Mai describes her sister’s murder is called “A Great Silence Overcomes Me.” She admits that “I stop talking after [Khanh’s] death. Our parents ask, then beg, then order me to speak. Perhaps I should say ‘my’ parents but I can’t because saying ‘our’ honors my sister’s continuing presence. Just one word. Any word...The truth is I have become capable only of pure, uninflected silence” (107). The trauma silences her, and the recovery of her speaking voice entails significant effort. Still, her emphasis on “our” parents, even shortly after her sister’s death, points to her desire to keep the memory of her sister alive, to sustain Khanh’s presence in her life. Likewise, it highlights a potential need or predilection to develop a dual personality, or at least something to replace the void from her sister’s absence in her life. As Laub aptly describes in his work, Mai comes to *prefer* the silence. She states, “I do not mind it. I want to be small inside the world’s vastness. [My parents] don’t understand, but I have grown to like the emptiness and stillness of silence itself. I want to be swallowed up inside a vast expanse of space” (128). After the dramatic loss of her sister, Mai seeks out silence as a way of escaping the world—and surviving.

In the mist of her suffering in silence, Mai’s immediate focus following her loss rests on recovering the presence of her sister in her life, despite the disorientation and silence that she inhabits. She notices “[s]ometimes the feeling that there is some other person standing next to me is so strong I have to turn and look. It is as if the person were hovering in my blind spot. Walking beside me” (113). Of course this reflects back to the epigraph—to the mysterious



*“third who walks always beside you”* in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Much like the speaker in the poem, Mai struggles to discern what she is experiencing and potentially observing. Immediately afterwards she adds “[a]nd then it occurs to me. She is my first love. Her loss is the one I will never fully recover from. When she died she left me forever full of yearning” (ibid). Mai thus suggests that the negotiation of her trauma is a journey through and with melancholia—a life forever “full of yearning,” of attempting to reconcile the loss of her “first love.” Hers is a loss that serves to silence her initially and ultimately manifests itself in multiple personalities. As Eng and Kazanjian note in their work, “melancholia results from the inability to resolve the grief and ambivalence precipitated by the loss of the loved object, place, or ideal” (3). Mai’s particular “loved object,” which in a sense is her ideal as well, is her sister Khanh. And as Mai’s post-traumatic symptoms evolve, her fixation on this lost object—and particularly with *replacing* Khanh—becomes clearer. She notes a “mass of churning emotions” inside her: “I thought it had to do with my sister, with the lingering imprint of her presence, with the fact that certain things can attach themselves to your body and soul and cling forever to your heart. Even after the fleshly presence, a fragment of a memory that might remain, spinning alternative versions of what might have been” (129). This is such a compelling statement that describes the power of memory to enact different possible realities: the “lingering imprint” of the memory that attaches to the “body,” “soul,” and “heart”; the ability to spin “alternative versions” of the past; the “fragment of memory” that is not whole but rather an essence or piece of the past that enables the individual to remember the event in her own way. In other words, Mai speaks to the approach I referenced earlier from Eng and Kazanjian: the “continuous engagement with loss and its remains...generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future” (3). While Mai clearly suffers in the immediate aftermath of her

traumas, the attachment to her sister that remains—the paradoxical *presence* of her absent sister in her life—eventually will allow her to revise and spin alternative versions of her painful memories, to rewrite the past and reimagine the future.

### **Tet**

The final step that ostensibly ensures Mai's descent into multiple personality disorder is the Viet Cong's surprise attack on Saigon during the celebration of Tet in 1968. As I mentioned earlier, the attack during the Tet Offensive is the second instance of trauma that serves to exacerbate the shock of Khanh's murder just months before. I particularly want to return to the events on Tet because the text places such emphasis on the events. Minh goes so far as to say "Tet also marked the moment life split and splintered for us... To understand Mai, you have to understand Tet" (Cao 192). Of course, for the United States the Tet Offensive signaled the beginning of the end of its participation in the war; despite the failure of the offensive tactically for the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, the surprise attack became a symbol of the United States' inability to win the war. In contrast, in *The Lotus and the Storm* the Tet Offensive represents the *beginning* of Mai's decades-long battle with her psychological wounds. I want to examine the event in greater detail because of its dual significance: it is the only trauma that all three narrators describe in their respective chapters, and it produces the splitting of Mai's multiple personalities. Consequently, the events on Tet present the most informative and succinct example of the three unique forms of narration in the text.

I first want to examine Minh's representation because his experience of the event is the most detached of the three. While Minh obviously is emotionally attached to his daughter and her well-being, his depiction of Tet is the most removed because he was not present for the entire progression of the events—the traumatic events transpire when he is at work, and he rushes

home to help his family. Just as significant, Minh's description comes as he reflects back to the event three decades later. His narrative of Mai's trauma describes his search for her in the midst of the battle: "[n]o one knew where the child was. The Chinese nanny was in a state of panic. My wife sat paralyzed on the ground. She covered her mouth and cried soundlessly...In the far corner of the garden, near the mango tree, was my child, wide-eyed, hushed. I turned to face her. I kneeled and opened my arms for her to run into. But she stood still, removed. I saw her hesitate. She was a wholly different child" (199). Minh relates a very chaotic image: the erratic nanny, Minh's wife paralyzed by fear and crying, and Mai paralyzed as well but silent, stoic, and apparently transformed—a "wholly different child" after the trauma of the combat. He also describes his interaction with his transformed daughter: "'Mai?' I said tentatively. 'No.' A ravaged face peeked up at me. Incompliant, she shook her head. 'Don't touch,' she growled. ...My child had changed. She had metamorphosed and crossed into an elaborately different realm. I tried to hold her, to love and to reassure. But she pushed me off" (200). Minh's narrative presents the dramatic and immediate changes he sensed from Mai, in the aftermath of the urban combat around their house. While his observations are important—such as the "ravaged face" he saw, the manner in which she "growled" at him, and even her unwillingness to give in to his consolations—he cannot discern the reason(s) for her metamorphosis; he can only describe her reactions.

In contrast, Mai represents her experience completely in the present tense, as the events transpire. To recount a brief portion of an excerpt I included earlier, she describes the initial attack in very short fragments, much in the way one's memory is composed, that produce a chaotic tone to the event: "And then it all returns—as if in an interlocking reflex of events. A siren goes off. Streaks of light flash above, in front of me, and everywhere. The windowpanes

of the house shatter” (158). For Mai this “reflex of events” that “returns” reflects back to her earlier trauma, the murder of her sister. The violence during Tet reminds her of the violence that shattered her childhood just months earlier; moreover, the combat jars her with extreme audio and visual overload—the sirens, the flashes of gunfire, the shattering windows. And the rest of her description of Tet speaks to the impact this violence has on her psyche. She presents fragments of the battle that ensues around her, the means by which she survives the battle inside a cistern, and reveals that “[c]onsciousness begins to slip out of me. I feel the fleeting burden of two selves separating, like gritty shadows against a dimming light, my sister and I, conjoined and then suddenly not. I watch and am watched at the same time. I am startled by this possibility... And although I would like to be able to say more about what happens next, the truth is I do not remember. I black out. After it is all over I can only feel the snapping aftereffect that is lodged deep inside my chest” (159). Hence, in the midst of the battle that engulfs her, she seemingly retreats inside herself and feels “two selves separating,” and even suggests that the other self might be her sister. In other words the violence of Tet indeed shifts her back to the loss of her sister—of her and Khanh once “conjoined” and then abruptly not. This insight into Mai’s psychological evolution is an element that only her own narration offers. In a particularly insightful article on psychic trauma and traumatic memory, Dori Laub and Nannette Auerhahn describe the problems associated with understanding the traumatic event; they observe: “[c]lose to the experience, survivors are captive observers who can only repeat it. They cannot make sense of it; they cannot know it cognitively. Indeed, they may not even be able to remember it, except for the haunting, fragmented visual percepts that they cannot integrate affectively into their personality” (288). In Mai’s narration we see this inability to make sense of the trauma of Tet and the inability to “know it cognitively.” She presents the event in fragments of

observations and sentiments in the present tense, as the battle occurs. And given her “black out,” she undoubtedly has difficulty remembering. Arthur Frank complements Laub and Auerhahn’s insights into psychic trauma in his work on the chaos narrative; he argues that “[i]f narrative implies a sequence of events connected to each other through time, chaos stories are not narratives. When I refer below to the chaos narrative, I mean an *anti-narrative* of time without sequence, telling without mediation, and speaking about oneself without being fully able to reflect on oneself” [emphasis in original] (98). Indeed, Mai’s inability to make sense of either trauma—whether Khanh’s death or the combat that engulfs her during Tet—speaks to Frank’s “*anti-narrative*.” Her own narrative progresses without mediation and with very little time to reflect—her consistent voice in the present tense reduces her ability to reflect back to previous events and synthesize their meaning, and to whatever extent might be possible, their veracity. Yet in a larger sense, as we see in *The Lotus and the Storm* war inevitably produces anti-narratives, particularly for children exposed to the traumas of war. All of Mai’s traumas occur when she is a child—from the age of 9 to 17. She is too young to make sense of the events, and yet the shock of the traumas compounds her inability to comprehend their meaning and significance. Thus, her narrative undoubtedly proceeds without mediation or reflection—only through the other narrators can we begin to ascertain the broader implications and meaning of what Mai depicts.

Bao’s narrative introduces the final representation of Tet that we receive in the text; this is not surprising as the events lead to her creation. Given that the trauma of Tet causes Mai to develop multiple personalities, Bao’s description of the event is particularly enlightening. On one hand, her narrative confirms some of the feelings that Mai describes; on the other Bao gives

greater insight into why the events were so traumatizing. Her first description of the event is as follows:

It was Tet. It was 1968. I was both Mai and my incipient self at the same time. I was tentatively there, submerged among the darts and points of light and dark, under water looking up through the jumping, electrified ripples, watching as Mai dipped and dodged and scurried after Mother. I heard Mother call out our sister's name, 'Khanh, Khanh,' as she walked obliviously from tree to tree, then room to room, searching, searching. Mai was calling after her. Mai was trying to hold on to a corner of Mother's sleeve....A long, plaintive cry came out of Mai when she fell and lost her grip on Mother's sleeve. Her body was flattened against the ground. Mother had disappeared. A hurt cut through me and settled in my flesh...I knew I had to resurrect myself. I knew I needed to reach her. (238)

Bao's description provides multiple insights into the traumas inflicted by the violence of Tet. To start, she confirms the chaotic nature of Mai's experience—the darting lightness and darkness, the obscured feeling of peering through the water, Mai surviving on her own. Bao, however, describes an especially notable aspect that Mai fails to include: Mai calling for her mother and grasping fruitlessly after her, as Quy already had lost control herself. As Minh's narrative notes, the surrounding combat paralyzed Quy and disoriented her; however, Mai did not know this and felt abandoned. In this way Bao's narration expands our understanding of Tet's impact on Mai: certainly the shocking violence of the combat aggravated her post-traumatic stress, but her sense of abandonment by her mother compounded the pain. Bao's vocabulary is notable as well: she felt she needed to “resurrect” herself and save Mai. This is the first of multiple allusions to the possibility that Bao is a type of reincarnation of Khanh—a psychological or *melancholic* means for Mai to maintain her connection to her lost sister. Furthermore, Bao refers to herself in the first person and Mai in the third, thus indicating that she asserts control over their body in times of stress; this is the first of multiple instances where we encounter this relationship. And yet, simultaneously, Bao's narration—stating that “a hurt cut through me and settled in my flesh”—suggests that she too was wounded by Quy's lack of awareness of Mai. Thus, given that Minh

states “[t]o understand Mai, you have to understand Tet,” we see the additional importance as it relates to Bao and the development of Mai’s multiple personalities. While Mai describes a “sensation of two selves splitting,” she does not really understand exactly what is occurring—she narrates the events as they occur. As Laub and Auerhahn described, close to occurrence survivors have difficulty registering the traumatic event and “may not even be able to remember” it (288). Yet Bao, narrating in 2006 (the present day for the text), has the distance from the event to offer a relatively more detached and synthesized portrayal of the event. She writes in the past tense—she “knew” she had to “resurrect” herself to save Mai; she knew she “needed” to reach her. Furthermore, Bao seems to have the ability to access Mai’s self-reflective consciousness that Mai cannot. Due to the losses she experienced as a child, Mai is overly vulnerable to pain, and Bao is able to withstand the vulnerability and pain for her. Nevertheless, Bao’s narration is not without question; she, too, is neither omniscient, nor is she fully reliable.

Bao’s description of her and Mai’s experiences during Tet leads us to the splitting of Mai’s psyche, which occurs in the aftermath of the attacks. As noted above, prior to Tet Mai had difficulty coping with her sister Khanh’s murder. She became mute and withdrew as much as she could from interacting with others. She described her struggle as “a mass of churning emotions inside me. I thought it had to do with my sister, with the lingering imprint of her presence, with the fact that certain things can attach themselves to your body and soul and cling forever to your heart. Even after the fleshly presence, a fragment of a memory that might remain, spinning alternative versions of what might have been” (129). Mai wrestles with melancholia—her inability to fully grieve her sister’s death and her need to release her “lost object.” She clings to her lost sister and the “imprint of her presence”; she fights to maintain the “fragment of memory that might remain.” As we see throughout this section, the violence during

Tet and Mai's perceived abandonment by her mother exacerbate her grieving, leading to her split personalities. Later in her description of the events of Tet, Mai depicts the sensation of two individuals, as she attempts to protect herself from the surrounding combat: "[a] shadow, two shadows, restless and charged, fling themselves against the cistern's walls. They spin as they expand and shrink, vanish and reappear, inside and outside the fleshy manifestation of my being. They race wailing and lunatic inside the tight confines of the cistern, one, the smaller of the two, crying and hiding behind the bigger, fiercer one. The shadows converge, then detach. I am here and not here. I watch and am watched. I am. I am not" (163). To be clear, two individuals do not hide inside the cistern; Mai describes the event as both she and her second personality, Bao, hide to save themselves from the fighting. What earlier in the text were just inclinations and insinuations of other entities or simply memories shadowing Mai now evolve into a psychiatric disorder. She describes further how her second personality comes to form: "[L]ike a storm, black and raging, a figure from within me shifts her shape until she is enormous and angry and erupts with a roar that swipes everything else aside. A keep quiet is sounded. It is there, speaking the voice of an angry girl. She puts out her arms and pushes me down. I am fastened to the bottom of the cistern" (163). Mai's description of her own battle, in the midst of the actual battle raging around her, gestures to a sensation of division and splitting, and to the turbulence of the trauma she experiences. There is no mediation to the narration—once again we receive the description in truncated phrases, as her other personality seizes control. And Mai's depiction confirms Bao's own narrative: Bao appears at the moment of highest stress, when Mai's emotions are most affected, disoriented, and vulnerable, in order to seize control and find safety in the midst of chaos. Consequently, Mai's experiences during Tet transform her: what initially was a suffering akin to melancholia, with Mai clinging to her lost sister and attempting to fill the hole that her



sister's murder created, is transformed by the violence and abandonment wrought by Tet that inspires multiple personality disorder. Ironically, however, while Bao appears as a belligerent personality in the midst of Mai's post-traumatic fight, she also represents a replacement for her lost sister (especially given her utilization of the term "resurrect" in her own narrative). The remainder of my chapter will focus on the paradox of this situation—whereby Mai's multiple personalities simultaneously generate significant pain but likewise offer her a potential path to some level of healing.

### **Half Lives and the Open Wound**

Following this trauma inflicted (and re-inflicted) by Tet, the narrative evolves into a negotiation of Mai's delicate, turbulent relationship with her multiple personalities—most exceptionally, Bao. Judith Herman, in her 1992 work *Trauma and Recovery*, a study on post-traumatic healing particularly among victims of sexual assault and abuse, asserts that "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy" (1). This is the predicament that Mai faces—her narrative proceeds in a rather emotional and guarded manner as she navigates her post-traumatic symptoms year after year, decade after decade, seeking to avoid confronting her illness and attempting to avoid aggravating her symptoms when possible. Yet, the tension between the will to silence and the desire to tell one's story are paradoxical products of trauma and potentially at odds, as Herman's statement suggests. However, Mai resolves this predicament by splitting her self into these other personalities—Bao can literally air grievances that Mai cannot. Both are part of the grieving that does not end for her. This tension between

silence and testimony gestures to the diverse responses to grieving that we find, even in the present day, over the war in both the United States and Vietnam. Dori Laub emphasizes just this type of trauma associated with *telling* one's story of trauma; in *Testimony* he writes that "[t]he fear that fate will strike again is crucial to the memory of trauma, and to the inability to talk about it...The act of telling might itself become severely traumatizing, if the price of speaking is *re-living*; not relief, but further retraumatization" (67). In Laub's view, the act of conveying one's story of trauma, even with the intent of healing, ironically has the capacity to exacerbate the survivor's symptoms—and this is the balance that Mai must strike in her narrative. From Tet onwards her portion of the text proceeds chronologically, written consistently in the present tense, as she gradually comes to terms with her illness in the subsequent decades, which highlights her relationship to trauma. In the excerpt that I provided in the introduction, between Khanh's murder and the events on Tet Mai offers a fitting description: "Every moment I spent with my sister before this moment also occurs again and again, *in the present tense*. It is time bending, taking away my breath. I am still there, at that moment when God or fate or a split second before or after could have made a difference but did not" (106-7) [emphasis added]. Mai's connection to her trauma is neverending—the trauma remains with her, in the present, in repetition. Moreover, everything that happened occurs "in the present tense," which speaks to the method in which she narrates. She seemingly never can move past the events: trauma is very much alive in the present for Mai, and she cannot move beyond it. Viewed in this way, we cannot help but connect Mai's neverending trauma to the experiences of hundred of thousands of Vietnamese and Americans affected by the war. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) literally became a formal psychological diagnosis based on the widespread experiences of American soldiers returning home from Vietnam. Mai's narrative emphasizes and serves to expand our

understanding of the suffering inflicted by the war, to include the innumerable civilians who suffered from violence, loss, and death just as severe as the soldiers who fought in combat—just as it serves to reinforce those survivors’ inability to leave the past behind. The war inevitably remains in the present for them, even decades afterwards.

Given Mai’s difficulty with the debilitating effects of the traumas she experiences in Vietnam and especially given the multiple personalities that develop in the aftermath of Tet, the narration in the second half of the text shifts to include chapters narrated by Bao, along with Mai and their father Minh. Cao even designates the second part of the novel (out of three), “Half-Lives,” and Bao is the initial narrator for the section. Needless to say, in this instance the term “half-life” implies multiple, powerful connotations: split bodies, the fracturing of Mai’s psyche, her sister’s life tragically cut short, her family’s lives before and after the trauma, before and after the war, and, in the scientific sense, the gradual reduction of life over time. We might also say that Mai and Bao are two halves of a whole—two half-lives existing together in an attempt to be whole, or at least to become whole once again, at some future stage. I also find that “half-life”—of a life that is not whole, of something that is split, of an entity that slowly diminishes and seemingly festers—points back to the open wound, the melancholic attachment that Mai (and as we will see, Bao) struggles to cope with and heal. Furthermore, what complicates the relationship between Mai and Bao even further is that Mai blames Bao for yet another loss in her life—the presumed death of their family’s American friend, James. In the midst of the turmoil of Tet, as combat engulfs their house after Mai has been abandoned by her mother and hides in her garden, Mai hears James come to rescue her: “James is coming for me. My heart leaps with relief and with fear. I crane my neck upward to look. The big metal gate opens. I hear his footsteps cross the graveled path, past the mango tree, and head toward my bedroom door. I’m over here,

James, I say, but nothing comes out of my mouth. I look up and see the muzzle of an upturned gun sticking out from the column of red brick [of our chimney]" 163). Given her fear from the violence surrounding her, Mai falls silent, fails to alert James to her presence in the courtyard, and fails to warn him of the guerrilla's gun. Subsequently, Mai "hear[s] a shot go off. A body falls to the ground" (164). She believes that James has been killed, but she blacks out after the gunshot and the body is gone when she finally recovers. From Mai's perspective, the only individual that cared enough to attempt to save her was James—not her mother or father—and Mai blames Bao for restricting her ability to warn James of the Viet Cong presence. Thus, given the significance of Tet that I've already described, James' apparent death exacerbates Mai and Bao's ability to co-exist. And still, in spite of this history, in spite of the debilitating implications of the term "Half-Lives," and despite the significant physical and emotional impact of Mai's multiple personalities, the introduction of Bao into the narrative ultimately presents a path through which Mai might come to terms with her open wound(s)—for while Bao in her own way engages with the same traumas inflicted on Mai, she introduces a separate connection to the past that affords Mai the opportunity to develop greater understanding of her own history.

Notably, Bao's narration begins after Mai and her father have escaped from South Vietnam and immigrated to the United States. Bao represents the primary connection to and arbiter of the past for Mai, and she actually symbolizes two types of connections—the "open wound" that evokes the traumatic flashbacks that unpredictably erupt and the "keepsake," the more innocuous keeper of memories of the past. At the beginning of her first chapter, Bao describes how her relationship with her father evolved and conveys her other key role in Mai's memory. Minh recognizes the appearance of a second personality shortly after Tet and inquires about her name; the conversation is quite evocative: "What is your name?" he whispered. I had

never been addressed directly before. The world around me felt like a storm. ‘Bao,’ I said. Vertigo unsettled me. I was merely repeating the word he himself had used to describe Mai. I didn’t have a name before then, but once I uttered it, I knew it was mine... ‘Which Bao? Bao meaning storm, or Bao meaning keepsake. Or treasure,’ he asked. ‘Both,’ I whispered” (236). Hence, the various meanings of Bao’s name speak to the diverse roles that she plays in Mai’s life and in the text as a whole. She could be a “storm,” a “keepsake,” or a “treasure.” As much of her own narration describes, Bao indeed embodies a “storm” in Mai’s life—she seemingly cannot control her temper or emotions; she explodes with rage at times; and she clearly is the most turbulent personality among the three that we encounter. However, her signification as the “keepsake” or “treasure” simultaneously highlights her role as the keeper of Mai’s memories and as Mai’s connection back to her life in Vietnam. Bao is the paradoxical connection to the past—Mai’s open wound and the keepsake—that, despite the turbulence and chaos that she brings to Mai’s life, likewise affords her the opportunity for eventual stability and healing. Furthermore, she ostensibly serves as a replacement for Khanh. Bao notes that after confirming her name with Minh, “I sensed that he was taking in the situation and trying to understand it. He put his arm around me, and in that moment, I believed he saw me as someone his dead child, Khanh, my sister, had somehow been reborn into. It was as if Khanh had not departed irrevocably into death but could be reclaimed in this strange and new realm” (237). In just a few short lines we receive a succinct assessment that points to Bao’s role as filling the emptiness left by Khanh’s murder—not only for Mai, but for her father as well. She replaces Khanh and maintains the connection to the past for Mai. The multiple roles that Bao fulfills likewise highlight the dynamic nature of Mai’s melancholic attachment to the past. Eng and Kazanjian maintain that “the ability of the melancholic object to express multiple losses at once speaks to its flexibility as a signifier,

endowing it with not only a multifaceted but also a certain palimpsest-like quality. This condensation of meaning allows us to understand the lost object as continually shifting both spatially and temporally, adopting new perspectives and meanings” (5). Therefore, even though Bao is not the “melancholic object” per se, her own flexibility as signifier speaks to the multifaceted role she plays in Mai’s life, and in Mai’s eventual healing.

Given these roles, the more controlling and emotional Bao becomes a consistent—and vital—part of Mai’s life, and the text becomes a balance between the parallel narratives offered by the two personalities, just as they wrestle with each other. Mai acknowledges the significant impact that Bao has on her life; she admits that “those meetings [between her and Bao] once wiped me out but seemed to give [Bao] renewed power. They used to be occasions in which she vanquished me and took over. I would be obliterated and sent into lost time. Her appearance was violent, a hot fire that swerved” (214). The introduction of Bao into Mai’s life actually debilitates Mai, while Bao conversely seems to develop greater strength (and agency) from the interactions. Mai, nonetheless, also battles to convey exactly what happens to her—Bao’s presence is simultaneously physical and metaphysical. Hence, Mai emphasizes the efforts she goes through to adjust to the presence of this extra personality. She notes how “I am slowly learning how to carry on calmly, projecting a singular, unified self, even as [Bao] buzzes about. I am practicing how to be a statue, even as her sensation grows slowly inside me...I have come to expect them both. There are two. I wonder if one of them is my sister or even her ghost” (215). It goes without saying that the development of a second (or third) personality is not something one is readily equipped to deal with. As the quotation reveals, Mai essentially shuts down as she feels Bao’s presence erupting, to go along with the silence she embraces following Tet. She admits that “I strive to leave my memories behind so the transition can be efficiently

managed...I do not tell [my dad] that I am stalked by Bao and Cecile and that I exhaust myself managing them and keeping them from escaping into the public world” (256). Mai harbors doubt; she questions what is happening, but she wants to discover a means of living with greater stability. She wants to decipher exactly what is happening within her body, but it is too exhausting—and irrational—to discern.

While Mai suffers doubt, frustration, and other psychological symptoms from her multiple personalities, Bao’s presence nevertheless enables Mai’s eventual stabilization. Bao notes, “I am the omniscient one among us three [Bao, Cecile, and Mai]...But I am Bao, the storm, not Bao the treasure. I am the malevolent central player. Mai is here, half bewildered, half alert, adjacent to the distinct lives we have been spinning in [the United States] where we have dwelled for thirty tarnished years” (235). Throughout her narrative she emphasizes her quality as a shape-shifter, as one who moves fluidly and rapidly among her different qualities: the raging and disorienting storm or the more peaceful keeper of memories and connection to the past. Bao is the personality that can access all three; she can feel each of the personalities and control them. And her narration also enhances our understanding of the turmoil and the instability Mai experiences with her post-traumatic symptoms. Bao observes that “[Mai] wants to be freed of memory, its empty shape, its hardened imprints...She will recall bits and pieces of this and that about our past lives but hardly ever the entire story that [their father] shares” (240). This gestures to the paradoxical nature of memory: that trauma inevitably is etched into one’s memory, but one has little control over how much detail and how one might retrieve it. It is an *intangible* concept—despite Bao’s description of “hardened imprints”—that has a surprisingly *tangible* effect on individuals. Eng and Kazanjian assert that “melancholia creates a realm of traces open to signification, a hermeneutic domain of what remains of loss” (4). In this way the

“bits and pieces” that Mai recalls ultimately present an opportunity for revision and greater understanding of her past, despite their debilitating impact at first. Bao adds further that “[a]fter thirty years in [the United States], our father and I still dwell on the tender pinprick of Vietnam as if it were there that we will find deliverance... Vietnam has not receded for me, as it has for Mai; it still tugs and pulls” (ibid). Mai thus desires to leave behind Vietnam and all of its related losses; from her perspective, Vietnam represents pain and loss. Bao, a separate part of Mai’s subconscious, holds the opposite perspective; she is the connection back to Vietnam and all of its memories. This dichotomy highlights to the trauma of Mai’s departure from South Vietnam and her experiences as a refugee torn from her home. Bao’s most remarkable observation emphasizes this dichotomy and struggle:

...lately, [Mai] has begun to wonder if everything about her current life is really birthed in that place that is now far away. How much, if at all, do we recover from the loss of love? How much, if at all, do we ever let go of grief, even as we proclaim the need to leave it in the past? The truth of her life comes out here where she is a stranger to her own history. She lives sometimes in a half-life of green that is Vietnam and in a half-life of blackness that is Virginia. A line divides the two. But a black light follows her inside this ministered silence, like a missing voice. She is, in truth, of neither the past nor the present. She is somewhere in between. (242)

Bao highlights one of the foundational questions in Cao’s text: “How much, if at all, do we ever let go of grief?” Inevitably this points to melancholia and the survivor’s inability to mourn completely—and hence to Mai’s attachments to her sister, and to an extent her mother as well. Mai’s pain, while grounded in the *loss* of her sister, in the profound *absence* of Khanh in her life, is ultimately tied to her ability (or inability) to negotiate or live with the grief she feels from that loss and absence. It is a delicate but necessary distinction. Khanh’s death stopped time for Mai—she is “of neither the past nor the present”—and seemingly irreparably divided her life (and, potentially, her psyche) into yet another form of “half-life”: between the life of loss(es) in



Vietnam and her life of multiple personality disorder in the United States. Consequently, her ability to balance her life with the need to grieve and negotiate the painful (and joyful) memories circumscribed in loss is the fundamental issue at play in the text.

This emphasis on loss, absence, and grief leads us back to the concepts of mourning and melancholia. Melancholia presents a way of explaining both the fractured narrative and the prolonged suffering that Mai experiences in the wake of her sister's death. Regardless of her symptoms, Mai clearly *suffers* for a prolonged period of time due to multiple losses—the death of her sister, the loss of her family's American friend, James, the loss of her mother who remained behind in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in addition to the traumatic loss of Khanh, Mai's sense of abandonment by her mother—both during Tet and as part of her mother's choice to remain behind in Vietnam—leaves a similarly lasting imprint and emptiness that she labors to mend. The absence of her mother and her inability to reconcile that loss remains with her. Bao emphasizes this stasis: “Mai lives her life in this country as if it were but a prelude to something more lasting that is not here yet and might never be” (265). From Bao's perspective, Mai remains stuck in a form of melancholic limbo: ever connected to the past, ever waiting for something to happen, for something to change, for something to fill in the absences created by the war. Consequently, I want to return once more to Eng and Kazanjian's work in *Loss*. Their focus on reinterpreting melancholia is to “generate a politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking” (2). Once more, they ask us to embrace an understanding of melancholia's attachment to the past that introduces a more productive form of healing and lends itself to a more viable survivorship via

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<sup>8</sup> For much of the narrative Mai assumes that James died during the Tet battle that occurred in the vicinity of her house. This traumatic loss compounds Mai's earlier loss of her sister, along with her mother's abandonment. As we learn near the end of the text, however, and as I will discuss shortly, James did not die.

one's "continuous engagement with loss and its remains" (3). Lan Cao's text undoubtedly is filled with "loss and its remains." While we certainly can read *The Lotus and the Storm* as a story of wartime loss—multiple losses, deaths, and traumas—and the subsequent journey to escape that loss and start anew, the relationship among the text's three narrators suggests we also can read their combined narrative through a more productive "politics of mourning." Even though Mai and Bao may not necessarily work together towards a "rewriting of the past," their diverse perspectives produce a knowledge of the past that is unavailable to them individually. As Halperin argues, "[r]emembering in these narratives doesn't just consist of recollecting the past; it entails recalling the past so as to remember it, giving it new shape in order to move forward toward a less harmful world" (4). This concept offers an insightful perspective into the relationship between Bao and Mai: Bao affords Mai the connection to the past that ultimately allows her to recall the past *and* give it "new shape" in the present. Collectively their knowledge of past traumas produces a means of moving forward in a "less harmful world." Interestingly enough, Bao admits such a scenario late in the text: "I know, with a sense of droning certitude, that I am the one among the three of us who has been holding our blemishes inside me. [Mai] is where she is, fine and assimilated, because I have made it possible" (283). Thus, in spite of the debilitating presence of Bao—the turbulence that she brings, the disconcerting permanent reminder of the war—she ironically offers Mai the ability to function and eventually heal her open wounds. Bao offers Mai a connection to the past that she herself cannot access. Mai's multiple personalities actually afford her a "continued and open relation to the past" that, despite decades of psychological torment, ultimately provide her a path to "reimagine" her future—a future more comfortable with past traumas and with sufficient psychological stability to live and survive on her own in the United States.

## **Reconciliation and Healing**

Despite all of the trauma and psychological suffering that we encounter in *The Lotus and the Storm*, if we read Mai's psychological disorder as a "continuous engagement with loss and its remains" rather than a pathological state, the end of the text suggests a path out of the debilitating state of multiple personalities that she inhabits for most of her life. While the narrative is dominated by the suffering encountered and endured by the protagonists, it likewise is a narrative on the process of healing. I want to turn to Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, a powerful study on the journey of recovery that trauma survivors typically take; in her study she delineates a common progression that those individuals most successful in adapting to life after trauma follow. She observes that the "faculties [that a survivor must recreate] include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy" (133). She also emphasizes that "[r]ecovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (ibid). Consequently, Herman finds that the survivor must learn to re-develop key "faculties" that are lost in the midst of the trauma—faculties that essentially allow the survivor to regain trust in others and herself. Just as important, while survivors often suffer on their own, she concludes that the path to recovery can only occur "in the context of relationships." Later in her work she argues that the survivor must learn to view her traumatic experience as a means of growth; she writes that survivors

can sometimes identify positive aspects of the self that were forged in the traumatic experience, even while recognizing that any gain was achieved at far too great a price. From a position of increased power in her present life, the survivor comes to a deeper recognition of her powerlessness in the traumatic situation and thus to a greater appreciation of her own adaptive resources. For example, a survivor who used dissociation to cope with terror and helplessness may begin to marvel at this extraordinary capacity of the mind. Though she developed this capacity as a prisoner and may have become imprisoned by it as

well, once she is free, she may even use her trance capability to enrich her present life rather than to escape from it. (214)

Thus, a key to healing, or at least developing a means of viable survivorship, means coming to terms with trauma and the individual's unique reaction to the trauma. Herman argues that through this understanding the individual can seize a better appreciation for the adaptive skills she developed in the midst of her crisis and long-term suffering. Herman's work informs the understanding that Mai herself discovers at the conclusion of the text. However, *The Lotus and the Storm* does not depict a form of healing that suggests finality or completeness. The conclusion of the narrative suggests that it really is not an either/or predicament—of either suffering or not suffering, of being ill or healthy. As Halperin writes with regard to Latina narratives of harm, hope in the midst of such struggle “can be agonizingly difficult to detect. Hope resides in the narratives’ interstices, in the spaces (however narrow they might be) ‘between and among’ the abundant representations of harm...although all of the writers illustrate how harm begets harm, they also demonstrate that harm can foster hope” (196). In much the same way, *The Lotus and the Storm* suggests a form of healing that fosters hope for Mai, even in the midst of significant trauma and suffering, decades after the war has ended. Suzanne Bost argues in *Encarnacion* that “disability shifts boundaries around and between bodies, challenging the integrity of the individual and the supposed predictability of identities” (18). Thus, the body is never static; it is always changing and evolving. Cao's novel takes it a step further: that the strict dividing line between suffering illness and being healthy is just as blurred. This fluidity ultimately speaks to the post-traumatic illness that Mai suffers, as well as her ability to adapt to a life dominated by her multiple personalities—her ability to discover healing after decades of pain.

Prior to examining the form of recovery that Mai and Bao discover in the conclusion of the text, it is important also to emphasize briefly an important example of healing that precedes it—most notably that of the third narrator in the text, Mai and Bao’s father Minh. Much like his daughter(s), Minh never really heals from the loss of his wife. Early in the text he admits that “[i]f we are fortunate, all of us find, at some point in our lives, the one special person for whom everything is possible, for whom love itself rearranges one’s entire being...My wife, Quy, was the person for me. I am still there with her” (18). As he approaches his own death, Minh repeatedly reflects back to his lost love; at times he even thinks that he can see her with him: “I can almost see a chest’s rise and fall on the overstuffed chair. Black hair spills in a shiny monochrome onto the cushion. I know her back, its slender length, the deep groove of her spine...I close my eyes. I see her as I first saw her, in soft lavender silk, in purple gloss” (52). Therefore, like his daughter who struggles to live with the murder of her sister, Minh, even decades later, still has not recovered from the loss of his wife. Nevertheless, the end of Minh’s life affords Mai and Bao the chance to care for their father and develop compassion for his suffering. Minh describes the shift he sees in his daughter: “She can be sweet and caring, if on occasion distant...with a certain theatricality, she rolls up my shirtsleeve and peeks at my upper arm” (18). Moreover, Minh’s illness actually brings Mai and Bao closer together; Bao narrates the care they simultaneously provide: “Father strains to breathe. Using long, deep strokes I rub mentholated oil onto the concavities of his chest. Mai steps in and instructs him to take slow, deep breaths. I put my ear to his chest and feel the enfeebled beat of his heart” (329). In such an intriguing scene, we find both Mai and Bao caring for Minh in his hospital bed—simultaneously performing different functions to help him breathe a bit easier. These little steps that bring Mai and Bao closer together gradually allow Mai to come to terms with her own illness. Most

important, however, just prior to his death Minh offers an example of forgiveness to his daughters. For much of his life Minh's closest friend, confidant, and ostensible nemesis was an individual named Phong—they had navigated their military careers together, with Phong's political connections often saving Minh. However, Minh also harbored significant mistrust of Phong, who had an affair with Quy and maintained affections for her throughout their lives together. Despite this history, at the end of both their lives Minh remarkably forgives Phong. After much consideration Minh reaches a level of tranquility regarding Phong's actions in the midst of the turbulence of war; he admits that "I felt no anger, only a radiating calm, like a wide-open lotus flower that rises from the mud and unfolds petals that float reassuringly on the water's surface. I knew right then that I was confronted with irreducible possibilities, each equally strong but mutually diverging. I could obdurately double the weight of our past, or I could release it...I gave him what he sought" (133). He reveals that "for once, I did not look forward but deeply inward. I am nothing as simple as happy but I am her, inhabiting fully this moment in which I am unburdened at last" (337). Minh passes away, but his model of forgiveness—unburdening himself of grudges and pain decades-old—is a powerful example for Mai. Minh's decades-long mistrust and resentment of Phong resulted in an attachment to the past, in some ways similar to Mai's, that he could not resolve. Consequently, his model of forgiveness and unburdening himself offers Mai a model for managing the pain she feels from the traumas in Vietnam, as well as her current life with her multiple personalities. And needless to say, the image of the lotus flower "that rises from the mud"—a beautiful creation thriving in the midst of muck—inevitably gestures to Mai and her ability to withstand the pain and suffering from her war trauma and discover a path out of her suffering.

Dominick LaCapra, in his examination of trauma in the study of history, observes that “[t]he feeling of trust betrayed or fidelity broken (however unjustified that feeling may in fact be) is one of the greatest impediments to working through problems” (144). Indeed, one of the primary obstacles to Mai’s psychological health is a lack of trust in and feeling of betrayal by her mother. Consequently, the first significant step in Mai’s healing occurs when, simultaneous to her father’s death, she finally learns of the numerous sacrifices her mother made for her family. Of course Quy’s daughter was murdered in a Saigon street, and her father was killed by Viet Cong (in an event not recounted in the text), which are massive traumas in and of themselves. Yet, at the end of the text Mai learns that her mother submits herself sexually to Phong, Minh’s friend and colleague, in order to save Mai’s father from execution (347). And most important, she learns that her mother still maintained love for her: after enduring significant suffering in post-war Vietnam, Quy eventually attempted to escape and reunite with Minh and Mai, only to die at sea after being raped by pirates (319-20). In other words, unbeknownst to Mai, Quy lived a life of bravery and sacrifice much like the various heroines from Vietnamese history that we find in the text. One of Mai’s most significant obstacles to a more stable existence was her sense of abandonment by her mother, due to the “feeling of trust betrayed.” Mai felt abandoned by her mother; she felt rejected and disconnected because she did not understand her mother’s actions. She is not whole because of the emotional and geographic distance between them and, given the lack of truth that she has access to, she continued forward in the United States lacking a complete narrative of her mother. Thus, the revelations she receives at the time of her father’s death provides her mother’s life a context and fullness that allows Mai to see that it was not a rejection of her but rather factors beyond her childhood self that were at play. In some ways this access to

the full narrative of her mother's life makes Mai complete. Consequently, the revelations she learns at the end of the text dramatically assist Mai in her recovery.

Following Minh's death Mai travels back to Vietnam for a final act of reconciliation. The return to her homeland offers the opportunity to revisit the grounds of her childhood, to revisit the points of trauma in her life, and to revise the memories she has held for so long. Nonetheless, Mai also travels to Vietnam to reunite her father and mother. Early in the text Minh states, "[I]f I could be granted one wish, it would be this—to go back to that time when I first fell in love by the rice fields. I would return to the place I had left and it would still be there, waiting. Just as my wife would be" (26). Following his death Mai complies with his wishes and returns his ashes to Vietnam. She deposits his ashes in the Saigon River, where they eventually will connect with her mother's remains.<sup>9</sup> Bao notes the significance of the moment: "For years, [mother] was a ghost, absent, living a life apart from us, occasionally pantomiming devotion. Now she is somewhere in the South China Sea. Soon our father will be released to join her" (377). Thus, Mai turns to the river and sea to reunite her parents and begin a reconciliation of her own. This step—to complement her father's model of forgiveness and her newfound understanding of her mother's sacrifice—enables Mai to initiate a reconciliation of her own, with Bao.

Notably, Mai and Bao release their father's ashes with another person present: James, the American soldier that Mai assumed was killed during Tet as he tried to rescue her, and for whose death Mai blamed Bao. James' death in the midst of combat during Tet compounded Mai's abandonment by her mother—after Khanh's death, James became a crucial person in Mai's life and initial recovery. During Tet Mai described him in reverential terms upon hearing his voice

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<sup>9</sup> Quy is laid to rest in the South China Sea following her death on a fishing vessel, as she attempts to escape Vietnam.



outside her house: “[a] lightness rises from me, in reassuring waves, as if his were the voice of life itself, strong and righteous, an invisible burnished presence that promises solace and deliverance” (162). She offers such a spiritual description: his was the “voice of life itself,” “strong and righteous,” that “promises solace and deliverance.” During the turmoil of Tet, the young Mai indeed sought deliverance and safety—first from her mother, then from James. Of course, in contrast to the abandonment of her mother, the American soldier fought through the battle to save her; his ostensible death served to exacerbate both Khanh’s murder and her mother’s abandonment in short order.

After the events of Tet, we do not encounter James in the narrative; however, upon returning to Saigon Mai and Bao discover, to great surprise, that James survived the war. Bao describes the significance of his survival and his presence in Saigon: “[w]ith his appearance the dead have awakened; our sister dances as Mick [Jagger] screams, our mother with her face beaming and flushed drinks tea with her Chinese friends, and our father shows us his polished boots” (370). Moreover, she notes that “[f]or years Mai has blamed me for his death. But here he is now, alive, in this single, well-aimed moment among all the unfixed, infinite number of moments in time” (363). James is bound up in two of Mai’s most significant traumas—the death of her sister and the violent combat that occurred during Tet. Yet, much like Mai, he has spent the subsequent decades grappling with the consequences of the trauma: he struggled with “years of loss” in the United States following the war, only to return to Vietnam to begin life anew once more; he tattooed the date of Khanh’s death on his arm, thus memorializing the initial trauma in his flesh; he even has a daughter named Khanh, with his Vietnamese wife (368). Much like Mai’s neverending trauma and Bao’s connection to the past, James has struggled to heal his own wounds and move past the traumas he experienced in the war. Thus, as Mai has carried the guilt

of James's "death" with her for decades, he has carried the guilt of Khanh's death with him just the same. Nevertheless, their reconnection offers a powerful, unforeseen step in Mai's healing. Bao observes: "what matters is the healing presence that being next to him brings. What matters is the fact that he is here. That we are all here. The world that was certified by subtraction is restored for now to its proper balance" (364). In the midst of yet another traumatic loss—the death of their father—Mai's return to Vietnam thus engenders a dramatic reversal: the discovery of the *survival* of a loved one and the realization that Bao did not cause his death. James' presence in Saigon eliminates a powerful barrier that had divided Mai and Bao; as Bao states, "We are usually double-chained and padlocked, but here in Saigon, Cecile and I are sprung. All of us are amazed to have found James alive, and when we are unified our common emotion turns out to be strung, like a swelling of the senses. It is a rare moment of coherence among us" (367). She adds that "[t]he barriers between Mai and me have been weakened. She feels my cries and I feel hers, as if our nerves glow, crosshatched, and we are bound together by a maddening, common vulnerability" (377). James's resurrection (his was the "voice of life itself," of "solace and deliverance") is a vital step in Mai's reconciliation with Bao and in her post-traumatic healing. In a way James represents the reestablishment of a family that she had been missing for decades—just as Bao represents the keepsake, the connection to the past, so too does James. It may not be a "nuclear" family, but given the massive traumas that both Mai and James have experienced, their relationship is just as significant. Given their shared traumas, they have a connection to one another that no one else can offer—and as such they afford each other a means of healing that they cannot discover elsewhere. It is a rather ironic twist to the more "traditional" Vietnam War narrative that typically offers a Vietnamese as the harbinger of post-traumatic

memories and nightmares for American soldiers: in Cao's text the American soldier in Saigon holds a connection to the past for a Vietnamese civilian visiting from the United States.

Each of the preceding steps—understanding her mother's sacrifices and love for her family, witnessing her father forgive Phong, reuniting her mother and father, discovering James's miraculous survival and his presence in Saigon—is significant towards Mai's "engagement with loss." Instead of the empty questions and doubts that her escape from Vietnam created, instead of focusing on the destabilizing effects of multiple personalities, she takes steps to confront and understand her family's history. Even more significant, with many of her lingering questions and doubts resolved, Mai's return to Vietnam allows her to reach a state of equilibrium with Bao. Through the course of the narrative we witness Mai gradually assume greater balance with her other personalities. At one point she notes that "[t]hese meetings with Bao once wiped me out but seemed to give her renewed power. They used to be occasions in which she vanquished me and took over...I still dread her appearance, but it no longer carries with it the threat of total destruction" (214). A bit later in the text their relationship assumes a greater balance; Bao describes how "[w]ith each successive occurrence, the transit point that marks, to put it euphemistically, my entry into and exit from [Mai's] world has become smoother" (266). Their return to Vietnam, however, represents the last step in their reconciliation. In Saigon Mai comes to her own revelation: "I am suddenly seized by a thought: To truly discover myself here, I must hang on to Bao. I keep going despite the fear of relapse. Both of us are claiming the moment. It is a big task, managing and modulating one's expectations. For the first time in more than thirty years I am riding on her optimism" (356). Mai realizes that she actually needs Bao to heal herself—or at least to afford herself the opportunity to live a life that is unburdened by the past. After releasing their father's ashes into

the river to reunite with their mother's body, Bao admits that "[t]he barriers between Mai and me have been weakened. She feels my cries and I feel hers, as if our nerves glow, crosshatched, and we are bound together by a maddening, common vulnerability" (377). Shortly thereafter she concludes that "Mai too wants what I want—for us to be reconciled and integrated into a shared web" (385). After decades of turmoil, of battling each other for control of Mai's psyche and body, of attempting to leave behind Vietnam (or return there, in Bao's case), Mai determines to live with Bao, to trace a path and future that allows her to live alongside her personalities and mitigate their disruptions in her life.

### **Conclusion**

Needless to say, Cao's text emphasizes the significant effort that Mai expends to attempt to negotiate her post-traumatic symptoms. Dominick LaCapra notes the difficulties in struggling with these symptoms and attempting to negate their negative impact(s):

Part of this feeling [that someone must keep faith with trauma] may be the melancholic sentiment that, in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement with life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past. One's bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound. (22)

Much like Eng and Kazanjian, LaCapra observes that the extended nature of melancholia may not be as debilitating as Freud and others have argued. Mai's "bond with the dead," while debilitating at first, eventually enables her to reconcile her grievances with her mother and her other personalities. Bao and Cecile ultimately "invest" Mai's traumas "with value," even though the effects of multiple personality disorder would seem to suggest only debilitation. The other personalities offer perspectives of the past that her own memory cannot, and Mai maintains connection to the past traumas that allow her to develop a viable survivorship. This generates

the conditions for Mai's path to recovery. Judith Herman observes that "[t]he major work of the second stage [of recovery from trauma] is accomplished...when the patient reclaims her own history and feels renewed hope and energy for engagement with life. Time starts to move again" (195). With the multiple closures that Mai experiences—and particularly with her return to Vietnam—she is able to “reclaim her own history” whereby “time starts to move again.” Nevertheless, to be clear, I find that the reconciliation between Mai and Bao at the end of the text does not signify moving *past* Mai's illness or her trauma. Mai and Bao are “reconciled into a shared web,” which indicates not that Bao and Cecile will cease being a part of Mai's life, but rather that Mai finally has come to terms with their presence and the need to develop a life alongside them. LaCapra emphasizes just this idea, that “working through [trauma] does not mean avoidance, harmonization, simply forgetting the past, or submerging oneself in the present. It means coming to terms with the trauma, including all its details” (144). And this is the subversive aspect of Cao's novel—that Mai does not give up her “multiple” personalities but instead strives to develop an understanding, a type of equilibrium, with them.

At the conclusion of the novel Mai and Bao return to the Vietnamese countryside, to the location of their family's graves in the midst of lush fields. Bao observes: “[a]lthough Mai has no conscious memory of the countryside—she feels something so familiar here, as if she were going to a known place. Toward a still point. That point in the present that carries a scent from the past but is not afraid of it and so welcomes the future without fear” (385). With this reference to a “still point,” Lan Cao summons T.S. Eliot just as she did at the start of the novel. In Eliot's final masterwork, *Four Quartets*, the poet introduces the concept of the still point in the first quartet entitled “Burnt Norton.” He describes the still point in a very paradoxical, circular form:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither  
ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point (ll 62-66)

Through this elaborate delineation, Eliot employs the “still point” to examine the struggle with time, suffering, mortality, and memory, in an attempt to conceptualize what it is like to be or reside outside of time. The still point at the close of *The Lotus and the Storm* similarly embodies the past, present, and future all at once, as Mai and Bao stand in the midst of much familial and cultural history—the present carries the remnants of the past and the future all at once. One might read such a concept as a depressing ode that nothing changes, that we are bound to repeat history, that we can never fully release the past. The past always is present, lingering beside us—much like the mysterious “third” whom the speaker observed in the novel’s epigraph. However, in Cao’s text, this “scent” of the past now becomes a positive attribute—the still point “carries a scent” of the past, but beckons a “future without fear.” Put in another way, we might read the still point as melancholia—as the survivor’s open wound and open attachment to history, carrying the past into the present, and offering future possibility. In this sense Mai’s life has been a negotiation of a still point: a decades-long battle with her post-traumatic symptoms and illness that render her constantly connected to the past, as she strives to live harmoniously or less combatively with her multiple personalities. In an essay on trauma and traumatic growth in South African literature, Michela Borzaga informs this discussion; she asserts that “[i]t is clear that, if we envisage the past, present and future as a *unified tangle*, the repetition and re-living of traumatic experiences as well as the potential for overcoming trauma: i.e. the process of working through it, are not separate and set at the two ends of the spectrum but coexist and struggle with one another in complex and unexpected ways” (78) [emphasis in original]. Therefore, in this

way, we might view both Mai's multiple personality disorder, whereby her different personalities connect her to different aspects in her memory and this "still point" that she and Bao inhabit at the end of the text as just this type of "*unified tangle*" that Borzaga envisions—a tangle of the past, present, and future that simultaneously push the survivor to re-live the past and push through traumatic memories and symptoms to heal.

As Mai and Bao relish in the lush Vietnamese countryside, Bao ends with a final observation: "[t]his moment we want to prolong soaks in the shadows of life, then. The future bends backward to mirror the past. We can almost see our sister and mother and father, in a row, all dead but not" (386). In other words, Mai does not intend to avoid or to forget the past or submerge herself only in the present; after much difficulty and ultimately understanding, she now can balance her traumatic past with the present. Indeed, for Mai the future presents a more hopeful, peaceful existence with her family intact—as her "future bends backward to mirror the past." Not the past that fractured her family and generated seemingly incessant suffering, but a past with her family whole once more. As I referenced previously, Eng and Kazanjian emphasize that "[w]hile mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia's continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects" (3). Mai's multiple personalities enable her to embrace a more sustainable path in the present and not simply abandon such "lost objects" or lay their histories to rest—at the end of the narrative she has a desire to reconcile with her illness, to live with her personalities, and to unify the different perspectives that they offer. LaCapra argues that "[s]omething of the past always remains, if only as a haunting presence or symptomatic revenant" (49) In Lan Cao's *The Lotus and the Storm*, a narrative dominated by trauma and both physical and psychological post-traumatic stress, "something of the past" indeed

remains ever-present with Mai, but ultimately Cao's novel suggests a way of discovering a means of agency and healing in Mai's prolonged illness and suffering.



### Chapter 3: Testimony in Asian American War Literature

In the final chapter of *Immigrant Acts* Lisa Lowe writes that “[t]o consider testimony and testimonial as constituting a ‘genre’ of cultural production is significant for Asian American women, for it extends the scope of what constitutes legitimate knowledges to include other forms and practices that have been traditionally excluded from both empirical and aesthetic modes of evaluation” (156). She adds, “Asian American culture is the medium through which alternatives to liberal citizenship in the political sphere are narrated, where critical subjectivities and collectivities can be reproduced in new configurations, with new coherences” (ibid). While Lowe’s inspiration is an Asian American woman’s testimony at a local community hearing in Oakland, California, concerning her working conditions, Lowe’s larger argument regarding Asian American culture is even more significant: she asks us to consider an expanded notion of what constitutes “legitimate knowledges” and to consider alternative forms of “literature” because they help further our understanding of the diverse and nuanced ways that Asian American cultural production informs, critiques, and subverts dominant American discourse. Given this plea, I want to study the way testimony functions in Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* and Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine* and examine how each author’s utilization of unique forms of testimony are crucial to our understanding of the form’s role in healing the traumatic wounds from war and assisting in developing critical subjectivities. While Keller’s text suggests the protagonist’s testimony is a crucial step in healing, the concluding testimony in Otsuka’s text suggests something notably less transformative. Nevertheless, this dichotomy between the two texts gestures to Lowe’s formulation. She remarks that “these

forms—life stories, oral histories, histories of community, literature—are crucial media that connect subjects to social relations. In [*Immigrant Acts*], I have argued that the contradictions of the political and economic spheres are manifested in Asian American cultural production as a material site of struggle, and Asian American critique is the dialectical politicization of these contradictions” (ibid). Indeed, both *Comfort Woman* and *When the Emperor was Divine* reflect this “material site of struggle”: of victims of war struggling to overcome oppression and trauma, of minority subjects struggling to assume a role in a society that ostracizes them, of families struggling to comprehend their plights at the hands of oppressors, and of individuals struggling to convey their experiences on their path towards healing. Moreover, both texts seek to “connect subjects to social relations,” as Keller and Otsuka portray the aftermath of war—the after effects of Japanese atrocities against Korean women, as they reverberate into the present day, and United States government policies against Japanese Americans in the immediate aftermath, respectively—and force the reader to confront the problematic histories of each. In her chapter Lowe refers to an assertion made by Chandra Talpade Mohanty regarding third world women’s narratives, who writes that “[a]fter all, the point is not just ‘to record’ one’s history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant” (cited in Lowe 157). While the testimonies included in *Comfort Woman* and *When the Emperor Was Divine* are in fact fictional, I want to build off of Lowe’s and Mohanty’s arguments and examine the role that testimony plays in the individual narratives and indeed emphasize that how we “read, receive and disseminate” these fictional testimonies is crucial to our understanding of war, trauma, and healing.

### **Testimony in *Comfort Woman***

The testimony found in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* offers a slightly more traditional form of testimony—at least a form that adheres more closely to the concepts delineated by Felman, Laub and Oliver—than the hybrid confession/testimony that concludes Otsuka's text. In much the same way as the texts that I have analyzed in previous chapters, *Comfort Woman* reflects upon the consequences of war and trauma on individuals and communities. Keller's text depicts the plight of a former Korean comfort woman from World War II, Akiko, and her post-war life in the United States with her daughter Beccah.<sup>10</sup> Akiko recounts the suffering that she and others endured at the hands of the Japanese during the war, as well as the post-traumatic symptoms that she navigates after the war. She and Beccah also describe their mutual struggles to understand each other as Beccah matures into adulthood. And still, in spite of this suffering, Keller's text ultimately depicts both Akiko's healing decades after the war and Beccah's subsequent healing in the immediate aftermath of her mother's death—healing that is engendered by the unique testimony that Akiko offers her daughter at the time of her death. In describing Felman's work, Oliver writes that “there is something other than historical accuracy at stake in testimony. It is the *performance* of testimony, not merely what is said, that makes it effective in bringing to life a repetition of an event, not a repetition of the facts of the event, or the structure of the event, but the silences and the blindness inherent in the event that, at bottom, also make eyewitness testimony impossible” [emphasis in original] (86). Undoubtedly this element of testimony holds true for *Comfort Woman*: Akiko's *performance*, via a ceremonial chant recorded onto a cassette tape, makes her testimony so radically unique and powerful, in that it simultaneously brings to life “a repetition of [the] event” and emphasizes the “silences and the blindness” that the history of the war obscures regarding comfort women.

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<sup>10</sup> Through the course of the narrative we learn that “Akiko” actually is the Japanese named bestowed on her in a comfort woman camp; her given name in her native Korean was Soon Hyo.

Through Akiko's testimony we encounter a means through which an individual takes steps to heal the lingering, ever-present wounds of war and likewise ensures that a problematic, traumatic aspect of history does not remain silenced.

### **Akiko and Beccah**

The foundations for Akiko's healing, affirming testimony are grounded in trauma, especially her experiences as an enslaved comfort woman and her relationship to a particular servant named Induk. Akiko and Induk only intersect with each other briefly during the war, yet they are inextricably connected through a legacy of violence and traumatic memory. They are tied together by name, by their similarly raped bodies, and ultimately by the connection to the past that Akiko's memory of Induk offers. As *Comfort Woman* is a story of female suffering, Induk provides a foundational example of agency and sacrifice, in a lineage that passes from her to Akiko to Beccah. While Induk sacrifices her life to end her suffering, Akiko survives the camps to eventually provide witness to its atrocities. Akiko recollects the day that her fellow comfort woman died: "to this day, I do not think Induk—the woman who was the Akiko before me—cracked...One night she talked loud and nonstop. In Korean and in Japanese, she denounced the soldiers, yelling at them to stop their invasion of her country and her body. Even as they mounted her, she shouted: I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive...All through the night she talked, reclaiming her Korean name, reciting her family genealogy, even chanting the recipes her mother had passed on to her" (20). After incessant abuse by Japanese soldiers, Induk ceased to acquiesce to her oppressors. From Akiko's perspective, Induk did not "crack" or lose her sanity; instead she reassumed the voice that she lost and reasserted control over her body. She is a model of defiance in the face of oppression. Akiko observes the power of this action: "[t]he rest of us were envious, not of the rich things she indicated having, not of her aristocracy, but of

her right to kill herself... That is what, in the end, made Induk so special: she chose her own death” (144). Instead of allowing the Japanese to continue to rape her endlessly, Induk “chose her own death” and forced them to end her life. “That is how I know Induk didn’t go crazy,” Akiko notes, “She was going sane. She was planning her escape” (21). Consequently, the lineage of trauma in *Comfort Woman* begins with Induk’s sacrifice but also, more importantly, her example of agency and defiance.

Of course this legacy of defiance does not end with Induk’s death at the camp, as she remains a vital and vibrant part of Akiko’s psyche. Shortly after her death Akiko notes that “[t]he corpse the soldiers brought back from the woods wasn’t Induk. It was Akiko 41; it was me” (21). Akiko not only takes her comfort woman name from Induk, she seemingly comes to embody her in the living world, and Induk remains a part of her for the remainder of her life. After months of her own suffering in the camp, Akiko attempts to extricate herself from her pain. She writes that “[Induk] found me sprawled next to an unnamed stream above the Yalu, the place where I had discarded my empty body, and invited herself in. 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” (36). As part of her journey to safety and freedom, Akiko believes that Induk saves her from starvation and death and even “invite[s] herself in” to reformulate Akiko’s body; moreover, she observes a merging of Induk with her own mother, a convergence of female symbols coming together to save her. In many ways this gestures back to the multiple personalities found in *The Lotus and the Storm*, which revealed the utilization of multiple personalities to overcome trauma. Additionally, her description indicates a merging of loss and trauma; she seemingly embraces the presence of Induk in her psyche as a means of

remaining connected to her memories. Akiko emphasizes this form of survival in a description of her escape, when she stresses the significance of Induk: “[t]he day after Induk called me out of the river, I went looking for the spirit I knew I could never find...I walked and I slept, walked and slept, and throughout the journey kept my eyes fixed on Induk beckoning before me. At times, her form would blur until it doubled, then quadrupled, and she would become Induk and my mother, and in turn my mother’s mother and an old woman dressed in the formal top’o of the olden days. I realized I was walking with my ancestors” (53). Induk becomes a spiritual figure to Akiko who guides her to safety, while at the same time transforming into a hydra of her ancestors. This lineage of the female body entwined with trauma establishes a vital configuration that informs Akiko’s testimony.

Given the significance that Akiko places on Induk’s model of strength, she strives to instill a similar courage in Beccah. She describes how, even as a baby, she sought to develop agency in her young daughter: “I watch her with a mother’s eye, trying to see what she needs—my breast, a new diaper, a kiss, her toy—before she cries, before she has to give voice to her pain. And each night, I touch each part of her body, waiting until I see recognition in her eyes. I wait until I see that she knows that all of what I touch is her and hers to name in her own mind, before language dissects her into pieces that can be swallowed and digested by others not herself” (22). Akiko strives to ensure that Beccah knows that she—and no one else—controls her own body and her voice; she wants Beccah to know that it is “hers to name in her own mind.” Akiko’s efforts to ensure Beccah develops agency and independence result from her post-war suffering and the incessant presence of traumatic memories from camp in her present-day life. She strikingly admits that after her escape from camp: “[the missionaries] asked me—in Korean, Japanese, Chinese—where I came from, who my family was, but by then I had no

voice and could only stand dumbly in front of their moving mouths as they lifted my arms, poked at my teeth and into my ears, wiped the dirt from my face” (16). The Japanese stripped her of not only her dignity, but also eliminated her voice. Furthermore, the trauma of the camp remains with her; it affects her ability to conduct normal activities. In the aftermath of her escape she describes this predicament: “I remember thinking that I could not stop cleaning, washing, cooking, gluing, because if I did, the camp sounds would envelop me and I would be back there, trying to silence the noises I made eating, crying, relieving myself, breathing, living. As long as I was quiet, there was the hope that I would be overlooked and allowed to die in the darkness” (65). The memories of camp overwhelm her and impede her ability to develop stability and serenity in the post-war environment; this instability continues into her life in the United States. At one point Beccah describes a conversation with her mother in the midst of a nightmare: ““Sometimes they cry so loud, just like a cat cry, so full of wanting, that I worry you will begin to hear them, too.’ My mother closed her eyes and started rocking. ‘Waaaooo, waaaoooo,’ she wailed. ‘Just like that.’ She stopped rocking and glared at me. ‘You have to fight it’” (28). Thus, even decades after her trauma, even as Akiko has adapted to life in the United States and established a semblance of normalcy in Hawaii, ghosts of the comfort women camps haunt her and hinder her ability to raise Beccah.

### **Soon Hyo’s Testimony**

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman and Laub describe the incomplete nature of an individual’s testimony. They observe that “testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge or assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of

reference” (5). In other words, the lack of completeness stems from the incomplete and fragmented nature of one’s memory. An individual’s testimony is only as whole as the “bits and pieces of memory” that one has the capacity to access and remember. They add further that testimony does not offer “a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion” (ibid). This characterization is important to note because the term “testimony” inevitably evokes images of a courtroom where an individual testifies, thus further evoking an idea of a complete narrative, of “nothing but the truth.” Felman and Laub’s definition serves to dispel such an idea by stressing that the incomplete and fractured nature of memory inevitably hinders the ability to conjure a “completed statement” or a “totalizable account” of a trauma. Akiko’s testimony at the end of *Comfort Woman* is indeed an incomplete statement: it is “composed of bits and pieces of a memory...that have not settled into understanding or remembrance,” it does not provide a “totalizable account” of her experiences with the Japanese; it does not “possess...a conclusion.” Her unique testimony nevertheless is remarkable for the message it carries from the past into the present and future, as well as for the care in which she prepares it for her daughter. Moreover, Akiko’s testimony carries forward the lineage of trauma—from Induk to Akiko to Beccah—that the narrative emphasizes throughout the text.

Akiko clearly prepares her testimony with significant care and thought, as it ultimately serves multiple purposes: it records the story of comfort women for posterity; it testifies to the crimes the Japanese committed; it passes on her family’s story to her daughter; and it delineates the names of other comfort women. The testimony also offers her a final, conclusive opportunity to assert her own voice. In her own words Akiko describes her gift to Beccah: “[i]n the box I hold for my daughter, I keep the treasures of my present life...and a thin black cassette tape that



will, eventually, preserve a few of the pieces, the secrets, of our lives. I start with our names, my true name and hers: Soon Hyo and Bek-hap. I speak for the time when I leave my daughter, so that when I die, she will hear my name and know that when she cries, she will never be alone” (183). The testimony is not complete nor is it “totalizable”; it preserves only “a few of the pieces, the secrets” of her life and of their family’s lives. Nonetheless, it is revelatory and ensures that even Akiko’s fragmented memory of her suffering and Japanese oppression will not be forgotten, just as it ensures that Beccah “will never be alone.” What is more, the form of Akiko’s testimony is very unusual: “a few of the pieces” and secrets of their lives, along with “a thin black cassette tape.” One of the fragments that Akiko includes to augment her recorded testimony is an official document from the American Embassy in Seoul, which reads, “*Dear Mrs. Akiko (Kim Soon Hyo) Bradley...I am sorry to inform you that we can find no trace of your sisters—Kim Soon Mi, Kim Soon Hi, Kim Soon Ja—presumed dead or residing in North Korea*” [emphasis in original] (173). Beccah relates the impact that these words had on her: “I had to read those opening lines twice more before I understood who was who, that my mother once belonged to a name, to a life, that I had never known about. That the names I had known only in relation to the Seven Stars belonged to women I could have called *imo*, and that my mother, once bound to others besides myself, had severed those ties—my lineage, her family name—with her silence” (ibid). The document is a revelation for Beccah; she learns her mother’s given name, Kim Soon Hyo, as well as the fact that her mother left behind an entire family she never revealed. Even for the reader it is striking to learn that Kim Soon Hyo chose to live her adult life with the name she was given as a comfort woman, Akiko; it is yet another example of how she carried her trauma with her, but in “silence.” Each time someone called her name, “Akiko,” it reflected back to her experiences as a sex slave during World War II. Still, her purpose and

motivation are even greater than passing on family legacies and knowledge to her daughter. At one point she informs Beccah that “I am crying for the dead. To show proper respect. To show love” (172). Akiko speaks for those who no longer can speak; she keeps alive their memory. She shows respect and remorse for their sacrifice, as part of Akiko’s trauma is the guilt she feels for the lack of proper burial for Induk.

Akiko’s testimony especially serves as a means of individual healing and ensuring that the plight of comfort women is preserved. Her recorded statement immediately assumes a tone of ceremony and spirituality, as she announces “*Kok: I howl into the night air, emptying my grief into the homes of my neighbors, announcing my loss and my love*” [emphasis in original] (191). She begins with assertiveness, notably in the first person, and beckons her daughter and seemingly anyone who might listen; she empties “her grief” for her neighborhood to hear. She continues with this spiritual tone and invokes the names of women who perished in the camps: “*I sing Hanul, Pada, Ch-onji, sa-nam gwa irum, calling on Heaven, Sea, the four directions of Earth, and I sing your name. I mark the place where you are buried so that you will always find your way. Abugi. Omoni. Kun Aniya. Mul Ajumoni. I sing the names by which I have known you, all of you, so that you will remember. So that I will remember. So that those who come after me will know. Induk. Miyoko. Kimiko. Hanako. Akiko. Soon Hi. Soon Mi. Soon Ja. Soon Hyo. So many true names unknown, dead in the heart. So many bodies left unprepared, lost in the river*” [emphasis in original] (192). Consequently, Akiko gives name and voice to those who lost both in the camps. She honors their deaths with her words, even if she does not know their “true names.” Just as significant, though, she also records the names she does know, for posterity, so “those who come after [her] will know.” Akiko then testifies: “*Chonshindae: Our brothers and fathers were conscripted. The women left to be picked over like fruit to be*

*tasted, consumed, the pits spit out as Chongshindae, where we rotted under the body of orders from the emperor of Japan. Under the Emperor's orders, we were beaten and starved...the holes of our bodies were used to bury their excrement...we were bled again and again until we were thrown into a pit and burned*" (193). Here she embraces the more literal connotation of "testimony," by describing and delineating the crimes committed by the Japanese against the oppressed Koreans. She testifies in a legal sense to the horrors inflicted upon her country. In the face of the atrocities to which Akiko gives voice, she ends her testimony with a defiant tone, embracing her agency: "[t]he Japanese believe they have destroyed an entire generation of Koreans. That we are all dead and have taken the horrible truth with us, but I am alive" [emphasis in original] (193-4). She speaks for her country and for her people. Even in death, she is "alive," and her recorded testimony ensures that her legacy and the others' sacrifices will not be destroyed.

The work of John Beverley further informs a reading of Akiko's testimony, as his description and analysis of the form introduces a complementary perspective to the concepts delineated by Felman, Laub, and Oliver. His 2004 monograph, *Testimonio: The Politics of Truth*, examines the concept and history of *testimonio*, a form of protest literature prevalent in Central and South America. He writes that "testimonio is concerned not so much with the life of a 'problematic hero'...as with a problematic collective social situation in which the narrator lives. The situation of the narrator in *testimonio* is one that must be representative of a social class or group" (33). He observes further that "[t]he narrator in *testimonio*, on the other hand, speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group, approximating in this way the symbolic function of the epic hero, without at the same time assuming the epic hero's hierarchical and patriarchal status" (ibid). Beverley's work thus focuses on a particular genre in which an

individual narrates her life story in order to testify to political persecution or suffering. Even though the testimony we find in *Comfort Woman* does not fully replicate this form, the characteristics that Beverley describes offer a meaningful platform into the larger significance of Akiko's testimonial tape. Without a doubt she, as one of a small population of living comfort women, is a "representative of a social class or group," and her testimony testifies to a "problematic collective social situation" that remains under-acknowledged or misrepresented. The fictional comfort woman that Akiko represents is very powerful: given the traumas that actual comfort women experienced, it has been historically difficult for them to give voice to their experiences. This is one reason that her testimony is so powerful—her statement gives voice for many of those who could not testify to the atrocities they experienced and witnessed. In this sense, Akiko's testimony adheres to the political activist aspect of testimonio; she "speaks for... a community or group." Beverley also argues that "[t]estimonio is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies that any life so narrated can have a kind of representational value. Each individual testimonio evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences" (34). Akiko's fictional testimony speaks for the "absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences" of the comfort women that did not survive the camps. We see the "absent polyphony of voices" of which Beverley notes—Induk, Miyoko, Kimiko, Akiko, all of whom are "dead in the heart" and have no voice through which they might offer their own testimony. Her life indeed merits "representational value" in the place of the myriad women who suffered and succumbed to Japanese oppression during the war. Beverley argues that "[t]he dominant formal aspect of the testimonio is the voice that speaks to the reader in the form of an 'I' that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention. This presence of the

voice, which we are meant to experience as the voice of a real rather than a fictional person, is the mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, a desire to impose oneself on an institution of power, such as literature, from the position of the excluded or the marginal” (ibid). With her cassette tape and the related documents, the excluded and marginalized Soon Hyo “demands to be recognized.” Even after suffering immense physical trauma in the camps and years of psychological trauma in the post-war, she maintains “a desire not to be silenced or defeated.” Indeed, as both a comfort woman and an immigrant, Soon Hyo inhabits “the position of the excluded or the marginal”; yet her ability to assert control over her body and psychological suffering and the demons that haunt her, her ability to assume her own voice, even in the face of ridicule and misunderstanding, afford her the opportunity to raise a confident daughter and ultimately to testify to the horrors of the comfort women camps.

### **Beccah’s Witnessing**

Akiko’s testimony provides an affirming conclusion to a life dominated by the traumas that she and others experienced in the camps; however, the presence of her daughter Beccah as the recipient of the recorded testimony is just as significant. As I referenced earlier, Felman and Laub argue that “since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated, or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony, the burden of the witness...is a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden” (3). Oliver complements this idea: “the performance of witnessing is transformative because it reestablishes the dialogue through which representation and thereby meaning are possible” (93). The recipient of the testimony plays a similarly significant role in the process, and Beccah’s receipt of her mother’s recording is fascinating. She describes her first listen: “[l]ike the river in my blood, my mother waited for me to fly to her, waited for me to tell her I was ready to hear what she had to say...Wanting to

hear her voice once more, I unpacked the ‘Beccah’ tape—my mother’s last message, last gift to me—I had carried back from the Mano house....I listened, but only when I stopped concentrating did I realize my mother was singing words, calling out names, telling a story” (191). Her mother’s voice calling her from the dead is an emotional event. Beccah’s relationship with her mother had been complicated: Akiko’s post-traumatic suffering and its impact on her ability to both provide for and raise Beccah were detrimental to their relationship in many ways. Given Akiko’s periodic séances and her inability to fit into a normalized, assimilated life in Hawaii, Beccah felt ashamed of her mother. Yet, ultimately this shame was a result of Beccah’s lack of understanding and knowledge of her mother’s past—she did not know Akiko’s history and the suffering she experienced during the war and in the subsequent decades. Consequently, Akiko’s testimony eliminates this gap between mother and daughter and fosters a means of healing for Beccah. The testimony thus inspires her; she exhibits a level of excitement and lack of control that mirrors her mother’s trances. The testimony is so chaotic that she must transcribe it, and she describes the unusual means by which she records the recording: “[a]s the tape wound on, I rummaged through the kitchen cabinets for paper and pen, wanting to write down my mother’s song. I scribbled words I recognized—*kok, han, chesa, chudang, Saja, poji*—words connected to blood and death. After filling several notebook pages with black scrawl, I stopped the recorder. The scraps of paper seemed inadequate, small and disjointed. Needing a bigger canvas, I stripped a sheet from my bed, laid it on the living room floor in front of the speakers, pressed Play on the recorder, and caught my mother’s words” (192). Beccah embraces a method of transcription just as unique as her mother’s form of testimony: she transcribes the recording onto a bedsheet, seemingly the only canvas large enough to contain the words. In the past when her mother went into a trance, Beccah avoided her and felt ashamed;

after her passing, Beccah comes to realize the significance of her mother's actions and the power of her memory. She admits that "I rewound the tape where my mother spoke of the *Chongshindae*, listening to her accounts of crimes made against each woman she could remember, so many crimes and so many names that my stomach cramped. Without reference, unable to recognize any of the names, I did not know how to place my mother, who sounded like an avenging angel recounting the crimes of men" (194). Thus, Akiko speaks for the polyphony of absent voices and the crimes committed against them, and Beccah inherits this knowledge and legacy.

In the end, Akiko's testimony and Beccah's witnessing extends the lineage of trauma that we encounter through the course of the narrative; their relationship ensures that the history, the knowledge, and the sacrifices of comfort women are not forgotten. Beccah will carry the testimony and its remembrance of trauma and sacrifice forward. In fact, Akiko bequeaths this responsibility to Beccah; in her testimony she states "*Beccah-chan, lead the parade of the dead. Lead the Ch'ulssang with the rope of your light. Clear the air with the ringing of your bell, bathe us with your song. When I can no longer perform the chesa for the spirits, we will look to you to find us. I have tried to release you, but in the end I cannot do it and tie you to me, so that we will carry each other always. Your blood in mine*" (197). Beccah essentially inherits the responsibility to carry this history forward; the spirits of the comfort women will rely on her. Felman and Laub speak to this obligation: "to bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude" [emphasis in original] (3). This describes Beccah's role precisely: she bears both the solitude of the responsibility her mother imparts, as well as the obligation that comes with that solitary role. Furthermore, she understands that her duty also entails preparing her mother's body for burial, a healing step and

level of respect that neither Induk nor the other comfort women were afforded. Her process is just as fascinating as the transcription of her mother's testimony. She notes that initially "I unpacked my mother's ceramic offering bowls, strips of linen cut from the bedsheet I had written on when I listened to her tapes, and flowers from the garden—ginger, 'uki 'uki, hibiscus, honeysuckle" (208). Beccah thus takes the sheet upon which she transcribed her mother's recording, cuts it into strips to assist her mother's body, and proceeds to describe the purifying ritual: "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'" (208-9). The transcribed words bleed away like "spider legs." The colored water becomes holy, "blessed," and in turn she blesses her mother's eyes and cheeks. She finishes by taking the sheet, fully cleansed of the testimony, and blesses her mother's lips, ultimately giving Akiko back her Korean name, "Soon Hyo." Beccah thus assumes the responsibility of the witness; she releases her mother from her traumatic history and will carry forward the powerful testimony. She subsequently notes that "[a]fter 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" (209). Beccah's final step in preparing her mother's body for cremation is to ensure that her words—the trauma that had remained with Akiko decades after the war—would burn along with her body and "travel with her across the waters, free."



*Comfort Woman* presents an unusual and symbolic representation of testimony and its potential to assist in healing. Akiko's intricate preparation of her testimony—the bits and pieces of their “secret lives” to go along with the “thin black cassette tape” labeled particularly for her daughter—conveys the significance that she placed on her words. The actual testimony that she records on the tape affords a voice to the comfort women who were not as fortunate as Akiko, and whose bodies were never properly buried. Beccah's ad-hoc transcription—onto a bedsheet no less—belies her subsequent respectful, delicate preparation of her mother's body for cremation.<sup>11</sup> Taken as a whole, the testimony in *Comfort Woman* reveals a persuasive example of the consequential power described by Felman, Laub, Oliver, and Beverley. In their study of traumatic memory, Laub and Nanette C. Auerhahn describe the impact of trauma:

“[n]otwithstanding the difficulties around and the struggle against knowing, the reality of traumatic events is so compelling that knowledge prevails, despite its absence to consciousness and completeness” (289). Even in the face of debilitating trauma, “knowledge prevails.” As Akiko's plight demonstrates, this path might take a lifetime, but her testimony ensures that this knowledge, this history, indeed *prevails*, and this is a key facet of witnessing for Felman and Laub. They argue that “[t]he listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*” [emphasis in original] (57). Beccah's transcription and embrace of her mother's testimony creates “knowledge *de novo*”; her legacy is to carry this knowledge with her. Just as important, she assists in her mother's healing. As emphasized earlier, Soon Hyo's greatest desire was to instill courage in Beccah and to see her develop independence, and Soon Hyo witnesses this

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<sup>11</sup> Ironically, Beverley finds this form of transcription *not* so unusual. He notes that “[b]ecause in many cases the narrator [of a *testimonio*] is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the tape-recording and then the transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is an intellectual, often a journalist or a writer” (32).

maturation prior to her death. Beccah's coming of age in the face of her mother's death—her knowledge and awareness of her mother's traumatic past, her acceptance of Soon Hyo, and her own response as a willing witness—fosters even greater healing. Consequently, Beccah's witnessing enables Soon Hyo's healing even further, particularly in a text in which the boundaries between the living and the dead are rendered so porous. In conclusion, Oliver emphasizes the significance of the listener in the reciprocal relationship that forms the foundation of testimony. She asserts that “[t]he double meaning of witnessing—*eyewitness* testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and *bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can't be seen, on the other—is the heart of subjectivity” [emphasis in original] (16). Through this perspective the relationship between Akiko and her daughter is integral, even vital, to Akiko's assumption of subjectivity. Early in the narrative, after Akiko has escaped camp and discovered sanctuary with missionaries, she offers intriguing insight into the traumatic effects of war. She admits that “I did not tell [the other girls at the mission] what I knew was true: The war would never end, because the Japanese, like all that was evil, would wait in the shadows, shape-shifting and patient, hoping for a chance to swallow you whole” (67). *Comfort Woman* demonstrates that war never ends—it “wait[s] in the shadows, shape-shifting and present”—yet Keller's text also reveals how testimony provides a means of discovering healing in the face of such incessant trauma and suffering.

### **Testimony in *When the Emperor Was Divine***

Near the conclusion of *When the Emperor Was Divine*, Julie Otsuka's 2003 novel about Japanese American incarceration during World War II, one of the main protagonists describes the substantial impact that almost four years of imprisonment had on his father:

[Father] never said a word to us about the years he'd been away. Not one word. He never talked about politics, or his arrest, or how he had lost all his teeth. He

never mentioned his loyalty hearing before the Alien Enemy Control Unit. He never told us what it was, exactly, he'd been accused of...We didn't know. We didn't want to know. We never asked. All we wanted to do, now that we were back in the world, was forget. (133)

The narrator—one of two children in the family—describes two important consequences of the internment and his father's separate, simultaneous imprisonment in New Mexico: the father's profound silence in the face of his family's myriad questions and the family's corresponding desire to simply “forget” and move on. The excerpt succinctly captures the difficulty that Japanese Americans faced as they sought to reintegrate into society in the immediate aftermath of the war; the propensity for silence and the inclination to forget the internment were common approaches many embraced in order to resume their “normal” lives in the post-war. The powerful excerpt also speaks to the profound trauma that the father experienced and his inability to overcome incarceration's traumatic effects. *When the Emperor Was Divine* culminates with his “confession” in the text's fifth and final chapter, a chapter that focuses solely on his scathing, ironic statement in which he admits a litany of crimes, espionage, and anti-American activities, presumably to his captors. Since he “never said a word” to his family about his incarceration, the chapter captures the final words of both his experience and the narrative as a whole. However, in contrast to *Comfort Woman*, which presents an example that adheres more closely to a traditional concept of testimony and witnessing, the father's statement at the conclusion of Otsuka's text is quite unorthodox. In *Comfort Woman* we encounter a testimony from one individual to another, willing witness. Akiko's testimony comes after decades of suffering and reflection and ostensibly unburdens her of her trauma and pain. Her testimony testifies to the abuse and oppression of hundreds like her during the war, and she passes on this legacy to Beccah. In Otsuka's text, we find very little that reciprocates this relationship. The father's statement comes in the immediate aftermath of his trauma, with minimal time for reflection or

growth. Furthermore, the witness to his testimony is ill-defined, thus impeding the crucial survivor-witness relationship that assists in healing and re-establishing subjectivity. Some might argue that the confession is not a testimony, if read in a straightforward way; however, despite the unusual nature of the father's statement, I want to examine the confession through the lens of testimony to discover the semblance for healing that it offers the father and his family. In Caruth's 1995 collection, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Dori Laub writes that "[t]he testimony is, therefore, the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal 'thou,' and thus the possibility of a witness or listener inside himself" (70). I will examine how the father's statement at the conclusion of *When the Emperor Was Divine* starts the process of reclaiming his position as witness and reconstituting his "internal thou." In other words, I argue that his statement begins the process of reclaiming a sense of agency and voice in the aftermath of oppression and trauma.

*When the Emperor Was Divine* presents the story of a single Japanese American family and their internment experience during World War II. The narrative has five chapters and transitions between three separate narrators through the course of the text. The first three chapters are narrated in the third person, as the narrator observes the family's movement from their home in San Francisco, to their experience at the internment camp in Topaz, Utah. The third person narration establishes the lack of agency and voice that the family experienced in the aftermath of the attacks on Pearl Harbor and throughout internment. Moreover, the narration in these chapters generates the impression of surveillance, of an external individual constantly watching and monitoring the family members' actions. Additionally, for the entire narrative we never learn the proper names of any of the family members; they are known simply as "son," "daughter," "mother," and "father," which adds to the simultaneous implication of their

representation for all Japanese Americans and their lack of agency. After the family's release from Topaz, the narration in the concluding two chapters shifts to first person, as the family attempts to reintegrate into society and regain their agency. Most significant, throughout these chapters the family's father is incarcerated separately from his family, and his absence remains a persistent theme throughout the narrative, as each family member consistently reflects upon their memories and their hopes of reunion.

Given his unique "presence" in the narrative and his concluding statement, I want to focus particularly on his role in the text—not because his role is more important or the others' roles less so, but rather because he maintains the most unique position within the narrative. In the concluding chapter of *The Feeling of Kinship*, David Eng examines the documentary, *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige*, about a young woman whose family was interned during World War II. Eng writes that "[t]he spirit of [the director's] dead grandfather, who relates from beyond the grave the literal disappearance of the family house in California, while its owners are imprisoned in Poston, marks a history of forgetting, a history of loss, and a history of 'absence as presence' that defies analytic vision. (The family never learns what happened to the house.) The figure of the ghost thus troubles modern historical consciousness and its traditional claims to agency" (184). Much the same can be said for the significance of the father in Otsuka's text. His "absence as presence" helps define the narrative to an extent, as each of the characters simultaneously struggles with their incarceration and his absence from their lives. His absence serves as a continual reminder of loss; his ghostly presence in their lives, even as he is imprisoned several states away in New Mexico, haunts the majority of the text. Eng also observes that "Komoko's absence constitutes the dialectic of visibility and invisibility that structures the representative coherence of the political domain and its politics of identity" (183).

The father in *When the Emperor Was Divine* likewise typifies this “dialectic of visibility and invisibility” that paradoxically defines Japanese Americans during internment. Ultimately, the father’s testimony testifies to this simultaneous presence as hypervisible and invisible bodies, as well as the personal losses that so many Japanese Americans suffered.

The unnamed father’s absent presence in the text is key to understanding his unconventional testimony at its conclusion. In his work on testimonio Beverley notes that it is “a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies that any life so narrated can have a kind of representational value” (34). Even in the absence of a name, even in his ghostly “absence as presence,” the father’s testimony still holds “representational value” for those who did not have the opportunity to speak or simply chose to embrace the silence. While the father returns from his incarceration a shell of the person he was prior to his arrest, his confession gestures to the frustration that Japanese Americans felt at the hands of the hypocritical and unjust oppression they experienced during the war. Min Hyoung Song, in his analysis of Otsuka’s text in *The Children of 1965*, argues that “Memory is not part of [the text’s] basic narrative structure, especially as much of the story is told in the present tense, and thus the vagaries of memory, which the memory boom so thoroughly explored, have difficulty discrediting anything that happens in the story. Furthermore...Otsuka’s novel fills the inability to know what actually happened with a willful nothingness” (216). Undoubtedly, the novel seems to conclude “with a willful nothingness,” as the family returns to their home in California only to remain enemies within the community, which renders their incarceration invisible. They remain nameless. Their experiences go unacknowledged. The father’s testimony seemingly reads like a ironic submission to his oppressors. However, I read this “willful nothingness” that Song observes as still holding “representational value”: amongst the father’s sarcasm and angst,

we discover a foundation for healing and resumption of agency that testimony holds, as slight as that might be.

### **Absence as Presence**

To be clear, the power of Otsuka's novel lies not only in the concluding confession, but also her depiction of the upheaval and suffering that the Japanese American family experiences as a result of the United States government's decision to evacuate and incarcerate all individuals of Japanese heritage in the western United States. The four chapters that ultimately lead to the father's final statement consistently emphasize the family's substantial losses and the father's ghostly presence. Consequently, instead of moving immediately to the text's testimony, I first want to examine the foundation that Otsuka establishes prior to the father's return.

In particular, the narrative emphasizes the significance of the father's ghostly presence, in addition to the loss and uncertainty associated with the internment experience that we encounter in the text. While the family navigates the various stages of the internment—preparing to leave, evacuating their house, riding a train, surviving the monotony of camp life—they each reflect on the emptiness they feel without their father. His absence simultaneously reminds them of their previous lives in San Francisco and of the hope for a new life upon release; a similar hope of reuniting with him propels them through their years-long ordeal. At one point in Topaz, the daughter says to her brother, “Do you know what bothers me most? I can't remember his face sometimes” (72). Each family member recalls him in his/her own way, but the daughter's statement speaks to the fleeting quality of the family's relationship after the father's multi-year absence. They struggle to remember him, and yet all consistently think of him. His ghostly presence is the one constant in their internment experience and haunts their lives in camp. Furthermore, the mother thinks of him as she prepares their house for departure: “she could see

a full moon through the branches of the maple tree. The maple was a sapling with delicate leaves that turned bright red in the fall. Her husband had planted it four summers ago” (18). Her preparations elicit the memory of her husband, along with the evacuation’s literal uprooting of their family, which shakes the stability of all that they had worked for as a husband and wife. The stability and growth of the maple tree that her husband planted stands in stark contrast to the turmoil her family faces. Similarly, the daughter and son look to their father for this sense of stability and consistently reflect back to their father. At one point during their incarceration they hold a telling conversation: “In Lordsburg<sup>12</sup>, the girl said, the sky was always blue and the fences were not so high. Only fathers lived there. At night they could see the stars. And during the day, eagles. Our father does not worship the Emperor. She said that too. ‘Does he ever think about us?’ asked the boy. ‘All the time.’” (61). As the son and daughter struggle with life in camp, their father represents a separate reality that offers them hope, as well as a reciprocal longing. Even as the father seemingly enjoys his incarceration more than they do—where the “sky was always blue” and where eagles soared—he, too, thinks about them.

On the other hand, the father’s ghostly presence inevitably suggests instability and uncertainty. On the train to Topaz the daughter “took out her father’s postcards from her suitcase. One of them showed a tiny man fishing on the bank of a river...she flipped through the pictures of the Indian pueblos and the ancient cliff dwellings until she came to the postcard of the largest and finest auditorium in New Mexico” (42). Once again her father, in the form of the postcards he sends, seems to offer his family an escape from the monotony and suffering of camp. However, on the back of the postcard “her father had written her a short note...At the bottom of the card there was a P.S. and then a line of text that had been blacked out by the

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<sup>12</sup> The father is incarcerated, away from his family, at a special camp for Department of Justice prisoners in Lordsburg, New Mexico.



censors. She wondered what her father had wanted to tell her” (42). Even in this form of escape their oppression comes into view, as the father’s note has been censored. We encounter this censorship later in the text, too. The narrator notes how “[e]very few days the letters arrived, tattered, and torn, from Lordsburg, New Mexico. Sometimes entire sentences had been cut out with a razor blade by the censors and the letters did not make any sense. Sometimes they arrived in one piece, but with half of the words blacked out. Always, they were signed, ‘From Papa, With Love’” (59). These letters provide the family a form of sustenance, in the form of (re)connection with their father, and a reinforcement of their lack of agency. Oppression governs their lives, and the censored postcards suggest the haunting presence of another entity, their government oppressors. One moment in particular especially embodies the profound contradiction of the father’s ghostly presence. Shortly after arriving at Topaz, the narrator describes the young boy’s yearning for safety: “[i]n the beginning the boy thought he saw his father everywhere. Outside the latrines. Underneath the showers. Leaning against barrack doorways....It was 1942. Utah. Late summer. A city of tar-paper barracks behind a barbed-wire fence on a dusty alkaline plain high up in the desert. The wind was hot and dry and the rain rarely fell and wherever the boy looked he saw him: Daddy, Papa, Father, *Oto-san*” (49). The boy arrives at camp and struggles to adjust and adapt. He searches for the most significant piece of his life that is missing, his father, and he sees his father in every man that he encounters. He searches for his “Daddy, Pap, Father, *Oto-san*” but to no avail; his father is a ghost “outside the latrines, underneath the showers, leaning against barrack doorways.” Just as he seeks stability that he cannot find after the chaos of evacuating their home to a “camp” in the high desert, his father appears simultaneously everywhere but nowhere.

This dichotomy between stability and instability speaks to the trauma that their father embodies. Just as his absence from their lives offers them an eventual hope of stability, the memory of his departure remains as a powerfully traumatic memory, one that encapsulates their own individual traumas of internment. Caruth suggests, in her analysis of Freud, that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own...history is precisely how we are implicated in each other’s traumas,” and the consequences of the father’s trauma haunt the entire family (*UE* 24). The FBI’s arrest of his father particularly troubles the son, and the boy’s memory of the event is telling: “whenever the boy thought of his father on his last Sunday at home he did not remember the blue suit. He remembered the white flannel robe. The slippers. His father’s hatless silhouette framed in the back window of the car. The head stiff and unmoving. Staring straight ahead. Straight ahead and into the night as the car drove off slowly into the darkness. Not looking back. Not even once. Just to see if he was there” (91). The arrest haunts the boy, especially his father’s lack of emotion and the lasting image of his arrest. Interestingly enough, however, the son fixates on one aspect of the arrest: his father’s slippers. The narrator describes this unusual fixation: “he had never seen his father leave the house without his hat on before. That was what had troubled him most. No hat. And those slippers: battered and faded, with the rubber soles curling up at the edges. If only they had let him put on his shoes then it all might have turned out differently. But there had been no time for shoes. *Grab your toothbrush. Come on. Come on. You’re coming with us. We just need to ask your husband a few questions. Into the car, Papa-san*” [emphasis in original] (74). What troubles the boy is his father’s unkempt clothing, due to his surprising arrest in the middle of the night. Yet, the son’s fixation reflects to the problematic consequence of traumatic memories: only fragments of the event register, leaving the concept of a “complete” memory unattainable. Hence, the boy registers a few key

images—the hat, the battered slippers, the FBI’s instructions. The mother’s memory of the arrest reflects a similar result: “‘The night of his arrest, he asked me to go get him a glass of water. We’d just gone to bed and I was so tired. I was exhausted. So I told him to go get it himself. ‘Next time I will,’ he said, and then he rolled over and went right to sleep. Later, as they were taking him away, all I could think was, *Now he’ll always be thirsty.*’” [emphasis in original] (96). She colors her memory of the event with regret. In her mind she selfishly failed to get him a glass of water when he asked, on the last night she saw her husband. Their current status as internees and prisoners, hundreds of miles from each other, only exacerbates her guilt. The arrest traumatizes the family, especially as they each look to the memory of their father and husband as a means of escaping, mentally and emotionally, their individual ordeals in camp. Ironically, the boy merges their new environs in Utah with the memory of his father:

now whenever he thought of his father he saw him at sundown, leaning against a fence post in Lordsburg, in the camp for dangerous enemy aliens. ‘My daddy’s an outlaw,’ he whispered. He liked the sound of the word. Outlaw. He pictured his father in cowboy boots and a black Stetson, riding a big beautiful horse named White Frost...he’d be thinking these things, and then the image would suddenly float up before him: his father, in his bathrobe and slippers, being led away across the lawn. *Into the car, Papa-san.* (83)

The separation from their father and husband, alongside the memory of his arrest, dominates their psyche. His arrest is the last tangible memory they have of him; thus, while they inevitably use him to remind them of a simpler time when they were together as a family, to dream of their reunion, the memory of the late-night arrest interrupts their thoughts. His arrest succinctly encapsulates the heartbreak, the loss, the doubt, the emptiness, the unrest, the chaos, of the internment.

### **The Father’s Testimony**

As noted earlier, testimony offers the potential for healing given the proper conditions; unlike Akiko's testimony in *Comfort Woman*, however, the father's statement that concludes *When the Emperor Was Divine* presents a more challenging example that fits the father's problematic psychological state following his release. The family's return home following their release from camp brings hope of returning to normalcy, as well as the hope of reunion with their father. Notably, once they resume their lives in California the narration shifts to the plural first person "we," with several indicators that suggest the narrator is the son. With their release from camp the family seemingly regains a voice and a level of agency, but at the same time their return home only brings continued ostracization, as they remain marked as other. Moreover, their traumatic experiences at camp leave a lasting imprint, and their first night at home they tellingly sleep in a configuration that mirrors camp: "[w]ithout thinking, we had sought out the room whose dimensions—long and narrow, with two windows on one end and a door at the other—most closely resembled those of the room in the barracks in the desert where we had lived during the war. Without thinking, we had configured ourselves exactly as we had in that long narrow room during the war: our mother in the far corner, away from the windows, the two of us lying head to along the wall on the opposite side of the room" (111-2). Their configuration is a powerful example of the imprint that incarceration has on them, as well as the significant psychological hurdles they face in reintegrating into "normal" life. Even as they have returned home, the entity that provided them so much hope in camp, their psyches and bodies crave the familiarity of the camp setting. The family's struggles with reintegration foreshadow the father's return. Despite their own turmoil, his return offers them hope of reunion and stability, of returning to the lives they led before the war. His return, however, reinforces that everything has

changed—and their father has seemingly changed the most. The description of his initial arrival illuminates the family’s disappointment:

the train came to a stop and a small stooped man carrying an old cardboard suitcase stepped out of the last car. His face was lined with wrinkles. His suit was faded and worn. His head was bare. He moved slowly, carefully, with the aid of a cane, a cane we had never seen before...When we finally saw him standing there before us on the platform we did not know what to think, what to do. We did not run up to him. We did not wave our hands wildly back and forth and shout out *Over here!* to him...the man who stood there was not our father. He was somebody else, a stranger who had been sent back in our father’s place. *That’s not him*, we said to our mother, *That’s not him*, but our mother no longer seemed to hear us. [emphasis in original] (131-2)

He returns from his incarceration in New Mexico a beaten man, “lined with wrinkles,” a “bare” head, a “stooped” body and “cardboard suitcase.” It is such a shock that the boy concludes “the man who stood there was not our father.” In many ways, the boy is accurate. His father looks dramatically different; it is not the man, the hero, that he dreamed of in camp. The remainder of the text, including his testimony, reinforces the “stranger” who returned in father’s place. This stranger suffers from PTSD-like symptoms. The boy describes how “little things—the barking of a neighbor’s dog, a misplaced pen, an unanticipated delay of any sort—could send him into a rage. One afternoon, after a long wait at the bank, he pushed his way to the front of the line and began pounding on the floor with his cane. ‘I don’t have all day!’ he cried out. We turned away and pretended not to know him” (134). Years of imprisonment under false, unjust pretenses, along with separation from his family, shatter the father. This realization shocks the family. The boy envisioned a reunion multiple times, much like someone dreaming of a film star or the return of a triumphant hero. In camp he dreamed of the myriad ways his father might return: “he could come back on a horse. On a bike. In a train. On a plane. In the same unmarked car that had once taken him away. He could be wearing a blue pinstriped shirt. A red silk kimono. A grass skirt. A cowboy hat. A halo” (104). In camp the prospect of reunion pushed the boy and his

mother and sister onwards; in reality, much like their ostracization by the community, the father's return astonishes them even further. The boy even envisioned him and his father recounting the tales of their separation: "[h]e'd lean back on the cot and make himself comfortable. He'd pull out his pipe. A box of matches. He'd smile. 'Now tell me what I missed,' he'd say. 'Tell me everything'" (105). Instead, returning from New Mexico the father's testimony reveals everything and nothing.

In her work on witnessing Kelly Oliver emphasizes the re-establishment of subjectivity that comes through the process of testimony. She writes that "along with the memories of physical pain and torture, witnessing recalls memories of being objectified, of losing one's sense of self as agent, of losing one's subjectivity and ultimately one's humanity. The shame involved in experiencing and testifying to one's own oppression is the result of being something not human, an object for another. The experience of testifying to one's oppression repeats that objectification even while it restores subjectivity" (99). This formulation is key to examining the father's concluding statement. Oliver stresses that the survivor's recollection of oppression, suffering, and torture, alongside the loss of agency and humanity, produces shame. The process of recollection and testimony to these losses likewise elicits the loss of subjectivity that the trauma survivor experienced. In this way, even before we receive the father's confession we see this shame and loss of subjectivity in the father's shattered body and his rage upon returning to his family. Felman and Laub likewise add to our understanding of the father's problematic testimony. They argue that "the victim's narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence" (57). The theorists focus on the testimonies of Holocaust survivors,

who, in the process of recounting their traumatic experiences at the hands of Nazis, serve a simultaneous purpose of testifying for those individuals who lost their lives. Still, the father's confession reinforces his profound *absence*, from his family's lives and from the narrative as a whole. Moreover, he testifies to the absence of Japanese Americans, in spite of their hypervisibility, during and even after the war. The father's concluding statement similarly testifies to a silence, to a historical injustice hidden by shame, by euphemisms, and by government censure. Felman and Laub, in analyzing the film *Shoah*, argue that its "strategy is not to challenge the false witness, but to *make the silence speak* from within and from around the false witness: the silence within each of the testimonies, the silence *between* various silences and various testimonies; the irremediable silence of the dead; the irremediable silence of the natural landscapes; the silence of the church procession; the silence of the ready-made cultural discourses pretending to account for the Holocaust" [emphasis in original] (266). There is a significant critique of the silence that once surrounded the Holocaust—not just the silence associated with survivors, or the silence associated with the millions lost, but the silence of those who allowed the Holocaust to happen. While I do not equate internment with the Holocaust, this emphasis on the multivalent understanding of "silence" is important to reading the father's testimony. In short, we encounter this *silence* in the father's confession as the inability—in his mind, an *impossibility* after years of incarceration—to embrace the power of testimony, of witnessing to the persecution, oppression, and torture which psychologically and physically harmed him.

His testimony is short, barely reaching three pages. It begins with the intentionally provocative statement, "Everything you have heard is true. I was wearing my bathrobe, my slippers, the night your men took me away" (140). With this statement the narration takes one

final turn, to the first person singular, and just as important, this first person narration invokes the reader. This address to “you” disconcertingly forces the reader to question not only whom the father is addressing but also just what it implicates, and at the same time he belittles the predicament in which he finds himself. In *The Children of 1965* Song writes that “[t]he last section of [*When the Emperor Was Divine*], the father’s, is where Otsuka most powerfully insists that the story her characters have told is as valid as any personal memory, by subverting easy assertions of truth” (218). He argues that if we read the father’s opening line, that “everything you have heard is true,” “as part of the ensuing monologue, it is then a lie that the father is telling authorities because they want to hear his confession” (219). Indeed, the father’s opening statement dramatically affects everything that follows, especially as his *confessions* become even more unrealistic and absurd. However, if we read his statement through the lens of absence and silence, we also can read the ensuing confession as testimony to the farcical justification for his arrest and, to a larger extent, the justification for internment. Undoubtedly, the father’s testimony subverts such “easy assertions of truth” by immediately and ironically stating “everything you have heard is true.” For example, he continues his statement: “All right, I said, I admit it. I lied. You were right. You were always right. It was me. I did it. I poisoned your reservoirs. I sprinkled your food with insecticide. I sent my peas and potatoes to market full of arsenic. I planted sticks of dynamite alongside your railroads. I set your oil wells on fire...”(140). He states that “I crept into your house while you were gone and sullied your wife” (141). He stretches his “confession” even further: “I pulled out the nails from your white picket fence and sold them to the enemy to melt down and make into bullets. I gave that same enemy your defense maps for free” (141). He concludes with this statement to his audience:

So go ahead and lock me up. Take my children. Take my wife. Freeze my assets. Seize my crops. Search my office. Ransack my house. Cancel my



insurance. Auction off my business. Hand over my lease. Assign me a number. Inform me of my crime. *Too short, too dark, too ugly, too proud.* Put it down in writing—*is nervous in conversation, always laughs loudly at the wrong time, never laughs at all*—and I'll sign on the dotted line. *Is treacherous and cunning, is ruthless, is cruel.* And if they ask you someday what it was I most wanted to say, please tell them, if you would, it was this: I'm sorry. There. That's it. I've said it. Now can I go? (143-4)

His statement suggests a profound resignation. He admits culpability to an innumerable litany of “crimes” that Japanese Americans were accused of, particularly as part of justification to incarcerate them for “military necessity.”<sup>13</sup> In response to his own question, however, the father ironically *cannot* go, at least not psychologically; he returns home a beaten, changed man. In her emphasis on re-establishing subjectivity, Oliver asserts that “the inner witness is produced and sustained by dialogic interaction with other people. Dialogue with others makes dialogue with oneself possible. In order to think, talk, and act as an agent, the inner witness must be in place” (87). The father faces notable difficulty in establishing such dialogue; his ill-defined witness, the vague “you” that he addresses, does not provide the sympathetic recipient that testimony requires. There is very little “dialogic” about his concluding statement, except that he implicates the reader as his audience—and as his witness. Oliver also asserts that “as Felman points out, although there were eyewitnesses to the Holocaust, they could not really see what was going on. From the inside, victims were not only empirically annihilated as witnesses—murdered—but also cognitively and perceptually destroyed as witnesses because they were turned into objects and dehumanized” (89). This theorization is significant. It attests to the cognitive and psychological destruction that many Japanese Americans felt after World War II; it similarly informs the father’s angry and caustic confession, as well as his withdrawal and the post-

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<sup>13</sup> The legal justification for Japanese American internment resulted from President Franklin D. Roosevelt signing Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which provided authorization for the United States Army to establish the camps (Robinson, *By Order* 4).

traumatic suffering that he experiences after his release and return home to his family. The father's testimony relates this cognitive destruction and his transformation into a dehumanized object—he receives no response to his statement.

The testimony that concludes Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* highlights the profound paradoxes that Japanese Americans faced during World War II: simultaneously characterized and objectified as hypervisible and invisible, as citizen and enemy alien, as absent and present. In his narration after returning home, the son reinforces this conflict; he tellingly offers his father's response to this objectification and dehumanization:

As the days grew longer our father began spending more and more time alone in his room. He stopped reading the newspaper. He no longer listened to *Dr. I.Q.* with us on the radio. 'There's already enough noise in my head,' he explained. The handwriting in his notebook grew smaller and fainter and then disappeared from the page altogether. Now whenever we passed by his door we saw him sitting on the edge of his bed with his hands in his lap, staring out through the window as though he were waiting for something to happen. (136-7)

The description encapsulates the dramatic transformation the father undergoes through the scope of the narrative, a narrative from which ironically he is more or less (physically) absent until the final twenty pages. After facing unjust imprisonment from the day after the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor until several months following the armistice, the father returns home a changed person: beaten down, withdrawn, "waiting for something to happen," haunted by his experience. The quotation demonstrates his transformation, just as it insinuates his family's suffering: his wife and children, who waited four years for his return and used his absence and hope of a reunion to help them survive their own turmoil in the internment camps, are forced to suffer even longer. Oliver stresses that "subjectivity requires the possibility of a witness, and the witnessing at the heart of subjectivity brings with it responsibility, response-ability, and ethical responsibility" (91). The father lacks this reciprocal relationship—that of the survivor and the

witness—in his testimony. In order for him to regain his subjectivity, he needs a willing listener, a recipient. His FBI oppressors certainly do not lend such an ear. The government apparatus does not offer such a relationship. Consequently, the “you” that he addresses only leaves the reader as the recipient, which is the most powerful aspect of the statement—by invoking the reader as witness, the onus shifts from his oppressors to a larger audience and thus implicates all of us in the tragedy of his experiences and related injustices.

On a larger scale the struggles, complications, and paradoxes in *When the Emperor Was Divine* gesture to the experiences of not only Japanese Americans but Asian Americans writ large. In her monograph *Imagine Otherwise* Kandice Chuh argues that “Asian American is/names racism and resistance, citizenship and its denial, subjectivity and subjection—at once the becoming and undoing—and, as such, is a designation of the (im)possibility of justice, where “justice” refers to a state as yet unexperienced and unrepresentable” (8). Undoubtedly Otsuka’s narrative, and particularly the father’s testimony, speaks to the impossibility of justice that Japanese Americans faced in the midst of World War II and in its aftermath. The father’s “confession” belies his denial of citizenship and subjectivity, as well as his subversive efforts at resistance. In a similar way, Eng and Han address this paradox as well; they assert “the Asian American model minority *subject* also endures in the US as a melancholic national *object*—as a haunting specter to democratic ideals of inclusion that cannot quite “get over” the histories of these legislated proscriptions of loss” (348). The father, even in his shattered, beaten down form after his release, and the family endure as a “melancholic national *object*,” as individuals who haunt the “democratic ideals of inclusion” that the dominant post-war cultural narrative subjugates; however, his presence, just like the presence of his family, stands in the face of such

patriotic discourse. Consequently, his testimony offers both a seething indictment of his unjust incarceration, and a foundation, even if slight, for healing.

## **Conclusion**

The divergent testimonies found in Keller's and Otsuka's narratives reveal the disparate paths to healing that we find in the aftermath of trauma. Felman and Laub assert that "trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after...trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion" (69). This lack of "completion" informs the lack of closure and resolution that we find in Otsuka's text. The father's statement, while seemingly relieving him of little pain and expressing only angst, nevertheless highlights the incomplete nature of his trauma. As he rightly should, he questions the merits of his detention and imprisonment, and his statement serves to underscore the hypocrisy of his predicament. Yet, just as important, his statement reveals the traumatic effects of the extended separation from his family and the lack of the "completion" inherent in his trauma. His concluding question, "now can I go?" is simply the beginning of his struggle. In this way, Felman and Laub inform our understanding of both Otsuka and Keller's texts: both families grapple with the consequences of trauma that "has not beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after." Through her unconventional testimony to Beccah, Akiko finds a level of closure and healing that allows her to die peacefully, unlike her comfort woman sisters. In contrast, the father in Otsuka's text finds little semblance of healing or closure with his statement. In Caruth's collection, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Laub writes that survivors "[need] to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an

imperative need to *tell* and thus come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself" (63). He adds that "[w]hat ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing...is not simply the information, the establishment of facts, but the experience itself of *living through* testimony, of giving testimony" [emphasis in original] (70). The father in Otsuka's text does not have decades to reflect upon his experience; his testimony comes in the immediate aftermath of internment, his traumatic wounds remain fresh. Furthermore, he needs recognition and acknowledgment of his trauma in order process his healing "unimpeded," before he can begin to "know" his own story and foster the willingness to tell it. Conversely, Akiko spends decades coming to such terms, even in the face of significant ridicule from her community.

The divergent examples of testimony highlight the significant role of the witness. In addition to her emphasis on the recovery of subjectivity, Kelly Oliver also stresses a process of affirmation: "to recognize others requires acknowledging that their experiences are real even though they may be incomprehensible to us; this means that we must recognize that not everything that is real is recognizable to us" (106). Thus, the witness plays the crucial role in affirming the testimony of the survivor. As we see through the trajectory of their relationship, Beccah becomes a witness for her mother—she acknowledges the reality of her experiences as a comfort woman, even if she struggles to identify and/or comprehend such history. By contrast, Otsuka's father's statement falls on deaf ears. He lacks a witness who acknowledges his plight; his messages to his family have been censored and they struggle to comprehend his journey. Oliver adds that "bearing witness to one's own oppression works through—both operationally and in the psychoanalytic sense of working-through—the forces whose oppositional pull makes subjectivity possible and ultimately ethical" (105). Indeed, through decades of séances and

eventually her final testimony Akiko “works through,” in both forms of the phrase, her trauma and its debilitating effects; her witnessing of her plight and the other comfort women “makes subjectivity possible” even in the midst of her traumatic memories. Needless to say, it is more difficult to find such a process in the father’s statement; his testimony appears to come at a much earlier stage of grieving and healing in relation to his trauma. In many ways, we might look to Lawson Inada’s poetry, multiple decades after internment, to discover the type of subjectivity gained from witnessing that the father in Otsuka’s text lacks. It is not to say that the father cannot or will not find healing; the example, as unorthodox as it may be, reveals that traumatic healing is a process of labor, of struggle, of trust and recognition, of affirmation. It is not an individual process but rather one that requires acknowledgement from others. Consequently, what makes the testimony in Otsuka’s text so fascinating is its implication of the audience as the father’s witness—the father’s concluding statement requires us as readers to bear witness. While the fictional “father’s” statement comes in the immediate aftermath of his detention and incarceration, which leaves him little time for reflection, the reader—the “you” who represents his audience—can still bear witness, come to understand the trauma of internment through his fictional testimony, and ultimately the need to remember. In this way the collective process of testimony transcends temporal and fictional boundaries in Otsuka’s text, to ensure that the trauma of Japanese American internment remains in our contemporary collective memory.

To conclude I wish to return to Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* and her final chapter in which she examines testimony as a means of arguing for expanding the forms of literature and cultural production that we study. She writes that such an expanded

mode of reading and reception seeks to situate different cultural forms in relation to shared social and historical processes and to make active the dialectic that necessarily exists between those forms because of their common imbrication in those processes. It seeks to understand Asian American cultural production

critically and broadly and to interpret the interconnections between testimony, personal narrative, oral history, literature, film, visual arts, and other cultural forms as sites through which subject, community, and struggle are signified and mediated...In this mode, we can read testimony as more than a neopositivist 'truth,' as a complex mediating genre that selects, conveys, and connects 'facts' in particular ways without reducing social contradiction or compartmentalizing the individual as a site of resolution. (157)

Testimonies in *Comfort Woman* and *When the Emperor Was Divine* emphasize the “social and historical processes” associated with the histories that Keller and Otsuka embrace in their work, just as they also demonstrate the diverse forms of testimony that we might embrace as part of our “mode of reading and reception” an expanded notion of cultural production. Lowe also argues that “cultural forms of many kinds are important media in the formulation of oppositional narratives and are crucial to the imagination and rearticulation of new forms of political subjectivity, collectivity, and practice” (158). I believe that both texts in this chapter highlight new forms of political subjectivity and collectivity. Akiko formulates a trans-historical alliance of political subjectivity with her deceased sisters from the comfort woman camps; she adds her voice—her testimony—to the dispersed and subjugated voices of other comfort women, even as they act without coordination or organization. She assists in ensuring that their plights are not subjugated but rather come together to form “oppositional narratives” to the dominant historical narratives formulated by former oppressors. The father in Otsuka’s text demonstrates a different side of the spectrum, that of an individual struggling to generate a narrative in opposition to the patriotic historical discourse that surrounds World War II. His testimony lacks a decisive, willing witness and highlights Japanese American struggles to assume political subjectivity and collectivity in the face of overwhelming oppression to the contrary, at least in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Nevertheless, Keller’s and Otsuka’s texts, despite the disparity in their respective testimonies, both gesture to the significance of testimony and witnessing in

fostering individual and collective healing in the face of post-traumatic suffering, and they likewise delineate the connection between this individual suffering and political struggle for recognition and subjectivity.



#### **Chapter 4: The Trauma of Citizenship: Collective Healing in Lawson Inada's Internment Poetry**

In Houston Baker, Jr.'s 1982 collection, *Three American Literatures: Essays in Chicano, Native American, and Asian American Literature for Teachers of American Literature*, Lawson Inada contributed an article called "Of Place and Displacement: The Range of Japanese-American Literature." The article is noteworthy not only because Inada builds upon his scholarly work with the other editors of *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* from a decade earlier, but also because he writes in greater detail about the United States government's incarceration of Japanese American people during World War II. Inada himself was interned during the war as a young child, and, needless to say, the experience profoundly affected his life and his work as both a poet and a scholar. His three published collections of poetry all center on the internment experience and its extensive, prolonged impact on the Japanese American community. In "Of Place and Displacement" Inada describes the impact of incarceration:

In the turmoil and uncertainty of the camps, the very strength of a people—their sense of identity and community, their sense of worth—was called into question and became subject to doubt by the people themselves. For the older generation, what had been second nature—maintaining Japanese tradition—now became a wrong; for the American born, being American was no longer taken for granted. In the "double war," they were all "aliens." It was as if the term "Japanese-American" no longer signified a viable whole but denoted an either/or situation, a double bind. In short, the people were called on to confront, define, and justify their own existence, to themselves and to their government. (260)

Inada's description stresses the profound legal and cultural predicament created by the United States government's internment policy and the associated effects on Japanese Americans. He

observes how the “sense of identity and community...was called into question” during the internment. The internment not only displaced over 100,000 Japanese Americans from their homes and incarcerated them through the duration of the war in the Pacific; the United States government’s policies forced Japanese Americans to question their “identity” and ultimately generated significant divisions within their community. The government’s racist and hypocritical policies served to unjustly incarcerate Japanese Americans and simultaneously fostered “doubt” on multiple levels—they questioned themselves and each other, their culture, and their country. Inada further illuminates the predicament that Japanese Americans faced: they found themselves in a “double bind,” in which the government—and by association, the American people—identified all of them as “aliens,” regardless of their citizenship status. He makes an important point that the trauma of internment thus occurred at multiple levels—that “the term ‘Japanese-American’ no longer signified a viable whole” for not only individuals but the larger community as well. Inada’s description succinctly highlights the diverse traumas inflicted by the internment: Japanese Americans were removed from their homes and unable to ensure the security of their properties and businesses; they were incarcerated in make-shift camps in some of the nation’s most inhospitable environments; they were forced to question their identities and their presumed “loyalty” to the United States.

In this chapter I examine how Inada confronts the trauma experienced by the Japanese American community and the ways in which his poetry enables collective healing. While the internment undoubtedly exacted severe trauma on the thousands of individual Japanese Americans incarcerated during the war—including Inada himself—his poems that feature returns to former internment camp locations instead focus on returning the Japanese American community to the “viable whole” left shattered by the internment. In “Of Place and

Displacement” Inada recounts the significance of the Japanese American communities in the decades before World War II: “[t]hese were vital, creative communities of families and clans, of spirit and celebration; these were real homes where people earned their keep, where people belonged” (257). He similarly argues that in *Yokohama, California*, “[the author] Toshio Mori, through his judicious use of language, reveals the core. And the core is community” (ibid). Japanese American incarceration—and particularly several United States government policies—shattered this “core,” inflicted collective trauma on the Japanese American community, and divided the community for decades following the war. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Dominick La Capra asserts that “as historical events that are indeed crucial in the history of peoples, traumas might instead be seen as posing the problematic question of identity and as calling for more critical ways of coming to terms with both their legacy and problems such as absence and loss” (81). Inada especially addresses the “legacy” of the internment and the “problematic question of identity” that the internment fostered. He understands that even with the success of the reparations movement, a multi-decade struggle that culminated with the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, the divisions in the Japanese American community sowed by the internment remained fresh; consequently, Inada employs his poetry as a means of healing the collective wounds. David Eng, in *The Feeling of Kinship*, argues that “[t]oday, the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 is commonly heralded as the conclusion to a regrettable but anomalous chapter of American history. But as [Rea Tajiri’s documentary] *History and Memory* so emphatically insists, political reparation and psychic reparation are hardly coterminous” (171). Inada questions the efficacy of reparations, just as Eng does. Indeed, in Inada’s perspective “political reparation and psychic reparation are hardly coterminous”; for the poet, while the political reparations enacted in 1988 generated a public and political sense of healing, the

“psychic reparation” of the trauma of citizenship inflicted on the Japanese American community by United States government policy was not complete. La Capra also observes that “the historical past is the scene of losses that may be narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future. The past is misperceived in terms of sheer absence or utter annihilation. Something of the past always remains, if only as a haunting presence or symptomatic revenant” (49). This traumatic connection to the past—while debilitating and “misperceived”—ultimately affords Inada “specific possibilities” to engage with the standard discourse associated with the internment and transform our understanding of its historical legacy. In his essay on Japanese American literature Inada tellingly asserts that “this is what [John Okada’s internment novel *No-No Boy*] is all about—the quest by Japanese-America to be whole again” (262). In this chapter I will focus on Inada’s two longest poems—“At the Stronghold” and “Drawing the Line”—through which Inada confronts the trauma of citizenship experienced by Japanese Americans and the associated divisions that festered within the community, in order to promote collective healing. In these poems Inada embraces this “quest” himself, to rewrite the historical legacy of the internment and enable healing within the Japanese American community to make it “whole again.”

### **Executive Order 9066 and the Loyalty Questionnaire**

Before examining Inada’s poems, it is important to establish the significant trauma produced by United States government internment policies and experienced by the Japanese American community. Two policies in particular—President Roosevelt’s approval of Executive Order 9066 and the War Relocation Authority’s (WRA) implementation of the so-called “loyalty questionnaire”—served to undermine Japanese Americans’ sense of individual identity and divide the larger community, with traumatic repercussions that continued decades after the war

and the end of internment. These two wartime governmental policies created the trauma of citizenship that endured long after the war and that Inada challenges in “At the Stronghold” and “Drawing the Line.”

Executive Order 9066 was the formal directive that established the legal policy for the implementation of the internment; its foundation in skewed racist justification generated consequences far beyond the immediate incarceration of Japanese Americans. Following the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the Japanese military’s sustained success in the Pacific theater, the United States government and the general public harbored intense fear of further attacks on the mainland. Given this fear, which was stoked by xenophobic media, politicians, and military leaders, President Roosevelt and his cabinet responded with an executive order. Notably, General John DeWitt, in charge of the Western Defense Command in San Francisco, led the charge and offered the following recommendation to the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson: “In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration. The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born in the United States, possessed of United States citizenship, have become ‘Americanized,’ the racial strains are undiluted...It, therefore, follows that along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 potential enemies, of Japanese extraction, are at large today” (Takaki 391). DeWitt’s advice reflects the essentialist implication that all individuals of Japanese ancestry—regardless of citizenship status—maintained “racial affinities” to the nation of Japan. The idea that “their racial strains are undiluted” was supported by multiple individuals in the government (and, to a large extent, the general public) and likewise led to similar pronouncements that all individuals of Japanese ancestry were “potential enemies,” even though similar conclusions regarding those of Italian and German ancestry were not made. Stimson further advised that

“second generation Japanese can only be evacuated either as part of total evacuation...or by frankly trying to put them out on the ground that their racial characteristics are such that we cannot understand or trust even the citizen Japanese” (Takaki 390). Consequently, on February 19, 1942, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, “which directed the Secretary of War to prescribe military areas ‘with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate military commander may impose in his discretion’” (Takaki 391). Greg Robinson notes that even though the executive order “did not specifically mention Japanese Americans, it was intended to apply to them exclusively” (Robinson, *By Order* 4).<sup>14</sup>

The executive order was crafted in vague language to eliminate the appearance of the policy applying exclusively to a single group—and yet the lack of precision afforded General DeWitt extreme latitude to enact the unjust policy in explicitly racist terms. In particular, the “exclusion orders” published by DeWitt’s command that notified Japanese Americans on the west coast of the requirement to evacuate their homes stated the following: “all persons of Japanese ancestry, *both alien and non-alien*, will be evacuated” [emphasis added] (Inada, *Legends from Camp* 4). The problems with this policy, the justifications for the order, and the language utilized were myriad. Robinson observes that due to immigration laws in the early twentieth century, Issei—the first generation immigrants from Japan—were “forbidden by law from ever becoming naturalized citizens” (*By Order* 4). Thus, Issei were prohibited by United States law from ever becoming full-fledged citizens. In contrast, second generation Japanese

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<sup>14</sup> Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, “the President had secretly arranged to have Chicago businessman Curtis Monson gather intelligence on the Japanese in the United States and assess whether they constituted a military threat...Munson informed the President there was no need to fear or worry about the Japanese population” (Takaki 386). This was supported by reports by the Office of Naval Intelligence and the FBI (*ibid*).

Americans, Nisei, “were, by birthright, American citizens,” yet, given the extrapolation that all people of Japanese ancestry were the “enemy,” this fact was negated and blatantly ignored (ibid). Robinson describes the predicament from a slightly different angle: “seventy percent of [the] ‘disloyal’ people were American-born U.S. citizens; their average age was 18 years old. The remaining 30 percent were virtually all permanent residents whose average age was over 50 and who had immigrated to America decades earlier” (*By Order* 108). Executive Order 9066 and the associated civilian exclusion orders placed Japanese Americans in the “double bind” that Inada described—a double sense of being “alien.” Most Nisei had lived in the United States for decades, yet were codified as “alien”; Issei were American citizens by birth and technically “non-alien,” yet the government presumed them “enemy” by association and thus another type of “alien.” Consequently, Japanese of all generations living in the United States were forced to question their identity. Kandice Chuh describes the trauma associated with the executive order: “linking foreignness with race, [DeWitt and Stimson] constructed a fantasy in which Japaneseness overflowed Japan’s sovereign territory to constitute a simultaneously internal and external threat to the United States” (65). She adds that “internment’s success relied on favorable adjudication of challenges to that construction, to the phantasmatic imagining that would lead to the alienation of putatively inalienable rights from U.S. citizens” (ibid). The “phantasmatic” linkage of all people of Japanese ancestry to the nation of Japan—the conclusion that all Japanese Americans were essentially “alien”—fostered significant doubt, disillusion, and harm within the community. Robinson observes the psychological impact of the order: “stigmatized as disloyal and ordered out of their homes for no apparent reason...the internees suffered from feelings of shame and depression and were vulnerable to family breakdown, alcoholism, and other social problems” (*By Order* 127). In many ways EO 9066, the associated

exclusion orders, and the rendering—the alienation—of all Japanese Americans as enemy perfectly reflects the concept of racial melancholia. Anne Anlin Cheng asserts that “*this* is racial melancholia for the raced subject: the internalization of discipline and rejection—and the installation of a scripted context of perception” [emphasis in original] (17). In addition to interpellation as minorities and as Japanese Americans, they were stripped of their rights as citizens and permanent residents and installed as alien (and non-alien), as enemy, as “Japanese.” The United States government formally rejected them as part of the nation; hence, racist government policy inflicted trauma on not just the individual level but the community writ large. In her monograph *Partly Colored* Leslie Bow argues that “the racially interstitial can represent the physical manifestation of the law’s instability, its epistemological limit, the point of interpellation’s excess” (4). She further observes that “interstitial populations unveil the mechanisms, political processes, and stakes behind the making of status” (ibid). Without a doubt, the trauma of citizenship enacted by EO 9066 and experienced by Japanese Americans reflected their interstitial status, as well as the instability of the government policy and the associated “mechanisms, political processes, and stakes behind the making of status.”

The significance of the order cannot be understated, along with its impact on Japanese Americans—so much so that Inada includes a facsimile of one of the exclusion orders at the beginning of his most famous collection, *Legends from Camp*, and reappropriates the language of the order in the ensuing poem, “Instructions to All Persons.” As Chuh notes, the internment order was grounded in the concept that “Asiatic racialization defines Asianness as ineffably foreign and inassimilable to America” (59). Ostensibly all internment policy was justified via this racialization: the perspective that Japanese Americans were “ineffably foreign and inassimilable.” Furthermore, in addition to the executive order, Japanese Americans experienced



a second related collective trauma during internment with the implementation of the War Relocation Authority's "loyalty questionnaire" that further reinforced their "foreignness." In February 1943, one year after EO 9066, President Roosevelt approved a War Department request to recruit Japanese Americans for military service (in preparation for an eventual invasion of Europe); Roosevelt stated that "No loyal citizen of the United States should be denied the democratic right to exercise his citizenship, regardless of his ancestry. The principle on which this country was founded and by which it has always been governed is that Americanism is a matter of the mind and the heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race and ancestry" (Robinson, *A Tragedy* 184). The irony and hypocrisy of his statement goes without saying, but it must be said: the government's implementation of the military recruitment of Japanese Americans and the related loyalty questionnaire was justified by the ostensibly "democratic right" of every individual "to exercise his citizenship, regardless of ancestry," even though the government had incarcerated those same individuals by taking away their democratic rights. The WRA created a board of military officers who would "determine the loyalty" of Japanese Americans who wished to serve, and they ordered "all Japanese Americans seventeen or older" to fill out the questionnaire (Robinson, *A Tragedy* 185). The most problematic aspect of the questionnaire rested with two now infamous questions: question 27, which asked, "Are you willing to serve in the Armed Forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?," and question 28, which asked if the individual was prepared to swear allegiance to the United States "and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?" (Robinson, *A Tragedy* 186). Needless to say, the questions posed a predicament in which the internees could not win. If they chose to take a stand against the multiple injustices inflicted on them and not respond, the government

presumed they were “disloyal.” If they chose to respond negatively to the questions, they likewise were presumed disloyal. And if they chose to respond in affirmation to the questions and offer to serve in the military, some internees viewed it as further capitulation to the government’s hypocritical demands. Furthermore, the Issei, the first generation Japanese Americans barred from naturalization, “could not renounce their allegiance to Japan without becoming stateless,” which meant the loyalty questionnaire violated international law (ibid). After a year already spent in incarceration, the loyalty questionnaire fomented significant hostility against the government but, even more important, within the Japanese American community—between those who concluded they should respond “yes” to the questions to demonstrate to the government that they were in fact “loyal” and those who perceived an opportunity to take a stand against racist injustice. The questionnaire created a traumatic rupture within the community regarding “loyalty” to the United States that endured long beyond the war. Moreover, this rupture was exacerbated by the differentiation and dissension that occurred in cultural discourse between the “no-no boys” who responded no to questions 27 and 28 and received even stricter incarceration and those Japanese Americans who “volunteered” to serve in the military in the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team, a unit whose efforts in Europe received significant acclaim from the highest levels of the United States government.

Inada offers the following insight regarding the community’s division: “[t]he point is, under those conditions, either way was both ‘wrong’ and ‘right,’ and though most eligible men went into the army, distinguished themselves, and were acclaimed as a ‘credit to their race,’ their actions did not necessarily invalidate the position of the no-no boy any more than defeat discredited the Japanese people” (“Of Place” 262). Inada stresses the quandary that the question of “loyalty” created—each approach was both “wrong and right.” Much like his approach in his

poetry that I will examine shortly, the poet underscores the significant stance assumed by the “no-no boys,” the individuals who chose to respond “no” to the loyalty questionnaire. Lisa Lowe asserts that “this impossibly binary demand [to either identify with Japan and be labeled “enemy” or to assimilate without question]...is not dissimilar to the predicament of many racialized minority peoples who face disenfranchisement unless they abandon their particular cultures to become citizens assimilated by way of a common culture. Yet for Japanese American and Japanese Canadian men and women, this process was coercively enforced through physical detention in camps and for Nisei men through the demand that they prove their patriotism by enlisting in the armed services to fight against Japan” (48). For Lowe the governmental process of determining “loyalty” mirrored the pressure of assimilation for “racialized minority peoples,” but in the case of internment there was an additional element of forced coercion. As was the case with EO 9066, the consequences of the loyalty questionnaire gesture to racial melancholia; Cheng argues that “racial melancholia...has always existed for raced subjects both as a *sign* of rejection and as a psychic *strategy* in response to that rejection” (20). Thus, racial melancholia reflects both the rejection of Japanese Americans through the idea of “loyalty,” as well as their resulting strategies in response to the predicament.

The wartime policies enacted by EO 9066 and the subsequent loyalty questionnaire inflicted trauma at the individual level and the collective level for Japanese Americans. Robinson describes the internment as a “tragedy of democracy...by arbitrarily confining American citizens of Japanese ancestry, the government violated the essential principle of democracy: that all citizens are entitled to the same rights and legal protections” (*By Order* 5-6). Indeed, it was a tragedy of democracy that sowed significant divisions within the Japanese American community; citizens and permanent residents of Japanese ancestry were divided in

multiple ways: “alien” v. “non-alien,” “loyal” v. “disloyal,” “Japanese” v. “American.” It was a tragedy of democracy enacted by the infamous loyalty questionnaire that exacerbated the discord and produced a traumatic rupture within the community, a separation that endured for decades. Put together, these produced a trauma of citizenship—of United States citizens and permanent residents stripped of their legal rights, forcibly coerced into giving up their homes and pledging their “loyalty” to a government who viewed them as enemy and “alien,” and traumatized as a community. In Cathy Caruth’s collection, *Trauma: Explorations In Memory*, Kai Erikson writes that “the experience of trauma, at its worst, can mean not only a loss of confidence in self, but a loss of confidence in the surrounding tissue of family and community, in the structures of human government, in the larger logics by which mankind lives, in the ways of nature itself” (198). Without a doubt the trauma of internment forced Japanese Americans to question their identities, to question the government, to question “the surrounding tissue of family and community.” The debate about “loyalty,” generated by the U.S. government’s policies, split the community long after internment ended, continuing even after the United States Congress and President Reagan approved reparations to former internees in 1988. La Capra argues that “the feeling of trust betrayed or fidelity broken (however unjustified that feeling may in fact be) is one of the greatest impediments to working through problems” (144). Consequently, while the government eventually acknowledged the wrongs committed during the war, the divisions within the Japanese American community—a result of “the feeling of trust betrayed or fidelity broken”—remained. In “At the Stronghold” and “Drawing the Line” he reflects upon and embraces the legacies of Japanese American internees at two former internment camp locations to re-write the cultural history of internment. Through these poetic returns he seeks to repair the festering

division that was produced by EO 9066 and the loyalty questionnaire, reestablish the “trust betrayed [and] fidelity broken,” and enable healing within the Japanese American community.

### **At the Stronghold**

In “At the Stronghold” Inada offers a reflection upon the history associated with the internment camp at Tule Lake and confronts the complicated legacy of the no-no boys; in doing so, he rewrites the cultural history associated with the allegedly “disloyal” Japanese Americans. Instead of focusing on their “disloyalty,” he stresses the legacy of defiance and protest at Tule Lake and connects Japanese Americans’ efforts to the strikingly similar resistance of the Modoc Indians at the same location in the nineteenth century: ironically the Lava Beds region of northern California was the site of both Tule Lake internment camp and the Modocs’ insurrection against the United States Army. Through this history the poet emphasizes that the legacy of defiance is something to celebrate and emulate—not something that the community should scorn and utilize to divide.

His choice of Tule Lake for his first poetic return inevitably evokes the notoriety that the particular internment camp gained as the most rebellious of all the camps. Tule Lake was situated in an isolated spot in northern California, in a dry, inhospitable environment, much like the other locations. As Jeffery Burton and others note in their extensive history of the camps, “at an elevation of 4,000 feet, the winters at Tule Lake are long and cold and the summers hot and dry. The vegetation consists of sparse growth of grass, tules, and sagebrush” (279). More significant, however, the Tule Lake Relocation Center (as it was euphemistically called in government terminology) was the largest camp, with over 18,000 internees by 1944, and it

housed the most rebellious population of the ten camps” (282). Burton writes that “[w]ithin five months of opening there was a mess hall strike to protest inadequate food, a farm strike, and a general strike” (ibid). Furthermore, after the WRA implemented its loyalty questionnaire, 42 percent of Tule Lake’s internees refused to respond or answered no to both loyalty questions, in contrast to an average of 10 percent at other camps (ibid). After these issues and other unrest, the WRA converted Tule Lake into a “maximum security segregation facility and eventually declared martial law in November 1943,” which transferred control from the WRA to military police (283).

“At the Stronghold” does not begin at Tule Lake, however; instead the speaker traces a path from southern Oregon into northern California, in a way mirroring the evacuation and transport of internees from the coast to the interior. He references the Oregon towns of “Greensprings,” “Pinehurst,” and “K. Falls” in the first several sections of the poem, and “K. Falls” is the first location upon which the speaker dwells:

K. Falls ain’t  
Got nothing  
For me.  
Unless I had a need  
For gutters, for  
Official termination,  
My brown eyes  
Welling over at the rim...  
My brown spirit  
Slumped in some stirrups  
At the terminal. (103)

K. Falls most likely refers to Klamath Falls, a town in southern Oregon. Though not directly associated with internment, the town is only approximately 30 miles from Tule Lake. The tone of contempt that the speaker fosters is notable. The location “ain’t / Got nothing” for speaker; he doesn’t need “official termination” or his “brown spirit / Slumped in some stirrups / At the

terminal.” The ambiguous terminology nonetheless establishes the speaker’s first connection to the Modoc Indians: Klamath Falls was the site of the execution in 1873 of “Captain Jack,” a Modoc leader who led a group of fellow Modocs in a final stand against the U.S. Army near Lava Beds National Monument, just a short distance from Tule Lake. In October 1873 Captain Jack, a nickname given in place of his Native American name, Kientpoos (Palmberg 1), was hanged along with three of his fellow tribesmen, and their heads were shipped back to Washington, D.C., to the Army Medical Museum (174). Even though the speaker does not directly refer to Captain Jack, the emotions at the site of “official termination”—eyes “welling over at the rim” as he envisions the Modoc leader “slumped in some stirrups”—gesture to the history of the location. As the transit of the poetic journey reaches close to Tule Lake, the speaker seeks out a symbolic location to underscore the parallel histories of government persecution and oppression—and, ultimately at Tule Lake, parallel examples of defiance and standing up to injustice.

Just one section later, the speaker specifically addresses Captain Jack. He admits that “Captain Jack, / I come to you / In respect, / Out of a need / For communion. / I will not dance and sing / In your sacred cinders” (105). Upon arrival in the Tule Lake region the speaker tellingly addresses Captain Jack first, as opposed to a specific Japanese American or the internment camp, and he conveys a solemn reverence for the Native American. He expresses a spirituality towards Captain Jack and the “sacred cinders” of Tule Lake. The area holds significant meaning, as the site of both Native American sacrifices and Japanese American resistance; moreover, the area around Tule Lake was considered sacred to the Modoc people (Sutton 13). Given this spirituality and solemnity, the speaker unites the two peoples’ experiences even more directly:

We, too,  
Walked upon this ground,  
And though our  
Stronghold  
Was made for us,  
To hold us in,  
We, too,  
Heard the geese in the wind,  
The wind in the tules  
And dreamed  
In our brown bodies  
Of peace and the good land,  
Of home. (105)

This is one of the most important sections in the entire thirteen-page poem. First, the speaker introduces a subtle shift from the singular first person to the first person plural. “We” walked upon the ground that Captain Jack traversed; “we” likewise dreamed “of home.” With this shift, Inada distances himself further from the speaker, to make clear that he is not the speaker. Inada was not incarcerated at Tule Lake; he actually was displaced far from his native California, in Jerome, Arkansas, and Amache, Colorado. Consequently, the collective “we” that reflects upon the terrain and history of Tule Lake suggests an anonymous Japanese American—a speaker that stands in for all Japanese Americans, or least those who were interned there. This is significant as Inada attempts to tie this poetry to the collective healing within the community. Second, the speaker stresses the similarity of the “stronghold” at Tule Lake. In the process of defending against the U.S. Army, Captain Jack’s Modocs fled to a “natural lava fortress at the south end of Tule Lake,” which eventually became known as “Captain Jack’s Stronghold” (Sutton 9). As the speaker observes, though, Japanese Americans also created a “stronghold”; even though theirs “was made” for them by the U.S. government, the resistance exacted by the defiant internees represented a symbolic “stronghold” against the government’s unjust oppression. This resistance afforded Japanese Americans the hope of freedom, the ability to dream “of peace and the good



land”—and recognizing the sacrifice and integrity affords the community (the “we” to which the speaker refers) a means of healing.

The speaker sustains this solidarity in the ensuing section, which reflects upon surviving in the harsh conditions of Tule Lake. The speaker ponders, “There is a mystery / How you survived / This desperate place / Of edges and wind” (106). It is a mystery because of Tule Lake’s desolate surroundings, yet also because the history of the Modoc Wars has been subjugated and seemingly erased from historical discourse, just as the “heat, rain, cracked / Sweet cinders” suffer at the hands of time and weather. Consequently, the speaker emphasizes shortly thereafter that “This is how we sing and survive— / The entire / One of us / Gorged with the knowledge / Of paved genocide / Trying to find its way here” (106). This excerpt offers such powerful imagery—the paradoxical “entire one of us,” the people “gorged with the knowledge,” the striking “paved genocide.” The speaker’s choice of “entire one of us” ultimately ties the Japanese Americans’ plight at Tule Lake with Native Americans. This particular connection is noteworthy because there seems to be a dual purpose: to connect the two peoples’ histories and underscore the repeated injustices inflicted upon minorities by the United States government and to stress to a Japanese American audience how historical and cultural discourse can seemingly erase the past. To compound this critique, the speaker’s image of “paved genocide” reflects the overt efforts by the U.S. government to exterminate Native Americans and, at a minimum, subjugate Japanese Americans. Just nine days after Captain Jack’s hanging, all surviving Modocs were removed and shipped by train to Oklahoma (known at the time as Indian Territory), in a removal even more rapid than the relocation of Japanese Americans (Sutton 13). The notion of “paved genocide” thus gestures to the steady process of the removal of Native Americans from their sacred lands in the nineteenth century—of which the Modocs were one of

the last holdouts to give up their land—and also to the similarly rapid and methodical evacuation of Japanese Americans from the west coast after Pearl Harbor. Furthermore, it suggests the white-washing of history, of generating a cultural narrative that suppresses the monstrous atrocities associated with both Native American removal and Japanese American internment. Through this imagery Inada might persuade Japanese Americans of the need to come together and ensure that the lessons of the internment remain a crucial part of the American narrative of World War II—and not the divisive legacy associated with “loyalty” and the no-no boys. Inada also confronts the decision by many Japanese Americans after the war to assimilate rapidly and embrace silence as a means of survival; from his perspective silence only reinforces dominant cultural narratives that obscure the injustices enacted by the government. The speaker thus remarks, “For when the time allows, / Fists in the throat, / A volley / Of words and rocks” (107). As Shoshana Felman observes, silence is a problematic consequence of trauma that survivors must overcome: “the silence of the persecuted, the unspeakability of the trauma of oppression...[experienced by] those whom violence has deprived of expression; those who, on the one hand, have been historically reduced to silence, and who, on the other hand, have been historically made faceless, deprived of their *human face*” (*Juridical* 13). Inada suggests Japanese Americans must embrace their voices, employ their art and cultural production, to rewrite the history of Tule Lake and ensure that their narratives—the story of the no-no boys and draft resisters—are not subjugated.

Shortly thereafter the speaker incorporates the two infamous questions from the loyalty questionnaire, which, as the history described above reveals, served to divide the Japanese American community for decades after the conclusion of the war. The speaker includes the full language of each question and responds with an abrupt “No.” to each. The speaker does not

provide any explanation or additional reasoning for the responses; the answers stand alone, each with its own line, set apart from the rest. This seemingly represents the speaker's "stronghold," the place "where I show my heart" (108). Still, the speaker also forces the audience to read through the specific words of each question and closely consider their meaning, as well as the meaning of "no" in response. Inevitably this section evokes the complicated and divisive history of the no-no boys, which I delineated above. Chuh asserts that "the no-no boy stands as an impossible subjectivity, infinitely undecidable, one that cannot have stable meaning because it is refracted by so many determining forces...it is an apt figuration of 'Asian American' identity, emblemizing as it does racism and resistance in the same breath" (75). Indeed, the no-no boy symbolizes both the racist, essentialist concept of "loyalty" imposed on Japanese Americans, as well as the resistant path that a small percentage of defiant internees chose to embrace in the face of such persecution. Inada offers his own interpretation of the significance of the no-no boys in his prose. He argues that "the no-no boy was thus a threat to the smug and the complacent, for he was a reminder, not of the victories of war but of the defeats of camp" ("Of Place" 262). For Inada, the no-no boys, in failing to acquiesce to the pressure of the oppressor, presented a striking "reminder...of the defeats of camp." He adds that "though the no-no boy's refusal to serve can be interpreted as a negative act, an act of defiance, it can also be seen as a positive act: taking a stand" (ibid). This is one of the key concepts we see in "At the Stronghold"—the emphasis on re-envisioning the heroic stance that no-no boys embraced in the face of oppression. Tule Lake is a pertinent symbol: over 40 percent of the Japanese Americans at Tule Lake either responded no to the infamous loyalty questions or refused to answer them. This led to the segregation of the camp into "loyals" and "disloyals," further exacerbating the tensions among internees (Burton 282). Consequently, by tying the efforts of the no-no boys to the stronghold

and to the defiant sacrifices of the Modocs, the speaker revises the narrative associated with the no-no boys and attempts to eliminate or remedy one element of division within the Japanese American community.

In the ensuing section, the speaker assumes an ambiguous voice and underscores the desires of the oppressed that we encounter in the poem. The speaker pleads:

All I wanted  
Was a place to live,  
...  
All I wanted  
Was to fight to live,  
To be left alone.  
All I wanted  
Was a concession to dignity,  
Our own reservation. (109)

We can read multiple voices in the speaker in this section. The “I” could refer to the no-no boy responding to the preceding loyalty questions, or to an internee at Tule Lake—or at any other internment location, or to Captain Jack, or to any of the hundreds of thousands of Native Americans removed from their tribal lands. The section illuminates the historical injustices perpetrated against both Native Americans and Japanese Americans, as well as the parallel effects on both groups. In the end the speaker underscores a key aspect of the injustice: that the government’s actions reflected a lack of respect for human rights and human dignity. Once more, this reinforces that revisiting the perceptions associated with no-no boys is not necessarily about emphasizing that their path was better or more heroic than other internees’, but instead about emphasizing their stance against the lack of dignity and humanity conveyed towards the Japanese American people. Rather than foster further division, this reorients the legacy of the no-no boys.

One of the most meaningful steps that Inada takes in “At the Stronghold” is to repeatedly attack the hypocrisy and criminal legacy of internment. Marita Sturken claims that “the internment continues to be narrativized as a regrettable step that appeared necessary in its time—but not as bad as what other countries did...The historical claim of the internment as benevolent remains fixed through its alliance with the claim that the use of the atomic bomb was inevitable, an act that was appropriate for its time” (“Absent Images” 692). “At the Stronghold” contests this cultural narrative that Sturken highlights—that internment simply was a “regrettable step that appeared necessary.” As the history I emphasized at the beginning of the chapter shows, military necessity did not justify incarcerating Japanese Americans; it was a blatantly racist policy. The speaker confronts just this type of narrative; near the end of the poem we encounter this powerful juxtaposition:

Captain Jack  
Will be hanged  
Tomorrow. “*Instruction*  
*To all persons*  
*Of Japanese ancestry...*” (110)

The speaker combines the notification of Captain Jack’s execution with the exclusion order instructions to Japanese Americans based on EO 9066. The juxtaposition suggests there is little difference between the two—or at least that the lineage that connects to the two events is minimal. They are both forms of government removal. Sturken also notes that, in comparison to such iconic World War II images as Iwo Jima and Normandy, “the internment of Japanese Americans ultimately can find no such traditional narrative—of either conflict, resistance, or brutal injustice. Its images are overwhelmed by their sense of the ordinary and the domestic, outside of the discourse of war” (“Absent Images” 695). Indeed, the U.S. government severely restricted both reporting and photography related to internment camps and therefore ensured that

the narrative associated with internment remained “ordinary” and “domestic.” By connecting Captain Jack’s execution with EO 9066, “At the Stronghold” confronts this tendency and emphasizes the “resistance” and “brutal injustice” that instead should dominate the “traditional narrative” of internment. Immediately after the lines from EO 9066, the speaker asserts that “This is the stronghold, / The heart, the molten / Flow solidified / Blood of ancestors. / The blood of us / Is the red tule rope.” (111). The internment included much sacrifice and suffering. By emphasizing this aspect of internment, Inada seeks both to remedy the discord and misunderstanding within the Japanese American community and to ensure that the dominant American cultural narrative regarding World War II does not overlook or suppress this element. With this in mind, the speaker observes: “As our stay increases— / summer into fall— / The wounds and pain / fall from our feet / As we begin to know / The paths / Of the stronghold / The scars of battle / Smooth places / To stand upon / As our stay / Increases / To the span / Of our life” (111). On one hand the speaker reflects the trauma of internment—that the consequences remain “to the span of our life.” Yet, on the other, through this journey to Tule Lake the speaker suggests that with greater mutual understanding the “wounds and pain fall from our feet” and the divisions within the community might resolve.

“At the Stronghold” ends with two powerfully assertive sections that sustain this quest for resolution. In the first the speaker beckons the Modoc leader for a final time, almost in supplication: “Captain Jack, / Father, / You teach us / To stand / To plant / Our feet in the ground / You teach us / To stand / To raise / Our eyes from the ground” (112). The image is striking: of a group of people, once reticent and vanquished, standing firm and raising “their eyes from the ground,” after embracing the lessons of the Modoc sacrifices and the Japanese American heroism. The imagery presents a remarkable contrast to the beginning of the poem—

the image of the “official termination,” of the “brown spirit slumped in some stirrups at the terminal” (103). Hence, immediately afterwards the speaker revises yet another stanza from earlier in the poem—he asserts:

My sons,  
You are beside me now.  
No.  
You will not be leaving  
For Oklahoma.  
No.  
No one will take your photo  
In front of barracks.  
Yes.  
We are willing to serve.  
Yes.  
We swear allegiance. (112)

Once again we encounter a multivalent voice: the speaker seemingly assumes the voice of both a Japanese American and a Native American, which is quite appropriate for the poem. In either case, the speaker takes a decisive stand. He reflects back to the earlier incorporation of the loyalty questions; moreover, the speaker unites the removal of both Native Americans and Japanese Americans. In a striking reversal from the earlier reference to the loyalty questionnaire and no-no boys, the speaker now answers, “Yes.” Just as Inada argued the no-no boys’ refusal was a positive act of defiance, the speaker’s ability to say yes in this case is not an act of submission; instead it is an affirmative act. Unlike the predicament the Nisei faced during the internment, when the government’s loyalty questionnaire forcibly coerced them into a decision, the speaker has a choice in this instance. The government will not force him to serve or to authenticate his “loyalty.” The speaker will not be incarcerated or persecuted further for standing up for his inalienable rights. Inada thus utilizes the poem to transform the dominant discourse associated with myriad elements of Japanese American incarceration: of the loyalty questionnaire, of the no-no boys’ actions, of the remembrance and significance of the internment.

Sturken observes that “[s]urvivors return to the sites of their war experience; they place their bodies within the discourse of remembering either to affirm history’s narratives or to declare them incomplete, incapable of conjuring their experience” (“Absent Images” 688). While Inada himself was not incarcerated at Tule Lake, the speaker’s return to the former internment camp location seeks to declare “history’s narrative” of internment, of no-no boys, even of the Modoc rebellion, “incomplete.” The site of Tule Lake offers a powerful symbol of both government oppression and injustice towards two peoples and those groups’ resistance and defiance in response. The poet utilizes this poem to reclaim and rewrite the history associated with Tule Lake and the no-no boys—and to establish greater understanding among Japanese Americans. In the introduction to the first section of *Legends from Camp*, the collection that includes “At the Stronghold,” Inada writes that “there is a remoteness to history, and to simply know the facts is not always satisfactory. There’s more to life than that. So you might say I’ve taken matters into my own hands—taken the camp experience in my hands, stood in the sun, and held it up to the light. What did I find? What I *expected* to find: Aspects of humanity, the human condition” (3). “At the Stronghold” removes that “remoteness” and offers Inada’s strongest critique of the internment, the misunderstanding and division within the Japanese American community, and the lack of acknowledgement within broader American historical discourse. The poem allows him to reflect on those historical “facts,” many of which have been obscured or subjugated in popular discourse, and alternatively convey the significance and legacy of the traumatic experience. By doing so he conveys the “humanity”—and suffering—of both Native Americans and Japanese Americans and ultimately reframes the history of Tule Lake and the no-no boys, one of the two key elements of traumatic rupture within the Japanese American community.

### **Drawing the Line**



In many ways “Drawing the Line” is the bookend to “At the Stronghold.” Inada constructs a second poem in which the speaker returns to another internment camp location in the present day and reflects upon the history and legacy associated with the camp—in this case, Heart Mountain, Wyoming, site of the largest Japanese American draft resistance movement. The speaker encounters another historical figure who represents the integrity of those internees who stood up against the injustice of incarceration: Yosh Kuromiya, one of the leaders of the draft resistance movement who was placed in federal prison during the war in response to his efforts. Inada utilizes the figures of both Heart Mountain and Yosh to critique the hypocrisy of the military draft and the loyalty questionnaire. By emphasizing the integrity and ideals of Yosh and the other draft resisters, Inada seeks to salve the division that remains within the Japanese American community after the traumatic rupture inflicted by the question of “loyalty” and enable further collective healing. The dramatic difference in “Drawing the Line” is that in multiple instances throughout the poem the speaker addresses the reader, which suggests the audience must play a role as well in reconciling the trauma and discord wrought by the internment.

Inada’s selection of Heart Mountain as the second location for a poetic return inevitably evokes the history associated with the Japanese American draft resistance movement that began at the camp. The movement started in early 1944, when the War Department “formally announced its new policy of drafting the interned Nisei on January 20” (Muller 64). Tied to the loyalty questionnaire that was implemented months earlier in 1943, the policy of drafting Japanese American citizens who had been stripped of their Constitutional rights screamed of further hypocrisy: in contrast to the loyalty questionnaire, which sought to discern which citizens would be eligible to volunteer to serve, “Young Nisei men were now to be not merely invited to join the army, but compelled to do so by force of law” (Muller 64). Within weeks of

the War Department's announcement, a group of resisters at Heart Mountain had formed the "Fair Play Committee" to contest the new policy (Muller 77). The Fair Play Committee's efforts posed a significant threat to internal camp security, as well as overall internment policy, and the government moved rapidly to suppress the movement—on June 26, 1944, a federal judge convicted "sixty-three Nisei resisters on one count each of draft evasion and sentenc[ed] them all to three years in federal prison" (Muller 111). In much the same way that Tule Lake evoked the history of the no-no boys and their defiance, Heart Mountain similarly conjures the history of draft resisters, including Yosh Kuromiya. The poem thus begins with Yosh and the concept of drawing a line:

Yes, Yosh is drawing the line.  
And you might say he's simply  
following his own nature—  
he's always had a good eye,  
a fine sense of perspective,  
and a sure hand, a gift  
for making things ring true,  
and come clearer into view. (128)

The speaker in "Drawing the Line" is ambiguous in much the same manner as "At the Stronghold," and similarly gestures to a representative Japanese American, as Inada was not interned at Heart Mountain. In contrast to the malleable voice that we encounter in "At the Stronghold," in this poem the speaker remains, for the most part, consistent. Instead, for this poem we find a multivalent image—the idea of "drawing the line." At the start, "drawing the line" reflects the duality of Yosh, a visual artist and a former draft resister. Throughout the poem the speaker offers descriptions of the image that Yosh is drawing in the present day at Heart Mountain, while simultaneously we receive myriad interpretations on the figurative concept. In this initial section the speaker stresses that Yosh's qualities are seemingly inherent—he follows his "own nature"—just as it implies that the stand he and other draft resisters took was natural,

given that their ostensibly inalienable rights had been taken away. The speaker also fosters a tone of assurance: Yosh has a “sure hand,” he makes “things ring true and come clearer into view.” In the subsequent sections the speaker reinforces these qualities. For example in section VI he observes that “when he draws a line, / it tends to stay drawn...That’s just the way he is— / trusting his own judgment / as a person, as an artist” (130). At the same time the speaker also underscores that Yosh’s judgment and values are unique: “What ‘everybody does’ just may not go / with Yosh, the set of beliefs, the sense / of integrity, values, he got from his folks” (131). Consequently the beginning of the poem establishes Yosh as a unique representative for the draft resistance movement of Heart Mountain, as well as the associated metaphor of “drawing the line.”

The two subsequent sections shift the focus from Yosh to the rupture that occurred within the Japanese American community with the loyalty questionnaire and the Nisei draft. At the start of Section VIII the speaker poses the following: “As for this drawing in his sketchbook, / you might well ask: ‘What is it?’” (131). What follows is a delineation of the potential interpretations of Yosh’s “line.” The line remains somewhat obtuse, but the speaker emphasizes the significance of a markedly abrupt shift, “reflecting / a decisive turn of events which lasts / a while before resuming” (ibid). Given that the poem is set at the former site of an internment camp, it is difficult not to relate this “decisive turn of events” to the internment, and the line to the overall trajectory of the Japanese American experience. Shortly thereafter the speaker observes:

That’s what graphs show, the flow  
of activity, the rise and fall of events  
often out of our hands, so it can become  
gratifying to simply resume the bottom  
line of normalcy again...  
That is, it could have been worse.

The line could have been broken, snapped,  
or bottomed out into nothing, going  
nowhere fast like the slow and steady  
line monitoring a silent patient...  
And if you ask Yosh, he'd simply say,  
In his modest way: "Oh that's just Heart Mountain." (132)

The instability of the line suggests a loss of agency—a “rise and fall of events” out of one’s control. Even more significant, the speaker notes the potentially cataclysmic effects this “decisive turn of events” might have created—that the line “could have been broken, snapped, or bottomed out into nothing.” That this simple image of “just Heart Mountain,” as Yosh replies, evokes such history is quite fitting; the camp in many ways symbolizes the division within the larger Japanese American community wrought by the ideas of loyalty and resistance. As referenced above, the Fair Play Committee formed to resist the Nisei draft, but a significant part of the internee population did not support them—and the community’s scars endured for decades. Muller notes that Nisei soldiers from “the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team came home [from the war in Europe] to a well-deserved hero’s welcome from the Japanese American community...It was the battle-weary face of the Nisei GI, and not the prison-weary face of the Nisei resister, that most of the Nikkei wanted America to see” (179). Thus, in an American culture that viewed all Japanese as enemy and as foreign, for many internees the “bottom line of normalcy” required establishing a cultural narrative that emphasized the loyal, heroic actions of the Japanese Americans who enlisted in the Army, not the individuals who resisted. This rupture within the community continued even into the 1980s and 1990s—so much so that the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988, which established the reparations awarded to former internees and served as a symbolic closing chapter on internment (at least in the government’s perspective), was technically named House Resolution 442, in honor of the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental

Combat Team (Robinson, *A Tragedy* 299). As the speaker observes, the line did not snap or break or bottom out, but clearly the division persisted for decades.

The speaker builds on this symbolism in the next section by establishing “Heart Mountain,” as a multivalent emblem of internment, of trauma, and of resistance, in much the same way that Yosh functions. The speaker asserts:

Maybe you had to be there.  
For if you were, you would not only  
not have to ask, but you would  
appreciate the profile, the likeness  
of what looms large in your life  
and mind, as large as life staring  
you in the face day by day by day...  
you can't avoid it, you can count on it,  
Heart Mountain. Heart Mountain  
is still there. And you're here. (133)

The speaker addresses the audience repeatedly in this section, significantly more than in the preceding or subsequent sections. The speaker refers to “you” eight times in ten lines, repeatedly forcing the reader to consider the presence and impact of “Heart Mountain” in one’s life and drawing the audience into the trauma. The speaker asks the reader to empathize with the internees. The mountain haunts the internee, and it represents the traumatic memories that arise at any given moment—“day by day by day / and so on into night.” Much like a flashback, the mountain “assumes a prominence” in one’s dreams, regardless of time or distance or place. The speaker notes that “you can’t avoid it, you can count on it.” Yet, the speaker simultaneously turns this haunting presence into a symbol of stability, resilience, and survival: Heart Mountain “is still there. And you’re here.” The mountain still stands, as does Yosh, as does the internee, the draft resister, the Japanese American community. This is the power of Heart Mountain as signifier: it represents myriad values, histories, and memories. Consequently, “Heart Mountain” stands simultaneously as a symbol of the traumatic legacy of the internment and as a memorial to

the endurance of the Japanese American people, even in spite of their internal conflicts. And the speaker directly ties Yosh to these values: in the subsequent section he claims that the mountain is “a testament to /something that stands to be / respected from a distance...And Yosh, with his own given name, / is somewhat like the mountain” (134).

After the speaker connects Yosh to Heart Mountain, the poem transitions temporally to a context that suggests the period of internment and Yosh assumes the voice. These three sections—XIII through XV—establish the significance of the draft resistance movement: the integrity, the ideals, the American-ness of their efforts. Yosh’s lines are quite telling; he asserts that “out there is *in here* too, related— / it’s a matter of perspective, like lines / of lineage and history, like the line / between me and the fencepost” (137). He proceeds to extrapolate all of the potential connections of the line from the internment to “out there.” As he says, though, “it’s a matter of perspective.” He strives to reframe the actions of he and his fellow draft resisters. Sturken writes that “the government’s production of images of its ‘benevolent’ treatment of the Nisei and Issei...was in part contingent on it producing images of them as model and obedient citizens” (“Absent Images” 695). In other words, the government needed to produce a narrative of internment that presented the appearance that Japanese Americans were content and well-treated. The draft resisters and no-no boys did not fit that construct. Furthermore, Greg Robinson observes that after the war “the wartime confinement of Japanese Americans was gradually absorbed and assimilated into a patriotic narrative. This narrative presented official policy—however mistaken—as exceptional, a case of wartime hysteria. It thereby minimized the actions and resistance of Japanese Americans (other than perhaps the contributions of Nisei soldiers) and obscured the essential role of historic patterns of white supremacy and official discrimination in making such injustice possible” (303). Yosh adds fittingly:

Yes, if I had a big enough piece  
of paper, I'd draw the line  
tracing the way we came, smooth  
as tracks clear back to California,  
and in the other direction, the line  
clean out to the city of Philadelphia  
and the Liberty Bell ringing testimony  
over Independence Hall and the framing  
of the Constitution. Yes, its there,  
and I can see it, in the right frame of mind... (137)

During the war and in its aftermath, particularly as Japanese Americans attempted to return to a life of normalcy upon release, draft resistance and “draft evasion” did not fit the “patriotic narrative” to which Robinson referred. Thus, from Yosh’s perspective he and the other members of the Fair Play Committee and the draft resistance movement trace their actions back to the values and ideals espoused in the Constitution—to “the framing of the Constitution.”

After connecting the symbolic figures of Yosh and Heart Mountain, we encounter the poem’s most remarkable parallel to “At the Stronghold,” in the form of the loyalty oath. Yosh remains the speaker, and, while he does not repeat the actual questions that we encounter in the previous poem, he provides his unique responses:

No, you have no right  
to imprison my parents.  
No, you have no right  
to deny us our liberty.  
Yes, I have my right  
to stand for our justice.  
Yes, I have my right  
to stand for our freedom. (138)

This is a distinct transformation from the responses in “At the Stronghold.” Most significant, Yosh addresses a more encompassing “you,” which like the excerpt above, ultimately implicates the reader, to an extent, in his persecution. Similar to what we found in the father’s testimony in Otsuka’s *When the Emperor Was Divine*, this also implicates the larger audience in the history

and the healing. The direct address discomforts and forces the reader to confront the injustice. The subsequent pronouns are just as important: “Yes, I have *my* right to stand for *our* justice,” “Yes, I have *my* right to stand for *our* freedom.” This connects Yosh to the values he and the other draft resisters upheld—the inalienable rights to stand for justice and freedom—instead of the divisive concept of “loyalty.” In another way, Yosh’s responses to the loyalty questions here stress loyalty to the values and ideals of the Constitution, not a blind, supplicant, compulsory loyalty hypocritically enforced on internees in the unjust confines of the camp. As the subsequent succinct section reveals, “this is where Yosh / drew the line— / on paper, on the pages / of the Constitution” (138). This reframing of the resisters’ wartime actions is crucial towards healing the traumatic rupture that occurred within the Japanese American community.

The concluding two sections of the poem return to the anonymous speaker and shift temporally back to the present day. The conclusion reinforces the values associated with Yosh’s actions and Heart Mountain—but even more important the sections emphasize the healing associated with the return to the former internment camp location. In the penultimate section the speaker casually relates that “The rest is history. / Arrested, judged / sentenced, imprisoned” (138). Of course Yosh’s experience, like that of the draft resisters, was not so simple—incarcerated for being Japanese American, then incarcerated for standing up for one’s beliefs, then ostracized by the majority of the Japanese American community for being “disloyal.” The speaker then observes: “Eventually arrives / a few sentences / of presidential / pardon, period. / But history / doesn’t rest, / as Yosh gives / testimony, / drawing the line, / on paper, again” (139). Yosh and the other resisters eventually received a pardon, just as the U.S. government eventually approved reparations for the internees—but history does not rest, nor do traumatic wounds heal rapidly. Furthermore, “history” is always evolving and mutating according to cultural discourse.



Yosh's present day "testimony" is thus vital to bridging the community's division and to ensuring the lessons of internment remain vibrant and in the present. Robinson notes that even the redress movement—the movement to persuade Congress to approve reparations—was divided: "one-third of Japanese Americans favored a national campaign for reparations, one-third were opposed, and one-third felt neutral" (*A Tragedy* 293). Moreover, even in the aftermath of H.R. 442, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), which had been the primary proponent of assimilation and "loyalty" to the U.S. and severely criticized the draft resisters, remained obstinate. Only in July 2000, twelve years after H.R. 442 and 55 years after the end of World War II, did the JACL finally approve a resolution at its national convention apologizing to the draft resisters (and three years after publication of "Drawing the Line") (Muller 185). Thus, as the speaker observes, "history doesn't rest." The symbols of Yosh and Heart Mountain and the speaker's return to the former internment camp location serve to revise the cultural narrative associated with the resistance and ultimately repair the collective division that occurred during the war. Yosh returns to the camp "a free man / with a free mind and a very clear / conscience" (139). His integrity and the values represented and defended by he and his fellow draft resisters demonstrate a heroism just as substantial of those of the more celebrated 442<sup>nd</sup> R.C.T. veterans. In her study of Mitsuye Yamada's poetry on the internment, Traise Yamamoto argues that "the internment functions as a crucial site of both historical memory and the (re)construction of Nikkei subjectivity. Thus, the recovery of history is inextricably tied to the recovery of the voice that recovers history" (203). In many ways "Drawing the Line" functions in the same way for the draft resisters: revisiting Heart Mountain and the heroism of Yosh recovers the voices of the resisters and adds another layer to "Nikkei subjectivity"; the poem stresses that the heroism of Japanese Americans during the war was more diverse than

standard, dominant discourse sought to portray. Set apart from all of the other lines at the end of the poem, the speaker observes “a monumental testament under the sky” (140). Once again the connotations are myriad—undoubtedly suggesting the intertwined symbolism of Yosh and Heart Mountain. The speaker thus concludes by exhorting Yosh (and presumably the audience as well) to trust:

the judgment upholding truth through time  
as the man, the mountain, the profile make  
a perfect fit in this right place and time  
for Yosh to kneel again, feel again, raise  
his radiant eyes in peace to face the radiant  
mountain, Heart Mountain, Heart Mountain” (140)

Yosh—along with his fellow draft resisters and other internees—returns to the internment camp location “in peace,” to face Heart Mountain, the symbol of the camp, of internment, of the traumatic rupture that enveloped the Japanese American community. They return “in peace” with the knowledge that the resister’s actions justified—the “judgment” of time “upholding truth.”

### **Conclusion**

In his Afterword to *Only What We Could Carry*, an immense collection of prose and art by former internees, Inada offers the following observation:

From the outside, the camps may have appeared as neat and orderly as any prison or military installation, but on the inside there were conflicts, degrees of disorder and difficulty, and the entire range of human emotions that varied, not only from person to person, but from day to day. The very creation of the camps created chaos and confusion, and arbitrary impositions by the government served to further that confusion. (ii-iii)

As this chapter has demonstrated, the “arbitrary impositions by the government” created a traumatic rupture within the Japanese American community that remained divisive and destructive for decades after World War II ended. While on the individual level the “disorder,”

“chaos and confusion,” and “conflicts” in the camps exacerbated the trauma of displacement created by internment, the implementation of both EO 9066 and the loyalty questionnaire produced a massive, enduring division within the larger community. As Robinson observes in his history of the internment, “[f]ifty years later, Nisei communities remained divided by tension between those who answered yes and those who answered no on the loyalty questionnaire” (*By Order* 181). Consequently, in “At the Stronghold” and “Drawing the Line” Inada seeks to reframe the histories of the no-no boys and the draft resisters to foster healing within the community. He writes in the introduction to *Legends from Camp* that “we’ve lived the [internment] experience since—on a continual basis. And I’ve often wondered: What does it all mean?” (3). The poems reveal his emphasis on rewriting the cultural narrative associated with internment to stress the heroism, ideals, and integrity demonstrated by those individuals who were persecuted and ostracized by the community; in doing so Inada redefines the actions of those labeled “disloyal” and instead posits that they were just as “loyal” as the rest of the community. Muller asserts just this concept in his study of the draft resistance movement: “Both choices (to serve in the Army and to resist the draft)—wholehearted, willful compliance and wholehearted, willful defiance—were patriotic and courageous. What distinguished one choice from the other was not patriotism, but its pedigree. Both the patriotism of duty and that of protest have proud antecedents in this nation’s history” [emphasis in original] (197). Thus, for Inada, his returns to the former internment camp locations and his reflections on the no-no boys and draft resisters emphasize this “pedigree” of patriotism and courage. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* La Capra asserts that “not all [healing] processes are teleological or developmental. Processes may be complex and involve various modalities of repetition...working through [trauma] is not a linear, teleological, or straightforward

developmental (or stereotypically dialectical) process either for the individual or for the collectivity. It requires going back to problems, working them over, and perhaps transforming the understanding of them” (148). Indeed, the healing of trauma is not linear or teleological or a “straightforward developmental process,” whether for an individual or the “collectivity.” Each trauma is unique; each wound is different. Therefore, through the returns to the internment camps and through his reconsideration of the histories associated with both Tule Lake and Heart Mountain, Inada’s poetry helps to transform our understanding of the traumatic rupture that occurred in the Japanese American community and promote healing.

Yet, to take it a step further, both poems’ invocation of the reader—of involving and implicating the reader in the process of return—suggests that healing the traumatic wounds of internment extends beyond the Japanese American community to the larger nation. Sturken writes, “it could be argued that the internment produced an image both too disruptive and too domestic to conform to the war’s narratives” (“Absent Images” 694). The internment did not fit the dominant cultural narrative that evolved during and after the war, which led to the tempering and minimization of the injustices inflicted on Japanese Americans. Needless to say, this subjugation did not help in healing the rupture created within the community, as the former internees struggled to simply acclimate to post-war, post-incarceration life in a nation that viewed them with great skepticism and prejudice. In *The Melancholy of Race* Anne Anlin Cheng adds to this point: “precisely because the American history of exclusion, imperialism, and colonization runs so antithetical to the equally and particularly American narrative of liberty and individualism, cultural memory in America poses a continuously vexing problem: How does the nation ‘go on’ while remembering those transgressions? How does it *sustain* the remnants of denigration and disgust created in the name of progress and the formation of an American

identity?” [emphasis in original] (11). By implicating the reader in his poems, Inada forces his audience to confront these “vexing” questions and in “remembering those transgressions” ensure that the injustices of internment remain part of the American narrative of World War II. As Sturken argues, “to properly memorialize the camps and their survivors means to rethink the myth of America’s actions in World War II, a myth that even now remains resolutely intact” (“Absent Images” 704). In “At the Stronghold” and “Drawing the Line” Inada strives to do just that—to “properly memorialize the camps,” to rewrite the history associated with draft resisters and no-no boys, to heal the traumatic rupture generated by the U.S. government’s policies, and to ensure that the American history of World War II properly acknowledges the injustices imposed on the Japanese American community. In the decades after incarceration Inada has witnessed how the inability of the nation to properly memorialize and cope with previous injustice inevitably allows for future injustices to occur. Just this past winter, in the November/December 2014 issue of *World Literature Today*, he published a new poem called “To This Day,” which reflects yet again on the legacy and cultural significance of internment. The poem begins by asking: “Have you ever wondered / whatever happened to all the / barbed wire that defined / and confined the so-called / camp at Tule Lake?” (ll 1-5). The poem is a focused reflection upon this question and eventually concludes with this poignant image:

So perhaps it’s immaterial  
to dwell on such material matters  
like rusted wire of the past;  
rather, as we can imagine,  
in this advanced day and age,  
there just might be a mentality  
among us, between us,  
that, to this day,  
serves to keep us separated  
serves to keep us confined  
between “them” and “us,”  
and this mentality, this condition,

invisible as it is,  
intangible as it is,  
can actually function  
like actual barbed wire—  
and it is up to everyone,  
in the spirit of humanity,  
in the name of mutuality,  
to reach through the strands  
with extended hands. (ll 91-111)

Inada implores his reader not to forget or overlook past injustices; he understands that the “rusted wire of the past” undoubtedly is not “immaterial” and continues to have implications into the present day. The concept of “rusted wire”—of wire that remains intact but altered, transformed—gestures to the continued vibrancy of history. He sees in the United States’ contemporary wars and cultural discourse a “mentality” of fear that separates and confines in ways not so dissimilar from the internment seventy years ago. Whether the actual barbed wire at Guantanamo, or the more hidden, “invisible...intangible” mentality that divides people of different cultures, religions, or ethnicities, Inada sees the contemporary parallels to internment regardless. He strives to see past the division, and the pain, and encourages the reader to see the “humanity” in all. Thus, while his poems “At the Stronghold” and “Drawing the Line” ultimately seek to foster traumatic healing within the Japanese American community and rewrite the cultural narrative of the war—the poems likewise speak to the legacies and lessons of Japanese American internment and the ways in which the experience continues to inform the present day.

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