

Spring 2011

# Raping the raced body: Trauma in Asian North American women's literature

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RAPING THE RACED BODY:  
TRAUMA IN ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

May, 2011

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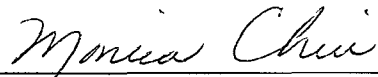
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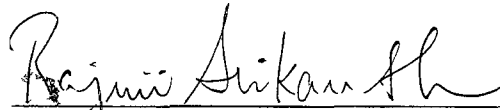
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Dedicated to Lillian, Melody, and my angel babies in heaven.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation benefitted from the support, encouragement, and advice of a network of people in my personal and professional life. The English Department at the University of New Hampshire provided tuition and financial support during my years of coursework. I am also grateful to the English Department for several travel grants to present papers at conferences in the U.S. and Ireland. Through teaching assistantships, the English Department allowed me to develop important connections with classes of students that challenged my thinking and my research. A monetary fellowship to study for a summer at Cambridge University in England allowed me to develop my research interests in feminism and the portrayal of the body in literature. I am also thankful for a travel grant from the Graduate School at UNH for travel to a conference to present material from my dissertation.

I received intellectual and research support from a number of academic organizations: the American Literature Association, the Association for Asian American Studies, the College English Association, the Circle for Asian American Literary Studies, the Modern Language Association, the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, the Northeast Modern Language Association, and the National Women's Studies Association. At several of these organizations' yearly conferences, I presented research or papers that helped me develop various chapters of my dissertation. The UNH Graduate Research Conference also provided the opportunity to present a portion of my

dissertation. I am grateful for the feedback I received from Cristy Beemer and Monica Chiu, both English faculty members, at the UNH Graduate Research Conference.

My research and dissertation were fostered and encouraged in graduate seminars at UNH taught by Monica Chiu, Briggs Bailey, Sarah Sherman, Sandya Shetty, Jane Bellamy, Lisa MacFarlane, and Siobhan Senier. I am thankful for the support of my dissertation committee: Monica Chiu, Siobhan Senier, Rajini Srinanth, Vicki Banyard, and Delia Konzett. I am grateful for the direction of Doug Lanier, Briggs Bailey, and Michael Ferber as English Graduate Directors. Janine Auger, English Graduate Coordinator, worked tirelessly to schedule my exams and defense, as well as to field my many departmental questions. The staff of Dimond Library, especially the reference librarians and interlibrary loan staff, has responded to my every query and need with timeliness and skill.

To the 999 crew, past and present, I am forever indebted for your diligent readings of my chapter drafts, your revision advice, and your receptive ear when I needed to vent the inevitable emotions that welled up during the dissertation writing process. Thank you to Susan Schibanoff and Laura Smith for your dedication to leading the 999 Dissertation Writing Workshop.

I am grateful to a number of colleagues that have offered support, encouragement, and revision advice: Laura Smith, Drew Lopenzina, Keith Botelho, Emily Hinnov, Kate Gillen, Abby Knoblauch, Jim Webber, Matt Hurwitz, Seiwoong Oh, Catherine Fung, Sara Quay, and many more. Keely Garden and Melissa Siik offered delightful discussions when I needed diversions from the dissertation.



I wholeheartedly thank my mom for fostering my love of reading with weekly trips to the town library when I could only read picture books and for nudging me toward more challenging books as my readerly mind developed. I thank my sister, Lisa, for reading P.D. Eastman's *The Best Nest* to me so many times that I had it memorized. My sister Lynn, who has always been my best friend, loved, encouraged, and supported me through every step of my dissertation. My dad's utter excitement that I would someday be "Dr. Amy" helped me keep my eye on the goal. I thank Nancy and Chris Manning for believing in me, checking in, and cheering me on. Laura Smith, my "New Hampshire sister," has been my steadfast confidant, champion, friend, and reader throughout my years at UNH.

I am forevermore in love with my husband, Stephen, for his tireless support, unwavering friendship, and comforting shoulder on which to rest my head and wipe my tears of frustration and anxiety. I thank my daughters, Lillian and Melody, for their kisses, hugs, and laughter.

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ABSTRACT

RAPING THE RACED BODY:  
TRAUMA IN ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

by

Amy Lillian Manning

University of New Hampshire, May, 2011

This dissertation examines the representation of racial and sexual traumas in short fiction and novels by Asian American women writing post-WWII to the present. The central focus of this project is on Asian American literary representations of the lingering effects of physical, racial, and sexual traumas to Asian American women, specifically the nuances of narrating traumatic experiences. Each chapter explores various literary representations of post-traumatic psychological states of unrest, instability, and incoherence. Most importantly, this study examines the frequently simultaneous narrations of sexual trauma *and* racial awareness, of how personal narratives of trauma against the physical body become entangled with narratives about racial awareness, social status, and political identity. Through analysis of Hisaye Yamamoto's "The High-heeled Shoes: A Memoir," and "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara," Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and *The Rain Ascends*, Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Behold the Many*, and Patricia Chao's *Monkey King*, I examine a common trope within Asian American literature: the simultaneous narration of racial and sexual traumas.

## INTRODUCTION

When I was sixteen, a gang of gun-toting, hood-wearing miscreants attacked a boyfriend and me while we were shopping in a store. Yelling “chink” to my boyfriend and “slut” to me, the deviants relied on denigrating whatever aspects of their victims that might get a reaction. They were looking for a fight, but we didn’t want any part of it. Although we tried to avoid the group, even lingering in the store to avoid venturing into the open parking lot where we assumed the group might be waiting for us, we were eventually attacked from behind as we walked out the store’s main exit. As he was pistol-whipped on the side of his head, my boyfriend endured a tirade of racial epithets from this group of young men who did not even know us. In my struggle to drag my badly bleeding and nearly unconscious boyfriend to safety, I suddenly gave up. I could no longer muster the strength to keep going. His hand in my hand, I could feel that my boyfriend’s body was limp and badly injured. Stopping, I turned to face our assailants, and stared straight into the barrel of a loaded gun. “Don’t move, whore.” I froze.

Years later, I’ll tell this story to a class of film students. They are assigned to create a storyboard of the incident and make up an ending. I deliberately withhold the ending of the story so that I won’t affect the project outcomes. After the students have presented their projects, complete with creatively designed camera angles and story endings, I forget to tell them how the story ended for me. After class, a student asks, “So,

how did it really end?” Startled, I quickly summarize the facts of the case: police were called by store personnel and arrived on the scene, our assailants ran away but were apprehended within the hour with their guns still in tow, my boyfriend was rushed to the hospital, and a court case eventually sent our assailants to jail. Satisfied with that answer, my student went home. In that empty classroom, however, I was suddenly confronted with all that I had not said about the incident: that my boyfriend refused to talk to me after the incident because he was embarrassed to have been called a “chink” and because he felt that the attack was all his fault simply for being Chinese American, that I had suffered nightmares about our assailants for months, that I still suffered recurring nightmares about guns and being attacked. This information, outside the realm of the facts of the incident/case, was certainly not requested by my student; nevertheless, this aftermath of the traumatic incident came unbidden into my mind and haunted me as if it had not occurred over half a lifetime ago, but had instead occurred yesterday.

The months that followed the attack, like the moments of the attack itself, are a blur of feelings, images, sensations, fears, nightmares, half-conversations, and flashbacks. I tried to talk to my boyfriend about the attack, but he would only apologize in shame for not protecting me and for “causing” the attack because he was part Chinese. As I look back to those days, I realize the traumatic returns to the event that I experienced, and the racial trauma that the attack stoked for my boyfriend. The deepest wound from the attack was invisible and centuries old: the traumatic wound of being an “other” in white America.

\* \* \*

My dissertation examines the representation of racial and sexual trauma in short fiction and novels by Asian American women writing post-WWII to the present. The central focus of this project is on Asian American literary representations of the lingering effects of physical, racial, and sexual traumas to Asian American women, specifically the nuances of narrating traumatic experiences. Each chapter explores various literary representations of post-traumatic psychological states of unrest, instability, and incoherence. Most importantly, this study examines the frequently simultaneous narrations of sexual trauma *and* racial awareness, of how personal narratives of trauma against the physical body become entangled with narratives about racial awareness, social status, and political identity. This attention to trauma *narratives* highlights the significance of my contribution to the field of Asian American literary studies. Through analysis of the fiction of Hisaye Yamamoto, Joy Kogawa, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, and Patricia Chao, I examine a common trope within Asian American literature: the simultaneous narration of racial and sexual trauma.

Several questions focus my research and writing. Why and how are historical/racial traumas and personal/sexual/bodily traumas so often simultaneously narrated in Asian American literature? What can we learn about the literary representation of trauma by focusing specifically on the “working-out” of trauma in Asian American literature? How does this focus on Asian American literature contribute to the study of trauma made so popular by theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra and E. Ann Kaplan?

When I first began studying Asian American literature, I encountered many narratives that included stories of rape, sexual abuse, sexual traumas, and harassments. Within many stories about coming toward racial awareness and understanding, these Asian American narratives also told of sexual abuses. As I studied and compiled my research, it seemed that *mere ink and paper* did not lay before me in these Asian American texts. Rather, *bodies* lay before – bodies that echoed the personal and historical traumas that the narratives seemed to both tell and to *endure* through their disjointed and chaotic structures.

Through this study, I interrogate how and why racial and sexual violence intersect in Asian American literary texts written by women. Most literary trauma theory about personal and collective traumas begins and ends with the Holocaust and its representation of lingering haunting in literature. Furthermore, within the field of Asian American literature, discussions of trauma are often limited to historical discussions (for example, about the internment), and do not investigate the personal relationships between the traumatized mind and the traumatized body – between collective traumas, personal traumas, and the haunted body of the present.

This project fills a gap in Asian American literary studies by examining the textual representation of personal and cultural traumas within texts by Asian American women writers. Moreover, I focus specifically on female characters within each of the texts, and so this project also contributes to the study of gender within both trauma studies and Asian American studies. Although both Asian American men and women are traumatized by race, Asian American women are multiply traumatized by race, gender,



and, in the case of the texts I examine, by their sexuality and/or sexual assault. My analysis of the women in these texts follows Cheung's discussion in *Articulate Silences* of the silencing and voicelessness of women due to culture, gender and race. Cheung writes, "The silencing of women ... takes on a peculiar resonance when we look at characters whose voicelessness is induced not only by gender but also by culture and race" (5). This "peculiar resonance" of "induced" silence is the foundation from which I build my analysis about the multi-point powerlessness, and hence traumatization, that marks the women of Asian American texts. I also build on Luce Irigaray's description of women's state of inferiority and alterity, whereby female is the opposite of logic and rationality, and "the female is either outside, the hole, or the unsymbolized residue" (Whitford 69). According to Irigaray, women are "homeless" in a symbolic order that leaves them outside the bounds of subject formation, or even denigrates them to being the *detritus* remaining from the racialization and socialization process (Whitford 69). I would add to this argument the deepened sense of homelessness and powerlessness that Asian American female characters exhibit through their working through or avoidance of racial and sexual traumas. I contend that women's racial and sexual traumas coexist in Asian American literature through narrative structures (such as silences, gaps, narrative burials, time shifts, textual space, and flashbacks) that mirror racial and sexual wounds caused by the induced state of powerlessness and the cascading secrecy and shame that result.

Chapter 1 sets the foundation of the dissertation with a discussion of trauma within Hisaye Yamamoto's "The High-heeled Shoes" and "Miss Sasagawara." Chapter 2

uses Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* to argue that Internment literature functions as a defining trope for Asian American literature as a whole by setting the precedent for trauma narratives and shaping the field for both writers and readers. The centerpiece of Chapter 3 is a close reading of traumatic haunting in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Behold the Many*. Chapter 4 focuses on the narration of incest alongside the often-silent narration of race in Chao's *Monkey King*.

### **Trauma and Trauma Literatures**

I use "trauma" to refer to a violent act against the body and psyche, in most cases a sexually violent act. I also use "trauma" in a metaphorical sense to refer to the injury produced by racial prejudice and the enacting of that prejudice through laws, imprisonment, and 'othering.' Furthermore, I discuss trauma with respect to the act, the injury, the lingering somatic effects of the injury, and the continuing psychological states induced by trauma.<sup>1</sup> This project examines the literary representation of racial and sexual traumas, including how literary forms mirror the way the brain remembers, files, and records traumatic incidents. Along with Babette Rothschild, I ask, "How is it possible for the mind to become so overwhelmed that it is no longer able to process a traumatic event

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Body Remembers*, Babette Rothschild writes, "Trauma is a psychophysical experience, even when the traumatic event causes no direct bodily harm. That traumatic events exact a toll on the body as well as the mind is a well-documented and agreed-upon conclusion of the psychiatric community, as attested in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, of the American Psychiatric Association" (5).

to completion and file it away in the past?" (14). Rothschild outlines the biological "defensive response to remembered threat" which is key to my theory of how literature represents the psychological states of traumatic stress:

When the limbic system [the center of the brain between the brain stem and the cerebral cortex] activates the ANS [autonomic nervous system] to meet the threat of a traumatic event, it is a normal, healthy, adaptive survival response. When the ANS continues to be chronically aroused even though the threat has passed and has been survived, that is PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder]. The traumatic event seems to float free in time, rather than occupying its locus in one's past, often unbidden into the present perception as if it were, indeed, occurring now. Within the limbic system are the two related areas that are central to memory storage: the hippocampus and the amygdala. The last few years have produced a growing body of research that indicates these two parts of the brain are centrally involved in recording, filing, and remembering traumatic events. The amygdala is known to aid in the processing of highly charged emotional memories, such as terror and horror, becoming highly active during and while remembering a traumatic incident. The hippocampus, on the other hand, gives time and space context to an event, putting our memories into their proper perspective and place in our life's time line. Hippocampal processing gives events a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is very important with regard to PTSD, as one of its features is a sense that the trauma has not ended. It has been shown that the activity of the hippocampus often becomes suppressed during traumatic threat; its usual assistance in processing and storing an event is not available. When this occurs, the traumatic event is prevented from occupying its proper position in the individual's history and continues to invade the present. The perception of the event as being over and the victim as having survived is missing. This is the likely mechanism at the core of the quintessential PTSD symptom of "flashback" – episodes of reliving the trauma in mind and or body. (12)

The concept of missing "a beginning, a middle, and an end" to a traumatic incident is key to the texts I examine, all of which portray characters who seek the ability to narrate a seemingly unnarratable incident. I borrow from Rothschild's discussion of the ways that the body can carry the physical and psychological traumas it has endured.

Similarly, my project builds upon Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk's studies on the neurobiology of trauma. Herman's work, like others' work within the field of psychology and neuropsychology, is grounded by Van der Kolk and Van der Hart's groundbreaking study about how stress affects physiology so that traumatic experiences are processed differently by the central nervous system.<sup>2</sup> According to Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, "a feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis, is fundamental to making an experience traumatic: the person was unable to take action that could affect the outcome of events" (446). This inability to "take action" is caused by the brain's inability or failure to formulate thoughts efficiently while under stress, or during a traumatic incident:

In traumatic situations the increased secretion of norepinephrine disrupts hippocampal function, which is necessary for the normal consolidation of memory. Rather than being integrated through the mediation of the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, traumatic memories are quite literally short-circuited and stored as somatic sensations and visual images in the amygdala. Linguistic memory, dependent on higher cortical function, is frequently inactivated during trauma; thus, sensory, affective, and motor memories stored in the amygdala manifest themselves in repetitive visual images, sudden auditory and sensory impressions, and inexplicable rushes of affect that crowd into survivor's consciousness, sometimes without any apparent external stimulation. (Boulanger 23)

In the texts I examine, characters (and the very narrations themselves) exhibit Boulanger's concept of a disrupted and "inactivated" "linguistic memory." In this way,

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<sup>2</sup> See Van der Kolk and Van der Hart's seminal essay "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" published first in *American Imago* (1991) and reprinted in Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). See also Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, which explores the neurobiology of trauma, especially Chapter VII, "The Science of the Literal: The Neurobiology of Trauma, p.229-65.

the texts highlight narratives that, at various points, are not yet ready to accept facets of past trauma so that details, characters, and memories are withheld from readers until the narratives are able to disclose them.

The traumas in these stories come to readers through indirect narratives that indicate the unsayable nature of the traumas endured. I am particularly interested in how each of the texts function as metanarratives about trying to talk or write about abuse or a trauma. For the literary characters in this study, even language itself can be traumatizing. The act of speaking, writing, or verbalizing a trauma through any means is itself a sort of second wound that has the power to re-traumatize. Nonetheless, the importance of giving words to a traumatic experience, of what can be said (and at what time), is a key feature of literature about trauma. I build specifically here upon Van der Kolk's notion of the literal speechlessness of trauma in which dissociation, not repression, is common to the trauma experience. In this way, readers encounter fractured characters that are attempting to produce or construct, like Judith Herman suggests, a narrative of self.<sup>3</sup>

In *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction*, Deborah Horvitz provides a substantive overview of psychoanalytic and literary critical discussions about the "lost and fragmented" states induced by trauma:

Psychologist Elizabeth Waites explains trauma as "an injury to mind or body that requires *structural repair*." According to Waites, "a main effect of trauma is disorganization, a physical and/or mental disorganization that may be

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<sup>3</sup> Herman's book, *Trauma and Recovery*, focuses specifically on narrative language and storytelling as a means of healing from trauma within the therapeutic setting or context, especially the importance of reconnecting with oneself by producing and constructing a narrative about a traumatic event.

circumscribed or widespread,” and this disorganization causes “*fragmentation of self, shattering of social relationships, erosion of social supports*” (22, 92; emphasis added). Similarly, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Kali Tal defines trauma as “a life-threatening event that displaces [one’s] preconceived notions about the world” (15). [...] Likewise, Judith Herman conceptualizes trauma as a “threat to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death” (33) [...]. Chaim Shatan, a psychiatrist who works with Vietnam combat veterans, describes trauma as a psychic state in which “reality is torn asunder leaving no boundaries and no guideposts (qtd. in Tal 15). (Horvitz 5-6)

Horvitz goes on to wonder how such a lost, fragmented, and “indefinable” self can be narrated, or made whole again, but surmises that if a person (or literary protagonist) is able to successfully narrate the seemingly incoherent past, the greater the chance of regaining control over her life. I am particularly interested in Horvitz’ discussions in contemporary literature of the fragmented, incoherent, traumatized literary figure. Popular theorists in literary trauma theory, such as Kali Tal, Laurie Vickroy, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and E. Ann Kaplan, inform the discussion of how to apply psychological theory to a literary character. My study is grounded on Caruth’s notion of the “double wound” that results from both experiencing a trauma and having to tell or narrate a trauma. Despite Tal, Horvitz, and Kaplan’s discussions of vicarious trauma, I am not concerned with the notion of whether or not a reader can experience a vicarious trauma through the act of reading. Rather, I am more concerned with the workings of trauma in the minds of the characters and on the structure of the narrative itself, so that the narration itself embodies the double-woundedness of trauma.

My project concerns the relationship between individual trauma and the cultural interpretation of trauma. Kali Tal and Dominick LaCapra discuss this relationship,

though a key difference between the two is that Tal believes that collective or historical traumas overwhelm the personal traumas that occur simultaneously. According to Tal, the individual experience of trauma is different from the cultural understanding or translation of an event, which is often mythologized so that individual experience is lost:

An individual is traumatized by a life-threatening event that displaces his or her preconceived notions about the world. Trauma is enacted in a liminal state, outside the bounds of the 'normal' human experience, and the subject is radically ungrounded. Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception. Textual representations – literary, visual, oral – are mediated by language and do not have the impact of the traumatic experience. Chaim Shatan, psychiatrist and pioneer of trauma research, explains that the victim enters the catastrophic environment of trauma through the 'membrane' that separates sense from nonsense, narrative from chaos, and 'Reality is torn asunder leaving no boundaries and no guideposts.' There is, in this case, no substitute for experience – only being is believing. (Tal 15)

My study is grounded in the way that, as Tal describes, a trauma is enacted in a "liminal state" in which the subject is "ungrounded." The texts in my study, I argue, act as that liminal state, and seem to re-present the traumas that occurred for the characters. In this way, the liminal state is both the space in which the trauma occurred *and* the space in which the trauma is narrated, or in which the texts attempt to narrate characters' traumas. LaCapra's notion that a person experiences simultaneously both a unique personal trauma *and* the collective trauma is at odds with Tal, but is at the center of my textual analysis in which characters bear and *embody* both personal and collective traumas.

Along with Vickroy, Kaplan, and Farrell, I argue that trauma narratives echo our unique contemporary trauma culture. Vickroy writes:

Trauma narratives, I contend, are personalized responses to this century's emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonization, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche. They highlight postcolonial concerns with rearticulating the lives and voices of marginal people, rejecting Western conceptions of the autonomous subject and describing the complex negotiations of multicultural social relations. The writers and theorists discussed in this study see trauma as an indicator of social injustice or oppression, as the ultimate cost of destructive sociocultural institutions. (Vickroy, Preface, x)

Thus, the “individual psyche” mirrors the nature of our traumatic culture that, through both active and inactive ways, traumatizes the “marginal” subject. According to Vickroy, our culture of “wars, poverty, colonization, and domestic abuse” produces fractured identities. My study hinges on Vickroy's assertion of “the power of literature to suggest what is inaccessible, unbelievable, and elusive about traumatic experience” (8). I argue that trauma narratives are the attempt to rebuild and reconstruct fractured identities, and that trauma texts themselves can be viewed as “resistant testimonial texts” that both reveal and conceal the traumas they contain (Vickroy, Preface, xii)

### **Racial Trauma**

I am concerned with the way that sexual traumas and racial traumas coexist in trauma narratives so that they are implicated in the telling of each other. Tal writes about the way that sexual and racial traumas are conflated for minority women:

Women of color suffer under the conditions of both sexism and racism, and for that reason they may not view sexual assault as the traumatic event which shaped their lives. The sexual assault of a woman of color is inextricable from her assault as a black woman, a Latina, or an Asian woman. The refusal of women of color to focus solely, or even primarily, on sexual assault reflects an awareness of the complex and interrelated character of race, gender, and class oppression. As Angela Davis writes, “rape is frequently a component of the torture inflicted on women political



prisoners by fascist governments and counterrevolutionary forces. In the history of our country, the Ku Klux Klan and other racist groups have used rape as a weapon of political terror” (Tal 159)<sup>4</sup>

In both racial and sexual traumas, I argue that victims’ feelings of powerlessness and shame are a hallmark of both wounds. That is, racial traumas and sexual traumas both cause a wound in the psyche. Similar to the “double wound” that Caruth argues is the hallmark of personal psychic trauma, the wound that results from racial and sexual traumas is not singular in nature. Rather, just as the trauma from a sexual assault returns to the victim in repeated flashbacks so that the trauma seems to not have an end point, so too are racial traumas open-ended and ongoing in nature. In my discussion in these texts of the racial wound that accompanies the sexual wound, I rely on critics such as King-kok Cheung, Anne Anlin Cheng, Pattie Duncan, Elena Creef, Eleanor Ty, and David Palumbo-Liu.

All of the critics named above rely on the concept of the social and cultural construction of race as made popular by such theorists as Stuart Hall, Michael Omi, and Howard Winant. Hall writes, “how things are represented and the ‘machineries’ and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role” (254). In this way, the various ways that race is represented, through language, stereotypes, and social interactions, play a role in its ongoing construction. These “machineries” however have the power to wound in the way that

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<sup>4</sup> Tal quotes Angela Davis, “We Do Not Consent: Violence Against Women in a Racist Society” in *Women, Culture, Politics*, New York: Vintage, 1989, p.47

they create and define race, or conscribe racial subjects. For example, Duncan writes of language's ability to wound and proscribe trauma: "Thus, while silence may be misunderstood, speech, too, is dangerous. Language, controlled by those with power, may distort, stereotype, and control while concurrently shaping and defining reality for those who are dominated and/or marginalized" (88). Thus, for the characters in the texts I study, language is difficult to control as a means of narrating racial or sexual trauma. The nature of trauma, though, necessitates telling in that it continually rises to the surface despite attempts to stifle it. Cheung writes about the "verbal restraint" of Chinese and Japanese cultures that is both the cause and result of "gossip, rumor, name-calling" and other practices that attempt to denigrate the "other": "The negative social assessment of silence isolates and baffles many an Asian American. Verbal restraint, often inculcated in both Chinese and Japanese cultures and reinforced as a survival strategy in the face of racism in the corresponding immigrant communities, hardly prepares a child for vocal assertion, especially when she is perceived as the Other" (Cheung 6). Thus, although characters in trauma narratives use silence as a "survival strategy," it also works against their attempts to narrate the sexual traumas they endure. Cheung notes how the "compounded impact of sexual and racial abuse ushers in twenty years of repressed guilt" for Naomi in Kogawa's *Obasan*. Similarly, the characters in Yamamoto's, Yamanaka's and Chao's texts work with the difficult medium of language that has conscribed and denigrated them as racial subjects yet serves as a necessary tool to narrate their way out of traumas.

While Cheung focuses on the silencing and voicelessness of Japanese and Chinese American literary characters due to culture, gender, and race, Anne Anlin Cheng discusses the more broadly defined racial wound that affects the formation of identity, the implication of both white identity and racial identity in the production of the racial “other,” and the power and powerlessness that result on both sides of the racial divide:

On the one side, white American identity and its authority is secured through the melancholic introjection of racial others that it can neither fully relinquish nor accommodate and whose ghostly presence nonetheless guarantees its centrality. On the other side, the racial other (the so-called melancholic object) also suffers from racial melancholia whereby his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual’s sense of his or her own subjectivity. Already we see that these two ‘sides’ are in fact implicated by one another.... The model of melancholic incorporation, far from prescribing or reifying the conditions of the racial other, reveals an intricate world of psychical negotiation that unsettles the simplistic division between power and powerlessness. (Cheng, Preface, xi)

According to Cheng’s “model of melancholic incorporation,” the racial other is a “ghostly presence” of a “never-possible perfection” that presents itself as a feeling of loss and powerlessness for the racial other. The Asian North American women that I study exhibit this powerlessness through the ways they struggle for words to narrate their racial and sexual traumas. In each case, the narrative, not only the characters, express a kind of melancholic loss in which the right to own or narrate one’s personal story is overwhelmed by the inability to access the language necessary to procure an acceptable story for the traumas endured. I say that these characters attempt to “procure” an acceptable narrative because, as Cheung and Cheng both note, the language necessary to utter the words of their stories is controlled by the culturally empowered, white majority.

Just as Cheung writes of the issue of feeling “shame for feeling shame” about one’s own racial identity (Preface, x), so does Cheng write about assimilation into white culture as an incorporation in the self of both an “impossible ideal” and “denigrated self” (72). For both Cheung and Cheng, racial assimilation causes an ongoing, never-healed racial wound. I argue that this racial wound is narrated in Asian North American literature *with* the narration of sexual traumas because the characters’ psyches are tossed between the two wounds, unable to settle on a narrative for either one. As the characters feel what Cheung describes as a “grief” caused by the racial/ethnic subject-formation, so do the characters feel a sense of loss or mourning for the sexual abuse narratives they feel they must disown, and yet need/want to tell.

In one important similarity, Cheng’s and Cheung’s analyses hinge on the idea of race as a visible factor that causes an invisible, shameful wound. Eleanor Ty also supports this Freudian and Lacanian obsession with the visual as a major component of our subject formation.<sup>5</sup> Ty writes:

In my study of works by Asian North Americans, I argue that the ambivalent claims and powers of visibility create tensions and disturbing positions for authors who attempt to represent difference without falling prey to Western scopophilic fantasies. To resist the visible and the pleasures of scopophilia, to resist performing typically Oriental or ethnic roles without rejecting the everyday little acts that constitute one’s self, become some of the biggest challenges of self-representation” (Ty, *The Politics of the Visible*, 10)

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<sup>5</sup> See Jacqueline Rose’s discussion of the Lacanian and Freudian view of vision as a “trap” in which the “subject not only looks at an object and simultaneously reproduces this object as an image, but the subject is also constituted as object by the Other” (190).

As the characters in this study “resist” the pull to “perform” their racial selves (in ways that are both individual and socially constructed), their sexual traumas rush toward the surface as wounds that might stand in for the racial wound society will not allow them to claim. Nevertheless, for these characters the sexual trauma, like the racial trauma, is circumscribed by the psychology of trauma’s ineffability.

### **The Narrative Connection between Racial and Sexual Traumas**

The texts I’ve chosen to discuss in each chapter require a focus on narrative structure and content in order to fully interrogate these texts as sites where race and sexual trauma are simultaneously narrated. A materialist and cultural critique help to elucidate the *separate* workings of race and sexual trauma in these texts, but narrative examination is necessary as well to investigate *how and why the two are narrated through each other*. I illustrate how the authors in this study use disjointed narratives to represent the way that sexual and racial traumas coexist in characters’ minds. Through narrative shifts, narrative burials, and narrative silences, these authors create narratives that mirror the way trauma haunts minds and bodies.

I argue that a refocusing in Asian American literature on narratives reveals how the telling of racial traumas and sexual traumas become conflated. According to Sue-Im Lee, the hyper-focus in Asian American literary criticism on sociological, economic and political issues is due to the “parallel beginnings of Asian American Studies in the academy and of Asian American political activism in the late-1960s” (2). This has meant that literary criticism of Asian American texts “has primarily sought to ‘speak’ the

material realities of hitherto ‘invisible,’ ‘disenfranchised,’ or ‘silent’ subjects” (2). In fact, Lee argues that Asian American literary criticism has lost sight of what is “literary” at all:

Asian American literary criticism has become almost indistinguishable from the reading of “culture” . . . . In this mode of criticism, literary works have been readily examined as symbolic enactments of material forces; as exemplifications of a particular ideology, phenomenon, or a conflict; or as illustrations of the political, economic, and sociological concerns of the times. (2)

This attention to the “constructed nature” of subjectivities is a strength of late twentieth century literary criticism; I agree with Lee that Asian American literary criticism has gone farther into discussions of “gender, class, sexuality, nation, capital, labor, and globalism” than other “minority literary scholarship.” In a key passage of their Introduction, Lee and Davis argue for a renewed focus on Asian American literary texts as “aesthetic objects”:

Perhaps one can discern the primacy of these sociological, economic, and political concerns most readily from the titles of monographs, anthologies, and edited essay collections in Asian American Literary criticism of the last two decades. Concepts that recur as a title’s keyword, such as “cultural politics,” “nation,” “transnation,” “orientalism,” “resistance,” or “subversion,” bespeak the discipline’s particularly focused energy upon such concepts. Certainly, materialist and political examinations of race, gender, sexuality, and nation need not preclude or exclude the possibility of treating texts as literary objects, but just such a balance, we contend, has not been successfully maintained in the Asian American literary criticism of the last two decades. That is, Asian American literary criticism at large has been slow to extend the analysis of the constructedness of human-made categories and institutions to include the examination of Asian American literary works as aesthetic objects – objects that are constituted by and through deliberate choices in form, genres, traditions, and conventions. (2)

This call to rescue the very “literariness” of Asian American texts is not new to Lee and Davis, whose earliest precursor can be found in Jinqi Ling’s 1998 monograph *Narrating Nationalisms: Form and Ideology in Asian American Literature*. Ling also writes about how Asian American literary criticism of the 1980s and 90s “den[ied] Asian American literature not only its literariness but also its rich human potential” (36). Ling also laments the reduction of some Asian American texts to the differences between “Asian” and “American.” I agree with Ling’s assertion that Asian American critiques too often fall into the same pattern of emphasis on “content over form” which results from an “emphasis on literature’s social or political function” (Preface v). Perhaps Ling’s approach to literature can best be summarized by his second chapter’s epigraph, a quote from narrative theorist Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*: “Narrative always says less than it knows, but often makes known more than it says.” I apply Genette’s words to the Asian American narratives of this study to investigate the silences and gaps that are embodied and made manifest through the intersection of racial and sexual traumas.

In Chapter One, I argue that two of Hisaye Yamamoto’s short stories are precursors to later Asian American literature and novels that turn to overt silence about sexuality and abuse in order to narrate what is equally complex and perhaps less-relatable to a Western-centric global audience: race. The characters in the stories come to represent not only the personal traumas within the narrative, but also violated/repressed sexuality and the violation of all Japanese Americans due to cultural racism and the internment of thousands of Japanese North Americans. In this way, racial oppression is narrated along with, or juxtaposed against sexual violation. Thus, these stories function as introductions

to what I argue is a common trope within Asian North American literature: the simultaneous narration of race and sexual trauma. In these two stories, the alien, uncomfortable, un-narratable memories of traumatic experiences come through. I argue that Yamamoto's stories are precursors of the contemporary "trauma narratives" that became so popular in the 1970s and 80s.

In Chapter Two, I argue that Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* metaphorically connects sexual abuse to the internment of Japanese Canadians through a simultaneous narration of coming to terms with both traumas. I argue that Kogawa's seminal novel sets up the internment of Asian North Americans as a defining trope of violation within Asian North American literature. The novel sets a precedent for trauma narratives in Asian North American literature in terms of memory simultaneously unfolding with personal acknowledgments and awareness of racial oppression. Thus, in *Obasan*, race and the raced body are perceived as wounds entangled in a subverted narrative of sexual and psychological abuse. I read Kogawa's *The Rain Ascends* as a parallel narrative to *Obasan* in order to highlight *The Rain Ascends* as a re-visioning of Naomi's sexual traumas in *Obasan*. Together, these novels create a dialogue about the competing roles of racial and sexual traumas in ethnic literature.

Chapter Three argues that Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novel *Behold the Many* depicts the ways that past traumas haunt not only bodies, but also landscapes, spaces, and narratives. In other words, land, place, and narrative can mirror and own a trauma like the body possesses and holds traumas. My discussion of this novel continues the overarching dissertation theme of coming to awareness of racial oppression along with



remembrance of sexual violation. In *Behold the Many*, the narrative and the body memorialize, possess, and own traumas that are both racial and sexual. Through close readings of the narrative structure, I argue that Yamanaka invokes the instability of narrative “interludes” to invoke the unstable nature of the novel’s narratives about race and sexual trauma.

In Chapter Four, I argue that Patricia Chao’s *Monkey King* depicts the silent narrative subversion of incest and race. The author subverts not only the narrative of race, but also the narrative of incest and all things connected to it (i.e. house, body, the idea of home). In *Monkey King*, readers receive more complete “flashbacks” of Sally’s father’s repeated rape of her because Sally has been hospitalized, has received therapy, and thus has been provided with socially designated language in which to tell her trauma. She has also had many opportunities, in both therapeutic settings and personal settings, to narrate her story. As a result, *Monkey King* provides a more accessible version of a sexual abuse narration. While in *Behold the Many* Yamanaka’s narrative itself veers away from the sexual traumas contained within it, Chao’s novel looks more squarely at the traumas contained within. In this way, readers see how Sally’s sexual trauma is rooted in her racial trauma, as her father rapes her in his power-hungry attempts to reclaim the self he lost through his assimilation into white American culture.

## CHAPTER I

### THE RACED, TRAUMATIZED, AND SEXUALIZED BODY IN HISAYE YAMAMOTO'S SHORT STORIES

“Prisons of Silence”

Jap!  
Filthy Jap!

.....  
Hands in our hair,  
hands that spread our legs  
and searched our thighs for secret weapons,  
hands that knit barbed wire  
to cripple our flight.

Giant hot hands flung me,  
fluttering, speechless into  
barbed wire, thorns in a broken wing.

The strongest prisons are built  
with walls of silence.  
~ Janice Mirikitani ~

In the poem “Prisons of Silence,” Janice Mirikitani establishes a connection between internment and sexual violation. The roaming, aggressive, and violent hands are coded as masculine through opposition to the explicitly female body and through the depicted metaphorical act of sexual violation.<sup>6</sup> The body of the victim is small and

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feminine in comparison to the masculine “giant hot hands” that so easily gain power and manipulate the victim’s limbs and even her entire body with one swift throw. This language of violation, trauma, and silence invokes the themes of two of Hisaye Yamamoto’s stories: “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” (1950) and “The High-heeled Shoes: A Memoir” (1948). Mirikitani’s poem functions as a helpful foundation for understanding the intersections of meaning between two seemingly disparate stories and main characters in “Shoes” and “Legend.” Although none of the characters in “Shoes” or “Legend” are rape victims, both are victimized and violated in ways that become conflated with rape – rapes that the narratives never acknowledge and that become devalued as traumatic experiences. In each story, the main character suffers a metaphorical rape. For Miss Sasagawara, the metaphorical rape is her forced internment and ostracizing treatment by other internees. In “Shoes,” the metaphorical rape is suffered by a friend who is forced to choose between being raped and being kissed, and by the main character who remembers several incidents that represent differing degrees of sexual assault. However, in one important similarity, Yamamoto represents both of these women as what I would call “problematic victims,” in which the victimhood of each woman is at first solidly rooted in her race and gender, but eventually shifts to being rooted in her sexuality and in so doing, calls into question the traditional binaries of

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<sup>6</sup> Although the internment can be viewed as violation of all internees (both men and women), as Traise Yamamoto points out, the internment in this poem is “configured as sexual violation” and thus “parallels the sexualization of Asian American women with the feminization of race and national identity.” Yamamoto argues that the poem “uses gender specific images that construct the internment as a metaphorical act of rape that collapses distinctions of gender” (Yamamoto, *Masking Selves*, 227).

West-East encounters of male/female, aggressor/victim, and voyeur/object. These two stories illustrate how Yamamoto appropriates master narratives about race, the internment, and trauma to establish the internment as a metaphorical rape, and to establish the female body as a site of simultaneous resistance and violation.<sup>7</sup>

Hisaye Yamamoto “develops a poetics of what King-Kok Cheung calls ‘articulate silence,’ rendering the alienation produced by the oppression and exploitation of gendered and racialized subjects. Formally and thematically, Yamamoto . . . explore[s] the culturally conditioned and socially constructed silences around sexuality” (Higashida 30). I add to this argument that Yamamoto forces us to confront the silences constructed around sexuality within a racial context. If sexuality is a “constructed silence” in these stories, then race is barely an audible utterance. For example, in “Legend,” the internees are set off in a “camp” from the rest of America as if they have built a quiet town in which to live peacefully. The presence of barbed wire, guards, the color of their skin (“yellow screaming flesh” in Mirikitani’s poem), and the circumstances of their presence in the “camp” are never mentioned. In “Shoes,” the narrator is unmarked by race until the very end of the story, and even then, her race is mentioned as if it is unrelated to the traumas within the story. In this way, the narratives of both stories are engaged in burying or silencing the traumas endured by the characters. The racial trauma that both

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of “master narratives” within Japanese American internment literature, see Younmei Chang’s *Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave*. Chang defines “master narratives as “familiar scripts that derive from and reproduce normalizing social ideologies and their common wisdom. These master narratives are about race, culture, the internment...”

causes and results from the internment is silenced in both stories. For example, the narrative of “Shoes” never acknowledges the historical, collective, and racial trauma that the main character has had to endure during the interment years and post-war years. In the same way, the narrative of “Miss Sasagawara” is silent about the harsh realities of internment life.

The women in Yamamoto’s stories exhibit neurological, biological traces of trauma through their fear responses to trauma. Recent trauma studies have explored the biological formation of trauma disorders, specifically the way that trauma is literally ‘written’ on the brain through complex hormonal shifts and ‘mis-firings’ of neurotransmitters.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the brain of the traumatized person is often physically changed and/or conditioned to hyper-respond to memories and triggers of past trauma. Through “Miss Sasagawara” and “Shoes,” Yamamoto raises provocative questions about personal complicity in the violation of one’s own body by another, responsibility to other victims of abuse through silence or speech, and the deceptive lure of one’s own memory back to the traumatic incident. According only to medical and criminal definitions, neither of the main characters is raped. However, their bodies and minds are assaulted in ways that echo the victimization of the body by another. Furthermore, these stories highlight how ‘degrees’ of trauma severity affect community and self-perception of trauma. In addition to portraying trauma’s trace on the brain, Yamamoto also portrays the trace of trauma on the corporeal body and in spaces that trigger memories and images.

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<sup>8</sup> See Introduction

These traces of trauma haunt their lives – some in healing ways, some in hurtful ways. Through their traumas, these women form relationships with their bodies and environments that continually open and heal the traumatic wound.

Yamamoto's stories anticipate later Asian American texts that tend to narrate and conflate race with sexual trauma. Furthermore, I contend that Yamamoto's stories are precursors to Asian North American literature that exhibits overt silence about sexuality and abuse in order to narrate what is equally complex and perhaps less relatable to a Western-centric audience: race. The characters in the stories come to represent not only the personal traumas within the narrative, but also the violation of Japanese Americans due to cultural racism and the WWII internment of thousands of Japanese Americans. When read together, and through each other, these stories reveal a world of shifting identities, in which the body, marked by race, gender, and sexuality may not always be as it seems, and in which the agent assigning meaning to that marked body is also not always clear. In this way, racial oppression is narrated along with, or juxtaposed against, sexual violation. Thus, these stories function as introductions to what I argue is a common trope within Asian North American literature: the simultaneous narration of race and sexual trauma.

**Miss Sasagawara as Paradox: Absent & Present, Silent & Poet**

**“Breaking Silence”**

From the silences  
in the glass caves of our ears,  
from the crippled tongue,  
from the mute, wet eyelash,  
testimonies waiting like winter.  
We were told  
that silence was better  
golden like our skin,  
.....  
We were made to believe our faces  
betrayed us.  
Our bodies were loud  
with yellow screaming flesh  
needing to be silenced  
behind barbed wire.

~ Janice Mirikitani ~

Mirikitani’s poem, which reveals the words and “testimonies” beneath the “silence” surrounding the Japanese American internment during World War II, portrays the Asian American body as a site of violation and resistance that complicates notions of visibility, invisibility, silence, and most importantly, complicity in one’s own violation. The juxtaposition of “golden” silence with bodies of “yellow screaming flesh” forges a connection between race, silence, violation, and body that underscores the “problems of the essentialized Asian female body and its vulnerability to violent intrusion, at once ideological and physical” (Yamamoto, *Masking*, 221). Mirikitani’s poetry often portrays the Asian American female body as an “all-out war zone” (Yamamoto, *Masking*, 221)

that can only resist oppression, violation, and invisibility through testimony, language, and visibility. However, visibility becomes for Mirikitani the simultaneous root of violation and resistance. In order to investigate and interrogate the nature of visibility through language and the body, I turn to Hisaye Yamamoto's similar problematization of these concerns in "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara." I argue how, through a violation comparable to the sexual violation and imprisonment in Mirikitani's "Prison's of Silence," Miss Sasagawara comes to represent femininity, the feminized Japan, and the traumatized female body.

The silencing and exclusion of Japanese Americans during World War II is clearly evident in "Legend," which portrays the internment camp as a world unto itself and completely separate from American life and culture. Indeed, the internees were set so far outside American life as to become spectacles. According to Emily Roxworthy, the government "spectaculariz[ed] the disenfranchisement and imprisonment of nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans" (4). By doing so, the United States "positioned" the American public as "passive spectators" and "cast the public as heroic 'patriots' opposite Japanese Americans, who were cast in one of two thankless roles: expressionless automata or melodramatic villains" (Roxworthy 4). In "Legend," Kiku, Elsie, and the rest of the internees take on the role of "expressionless automata" that naively live within the social structures they create for themselves in a desert void. In this role, the internees then cast Miss Sasagawara, through rumor and speculation, into the role of "melodramatic villain." Through her dramatic appearance, intriguing history, and fanciful past, Miss Sasagawara fulfills the internees' need to make somebody else the



outsider in a situation where *everyone* is an outsider. All of the internees are violated, traumatized, and suffer the exclusion from American society because, as Janice Mirikitani's poem portrays, their racially marked bodies betray them as 'other' and not-American, yet Miss Sasagawara suffers more as she is excluded from both internment society and American society.<sup>9</sup>

Kiku, the first person narrator of "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara," tells the second-hand, rumored story of Mari Sasagawara in the Poston internment camp in Arizona. A former dancer who traveled the world as a performer, Miss Sasagawara does not fit easily into the camp environment. She secludes herself from the others, only appearing when necessary (to use the shower or latrine), and dresses in her airy dancer "costumes" that make her seem to float about the camp as an other-worldly being. Having recently arrived at the internment camp, Miss Sasagawara quickly becomes the unfortunate subject of rumors (about her craziness and sexual deviance) as the internees displace their anger and resentment from the internment on to her. Rumors and half-truths spread around the camp about her, especially after Miss Sasagawara's middle of the night trip to the camp hospital for a supposed attack of appendicitis, for which she eventually refuses treatment. After another visit to the hospital, in which she becomes once again a spectacle for the nurses, doctors, and patients who trip over themselves to gawk at her, Miss Sasagawara is eventually transported to a mental hospital outside the

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<sup>9</sup> Miss Sasagawara suffers from what King-Kok Cheung terms a "tripartite exclusion" ("Thrice Muted Tale," 109-10). In addition to being excluded from American society, Cheung argues that Miss Sasagawara is also excluded from and silenced by her family and her own ethnic community because she is not only 'other' but also 'woman.'

internment camp. Upon her return to the camp, Miss Sasagawara seems to embrace camp life as she organizes a Christmas pageant and interacts more with the other internees. When Kiku leaves the camp and is away at college that she comes across a poem published by Miss Sasagawara. Kiku narrates the content of the poem, but not the poem itself, which remains as inaccessible to the reader as Miss Sasagawara has been throughout the story.

The incriminating rumors and “evidence” the community gathers of Miss Sasagawara’s sexual and gender deviance can be reduced to ‘myth’ or ‘legend,’ as the title of the story makes evident.<sup>10</sup> For example, Mrs. Sasaki’s claim that Miss Sasagawara salaciously watched the boys playing baseball and Joe Yoshinaga’s claim that Miss Sasagawara sat next to him while he slept, are unverifiable oral reports rooted in misinterpretations and assumptions about her character. Furthermore, the internees’ disparaging assumptions about Miss Sasagawara justify her suspicion that Mr. Sasaki might intend to spy on her when he enters her barracks in order to offer cleaning help:

Her hypersensitivity to being spied upon not only mirrors the wartime hysteria and paranoia of the white majority but also reflects back on the plight of her own ethnic group. Her visibility and susceptibility to scrutiny bespeak the Nikkei predicament during WWII, which drastically sharpened the external gaze on this Asian minority. The communal assumption of Miss Sasagawara’s pathology echoes the government’s speculation that many Nikkei residing on the West Coast could be devious spies. The isolation and eventual institutionalization of Miss Sasagawara correspond to the exclusion and ultimate detention of the race. (Cheung, “Thrice,” 118)

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<sup>10</sup> See Takaki’s discussion of the myth of “military necessity” in the internment of Japanese Americans

Thus, the internees internalize Western misogynistic and nationalistic views of the East. This internalization is of course problematic because it implies the internees' complicity with their traumatic violation. However, complicity with and silence against the white majority became necessary for physical and mental survival when the internees were divested of home, identity, and community as their "yellow screaming flesh" was flung behind barbed wire for an indefinite period of time. The internees, at the mercy of the white, Western, masculine-coded world, focus on Miss Sasagawara as a feminized, infantilized, sexualized, exotic subject against which they might align themselves with the West and masculinity.

The most immediately striking impression we receive of Miss Sasagawara is that she is simultaneously absent and present in her own story. The opening paragraph of "Legend" depicts Miss Sasagawara as a type of "invisible yet constituted" magical being who seems to almost float about the arid desert camp (20).<sup>11</sup> Amid the barren and infertile "place of wind, sand, and heat," the other internees "imagine Miss Sasagawara a decorative ingredient of some ballet." She is small with a "trifling waist," yet her skirts of fertile greens and yellows "billow" about, while her hair winds substantially around her small head. Although she is so small that she seems barely to be a material body, her

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<sup>11</sup> Maire Mullins quotes a poignant passage from Teresa de Lauretis that captures the experience of being the exoticized other who is marked by difference and desire: "The paradox of a being that is one captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressive, displayed as spectacle and still unrepresented or unrepresentable, invisible yet constituted as the object and the guarantee of vision; a being whose existence and specificity are simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled" (qtd. in Mullins 77).

“costume” creates the impression of exotic, desirable presence. In her “delicate” beauty and tiny stature, Miss Sasagawara invokes the Western stereotype of the Asian woman as childlike yet feminine, small yet sexually charged.

In fact, as Traise Yamamoto discusses, the Western feminization and “infantilization” of the Japanese woman constructs the Japanese female subject “as a metonym for Japanese national, racial, and cultural identity [in which] the combination of the geisha stereotype and the visually based racial economy of the United States results in the invisibility of the Japanese American female subject [...]. Her invisibility as a subject is paired with her hypervisibility as a sexualized, racialized body” (*Masking*, 5). The gendering of Japan as female leads to the conflation of the Japanese female body with Japan itself – the “cultural and national landscape” (Yamamoto, *Masking*, 23). As a result, Miss Sasagawara represents a literal and metaphorical “site that may alternately or simultaneously be inhabited by country and woman” (Yamamoto, *Masking*, 23). This shifting identity of Hisaye Yamamoto’s small Japanese woman, combined with her forced and self-imposed exclusion from the internment camp community, reveals a complex web of agents invested in coding Miss Sasagawara as the feminized Japanese country and cultural history.

In addition to noting the comparison of the violation and victimization of Miss Sasagawara to the violation and persecution of Japanese Americans, I argue that the story calls for additional analysis of why and how the Japanese American internees *themselves* silence, exclude, and eventually imprison Miss Sasagawara in a mental hospital. How does their persecution of a fellow Japanese American internee function in the story?

What do readers make of the persecution, victimization, exclusion, and violation of Miss Sasagawara at the hands of not only American society, but also at the hands of her father and her camp mates? Readers must turn attention toward the nature of the rumors and evidence that lead to the interned Japanese Americans' disavowal of Miss Sasagawara. I argue that Miss Sasagawara functions not only as a scapegoat and outlet for the internees' resistance and protest, but also as the internees' means of distancing themselves from the identity, race, culture, and gender they have been encouraged to disavow.

From the beginning of the story, Miss Sasagawara is an interned victim surrounded by rumor. However, the origin of the rumors about her madness, oddities, and hypersexuality is suspect because she rarely has contact with any other person. In essence, Miss Sasagawara seems to be, for much of the story, the epitome of Janice Mirikitani's silent and silenced internee and victim. The narrator, young Kiku, wonders where and how her friend Elsie has learned so much about Miss Sasagawara, who suddenly becomes much more exotic, enticing, and fascinating a figure to Kiku. When Kiku first sees Miss Sasagawara one evening, she is struck by the exotic nature of her being:

Her face was delicate and pale, with a fine nose, pouting bright mouth, and glittering eyes; and her measured walk said, 'Look, I'm walking!' as though walking were not a common but a rather special thing to be doing. I first saw her so one evening after mess, as she was coming out of the woman's latrine going toward her barracks, and after I thought she was out of hearing, I imitated the young men of the Block (No. 33), and gasped, "Wow! How much does *she* weigh?" (20)

In addition to showing Kiku marveling at Miss Sasagawara as if she is a treasured artifact amid the desert camp, this passage introduces Miss Sasagawara to the reader at a moment

of vulnerability or intimacy – as she exits the latrines. Apparently, for Miss Sasagawara, no moment can be private at the camp. Exposing the rumors that have preceded Miss Sasagawara, Kiku’s exclamations as she watches Miss Sasagawara imitate the young men in their awe of a being who seems at stark odds with her surroundings.

Miss Sasagawara is a silenced object laden with uncorroborated rumors, reports, and speculations. Kiku proceeds to question her friend Elsie about her knowledge of the seemingly ethereal being, but “forgot to ask her sources, because the picture she painted was so distracting” (20). Kiku learns that Miss Sasagawara has arrived with her father, a Buddhist minister, at Arizona’s Poston Relocation Center from another camp further north following the death of her mother. The Sasagawaras were supposed to join family already at the camp, but their arrival is immediately followed by a family fight, rumors, and the Sasagawaras quickly moving to Block 33 where they occupy “one end of the Block’s lone empty barracks, which had not been chopped up yet into the customary four apartments” (20). A young couple (the Sasaki), also new to the camp, shares the other end of the barracks, but rumor describes them at odds with the Sasagawaras over an incident the day Miss Sasagawara and her father moved in. According to rumor, when the couple tried to clean the barracks with a hose, Miss Sasagawara screamed, “What are you trying to do? Spy on me? Get out of here or I’ll throw this water on you!” (21). Having had the water thrown at him, Mr. Sasaki spreads the rumor that Miss Sasagawara is indeed a “madwoman.” Rather than being a “madwoman,” Miss Sasagawara can be

more appropriately viewed as the only character in the story with a humane and reasonable reaction to her circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the positive (perhaps naïve and deluded) outlook of Kiku and Elsie who talk of college and husbands someday in the future, Miss Sasagawara responds to a dire situation with aplomb until the circumstances drive her mad and into an asylum for the mentally ill. In *Whispered Silences*, Gary Okihiro quotes several internees who fully experienced, and are able to express, the sadness and terror of the situation. For example, of the Tanforan Assembly Center, Okihiro quotes Osuke Takizawa and his wife, Sadae Takizawa:

It was terrible. The government moved the horses out and put us in. The stable stunk awfully. I felt miserable, but I couldn't do anything. It was like a prison, guards on duty all the time, and there was barbed wire all around us. We really worried about our future. I just gave up. . . . It was hell. Everybody felt lonely and anxious about the future. In a word, we were confused. Deep down, we felt anger. It was a melancholy, complex feeling. (190)

In “Legend,” Yamamoto shows that the internees displace all of these anxieties onto Miss Sasagawara. As an oddity due to her “airy” appearance and demeanor, Miss Sasagawara is the most likely repository for the traumatized camp mates’ feelings. Indeed, taking the story as a whole, Miss Sasagawara’s actions when she arrives do not seem “mad” considering her mother’s recent death, the fight with family members, and being uprooted several times and delivered to one despicable, inhabitable abode after another.<sup>13</sup> In a

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<sup>12</sup> See King-Kok Cheung’s discussion of Miss Sasagawara: “she exhibits perhaps the only appropriate response to the situation; her “madness” is also a flight from the crazy circumstances” (*Articulate Silences*, 69)

powerless situation, imprisoned, and traumatized by having been forced from familiar life and surroundings, Miss Sasagawara acts as “mad” as can be expected.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to being excluded from society, Miss Sasagawara does not correspond to either American or Japanese expectations.<sup>15</sup> For example, Miss Sasagawara’s strained relationship with her father underscores her inability to fulfill a domestic role. Their cohabitation is awkward in her insistence on a solitary life and his excessive devotion to Buddhist ritual. Reverend Sasagawara takes care of his daughter by daily bringing wrapped meals to her from the dining hall and by attempting to create a ‘home’ for her after her mother’s death; however, he may also contribute (through his own oddities) to

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<sup>13</sup> Michi Weglen describes the exact measurements of the relocation centers: “A degree of uniformity existed in the physical makeup of all the [relocation] centers. A bare room measuring 20 feet by 24 feet was . . . referred to as a ‘family apartment’; each accommodated a family of five to eight members; barrack end-rooms measuring 16 feet by 20 feet were set for smaller families. A barrack was made up of four to six such family units.” (84)

<sup>14</sup> Peterson describes how an internee might feel upon reaching one of the relocation centers or internment camps: “In the United States once they arrived at their destination, they soon realized that what had been described to them as ‘relocation centers’ were in fact concentration camps, for they were surrounded by barbed wire and under the watchful eye of armed guards. Quarters were excruciatingly small; privacy was nonexistent; every moment of daily life became subject to camp rules and camp routines.” (145)

<sup>15</sup> Cheung writes: “whether one gauges her [Miss Sasagawara] by the traditional Japanese norm that views marriage as *giri* or obligation or by the romantic Western norm by which a woman defines herself in relation to a prince charming, her single status is sufficient to set her apart” (Cheung, “Thrice Muted Tale,” 112-13). Cheung’s reading of Miss Sasagawara as multiply silenced becomes even more convincing with the comparison of Miss Sasagawara to a “national allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (116)



the internees' belief in Miss Sasagawara's madness. As Shoshana Felman points out, female deviance from typical or expected gender roles is often suspect in any society or culture: "From her initial family upbringing throughout her subsequent development, the social role assigned to the woman is that of serving an image [...] of man: a woman is first and foremost a daughter/a mother/a wife [...]. What we consider 'madness' is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype" (7). Through her unmarried status and former flamboyant lifestyle as world-traveling ballerina, Miss Sasagawara deviates from the normative roles assigned to American woman during the 1940s, but more importantly, she deviates from the expected roles for a Japanese woman.

In addition to being set apart from her camp mates by her beauty and reserve, Miss Sasagawara also earns her intrigue by virtue of being the daughter of a Buddhist minister and having been a ballet dancer who had once traveled the globe before the war. Just as Elsie and Kiku talk "jealously of the scintillating life of Miss Sasagawara" (21), so can the reader also imagine the talk among the rest of the camp internees. However, the unflattering stories and rumors that get passed from barracks to barracks about the quiet woman disguise the probable admiration of the beautiful, talented, youthful dancer. As a spectacle, Miss Sasagawara is both *something* to denigrate and envy. In this way, Miss Sasagawara is alienated from her campmates and suffers an even deeper trauma than the internment itself: she suffers the trauma of being a spectacle.<sup>16</sup> As a spectacle of "artifice

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and surface” to the other internees, Miss Sasagawara does not find any empathy or sympathy within the internment camp (Roxworthy 5).

The three main rumors that contribute to the further traumatization of Miss Sasagawara at the hands of her fellow internees involve misreadings and misinterpretations of her behavior. In each case, the internees view her as overly sexual or as Cheung states, “secretly obsessed with sex” (“Thrice,” 113). Through these rumors, the internees “distance themselves from this victim of trauma and replicate the rhetoric of the dominant discourse that led to internment” (Elliot 63). It is important to note that in the face of each of these rumors, which it is difficult to believe she did not partially know were being spread, Miss Sasagawara does not verbally protest or defend herself.<sup>17</sup> She does make a seeming attempt to ‘fit in’ after her return from the hospital by organizing

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<sup>16</sup> Refer to Emily Roxworthy’s astute description of the intersections between trauma and spectacle as it relates to the internment: “So in the case of the internment, theories of trauma and theories of spectacle intersect and converge. Both trauma and spectacle are haunted by visibility, a visual scene/seen that inscribes its image deeply within one’s psyche precisely to the extent that it alienates the subject from any comprehension of the material underpinnings of the transpired event. On the side of trauma, Shoshana Felman finds that ‘the unexpectedness of the original traumatizing scene’ is replayed in the compulsive repetitions that characterize traumatic symptoms. On the side of spectacle, Guy Debord finds that the images offered up by commodity culture violently foreground the presence of the visual realm in order to absent spectators’ awareness of their own exploitation and disenfranchisement under advanced capitalism” (4). Roxworthy quotes Felman’s *The Juridical Unconscious* (174) and Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*. See Bibliography.

<sup>17</sup> However, her simple demeanor as she walks amid an atmosphere subversively hostile with rumor and suspicion, reflects the Japanese etiquette of silence and acceptance that “discourages children [or adults] from verbal confrontation and open protest” (Cheung, “Reading Between the Syllables,” 321).

dance classes and involving herself in the Christmas party. In this way, Miss Sasagawara becomes the very epitome of spectacle as she presents her fellow internees with the spectacle of herself as dancer and onstage. Ironically, this is when the internees most accept Miss Sasagawara: as she comes to fit the role of performer and spectacle on stage, and as she becomes complicit in her own victimization as spectacle.

The internees victimize and further traumatize Miss Sasagawara by virtue of making her hypervisible through rumor and gossip. Just as Miss Sasagawara would be unlikely to stage a formal protest against her hostile treatment at the camp through rumor and through her unnecessary detention at a mental hospital, so would all of the interned Japanese be unlikely to speak in protest of their internment, which Janice Mirikitani frames through her poetry as a metaphorical rape. Instead, they resort to the silence they are led to believe is “golden,” and they try to make themselves as invisible as possible through their silence so that their very presence and bodies will not betray them once again as a threat to the American way of life. Their silence and complicity in their own detention is essential for their survival both in the camp, but also for their reputation after leaving the camp (the need to find a job, establish a home, etc., - - all based on what white America must perceive as ‘good character’ in a ‘model minority’ who does not speak and is barely visible).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Cheung’s description of the Japanese virtues *enryo* (self-restraint, reserve, and deference) and *gaman* (suppression of emotion, and quiet perseverance). These virtues help partially explain the reasons why the Japanese American detainees would further ostracize and isolate Miss Sasagawara. Similarly, Miss Sasagawara would be unlikely to

Amid the “hysteria and paranoia” invoked through her exclusion and victimization, Miss Sasagawara’s body becomes her most accessible and acceptable form of silent protest against her internment and against her exclusion from her camp mates. Yamamoto focuses our attention on Miss Sasagawara’s body from the first sentences and paragraphs, which detail her appearance as a simultaneously substantial and insubstantial material presence in the world. She is too thin, but that thinness attracts the gaze and awe of those around her so that where and how and what she eats, where and how and if she showers, what she might weigh, how thin and light she must be, etc., all contribute to the “Legend” about Miss Sasagawara. Furthermore, for Kiku and Elsie, Miss Sasagawara might represent a female freedom and liberation because she never married and she has traveled the globe for her glamorous dancing career. The girls, and all the internees, are intrigued by her seeming ability to ‘float’ around the camp, as if she is not at all a physical being, but some airy being not weighed down by a body – a body that, like all of the internees’ bodies, announces its race and betrays the self.

As a representation of the Western stereotype of the Japanese body as delicate, feminine, and “infantile,” Miss Sasagawara and her body become the object of both awe and jealousy among the internees. As a dancer, she has been able to use her body as a vehicle for her career, livelihood, and passion. The body, that material thing marked by race, has brought only internment and violation to Miss Sasagawara’s fellow camp mates. However, Miss Sasagawara has been able to utilize her body so that, in addition to unfortunately being the racially marked body that ultimately betrays her, it is also a

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stage a formal protest against her hostile treatment at the camp through rumor and through her unnecessary detention at a mental hospital.

positive tool she controls, uses, and manages. For example, Kiku notices that Miss Sasagawara refuses to move her body as others ask or suggest when she first seeks medical attention for abdominal pain. Rigidly standing in the middle of the hospital waiting-room, Miss Sasagawara will not sit down, or move, or wait. When she eventually leaves the overcrowded hospital without anyone's initial notice, she walks (still in pain) despite the fact that George follows to offer a ride in the truck back to her barracks. Although this may seem like stubborn willfulness, Yamamoto continues to draw our attention to her heroine's control and management of her own body when Miss Sasagawara runs out of the hospital because she "didn't want any more of those doctors pawing her" (26). The internees focus on her body because she has retained what they perceive to be her control over it, but also because she represents the Western stereotype (of the Japanese body) that has interpellated their racially marked bodies. Thus, they are simultaneously drawn to her with awe as a *subject* who has retained her subjectivity through her body, and with scorn as an *object* upon which they might displace or project their resentment of their own bodies that (like hers) have been doubly marked by race and by the Western view of that racially marked body.

In a sense, the internees attempt to deflect the Western interpellation of their bodies and minds onto Miss Sasagawara, who absorbs the deflection of the essentialized Japanese subject to become (for her camp mates) the epitome of the feminine and feminized Japanese body and country. David Palumbo-Liu discusses how bodies become embodiments of race, country, culture, and history:

This is never a matter of smooth and unilinear movement, but of complex transactions that take bodies as embodiments of certain psychic

dispositions that might be read as indicators of acculturation or alienation, and as physical entities engaged in the circuits of labor and consumption, desire and contact, life and death. The Asian/American predication involves both psychic projection and specific materialities: 'acculturation' involves bodies as well as minds, each interpellated differently by a 'universal' dimension implicit in American hegemonic forms and the particulars of race, ethnicity, and history. (118-17)

Palumbo-Liu's distinction between embodiment as acculturation and embodiment as alienation is key: in order to protect themselves from alienation from society at the hands of the American government and Western culture, the internees become acculturated by internalizing (unconsciously, it seems) the Western view of the East and the Japanese body. In this way, the internees seem to 'Westernize' themselves, separate from the trauma and violation of the internment. Janice Mirikitani's poem "Breaking Silence" conveys this tragic manner in which the Japanese detainees "were made to believe our faces / betrayed us," and felt that their very bodies caused their own violating internment. As they turn in upon themselves with Western loathing of their own bodies, the internees also deflect that loathing onto Miss Sasagawara and her body, which most closely 'fits' the Western image of the delicate, feminine, and infantile body.

Yamamoto's "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" may seem until the last page to follow the binary of West/East, masculine/feminine, and agent/victim in which the Japanese body is essentialized, feminized, and invested with sexual mystique and intrigue. However, Kiku's discovery of Miss Sasagawara's published poem reveals a destabilization of these gender and racial roles, as well as the internment's violation of Miss Sasagawara's sexuality. Forced to share a small room with her Buddhist father who has "extinguish[ed]" all "unworthy desire" within himself, Miss Sasagawara is left in

“anguished silence” with her own passions and sexuality. The internment has virtually divested her of her sexuality by denying her reciprocity for her sexuality and passion. Readers may question the incestuous implication of her passions “rising, subsiding, and again rising” (33) in the same room with her father who is “blind” to any passion or sexuality; however, I argue that Yamamoto makes us aware (through this poem) of the depth of trauma, violation, and absurdity in the internment experience.

Although critics have tended to read the ending of “Legend” as Miss Sasagawara’s triumph in the face of her own persecution and violation (she receives the “last word” according to Kiku), I argue that the Miss Sasagawara’s triumph comes through her body, not through her words. Although Kiku finds Miss Sasagawara’s poem, and deems it the last word from the legend herself, readers are never allowed to see that poem or read it firsthand. Miss Sasagawara remains removed from the reader, her writing filtered through Kiku’s telling of it. Kiku tells us, “it was a *tour de force*, erratically brilliant and, through the first readings, tantalizingly obscure” (32). Indeed, the writing remains obscure to the reader, who is never allowed to read this poem about not Miss Sasagawara herself, but “about a man whose lifelong aim had been to achieve Nirvana, that saintly state of moral purity and universal wisdom” (32). This man, presumably Miss Sasagawara’s father, is described in detail through the poem that is interpreted for us *through* Kiku:

This man had in his way certain handicaps, all stemming from his having acquired, when young and unaware, a family for which he must provide. The day came at last, however, when his wife died and other circumstances made it unnecessary for him to earn a competitive living. These circumstances were considered by those about him as sheer imprisonment, but he felt free for the first time in his long life. It became

- possible for him to extinguish within himself all unworthy desire and consequently all evil, to concentrate on that serene, eight-fold path of highest understanding, highest mindedness, highest speech, highest action, highest livelihood, highest recollectedness, highest endeavor, and highest meditation. (32-33)

This man remains unnamed, for Kiku never says that it is Mr. Sasagawara, yet readers understand it to be him due to the striking similarity to ‘reality.’ Kiku, and readers of “Legend,” might assume the story is about Miss Sasagawara, especially due to the opening blurb about the poem being the “first published poem of a Japanese-American woman who is, at present, an evacuee from the West Coast making her home in a War Relocation center in Arizona” (32). Just as the man’s name is silenced, so is his circumstance: the very internment itself. The internment is described as simply a “circumstance” that others “considered . . . sheer imprisonment.” For the man, however, the “circumstance” turned out to be a path to Nirvana. By virtue of being divested of all worldly possessions and intimate connections (through the internment and the death of his wife), he is able to achieve the eight-fold path to enlightenment. Indeed, the internment was “imprisonment,” but Kiku’s interpretation, or the poem itself, silences the circumstances of the internment and the very narrative of the internment. Instead of being a traumatic experience, the internment is absurdly portrayed by Mari Sasagawara as a blessing and an opportunity for this man to achieve what he had always desired.

Just as the internment is silenced in the poem, so is Miss Sasagawara herself multiply silenced. Not only is her poem only indirectly available to readers, and her subjectivity silenced by a poem indirectly about herself, but she is also silenced within the subject matter of the poem itself:



This man was certainly noble, the poet wrote, this man was beyond censure. The world was doubtless enriched by his presence. But say that someone else, someone sensitive, someone admiring, someone who had not achieved this sublime condition and who did not wish to, were somehow called to companion such a man. Was it not likely that the saint, blissfully bent on cleansing from his already radiant soul the last imperceptible blemishes (for, being perfect, would he not humbly suspect his own flawlessness?) would be deaf and blind to the human passions rising, subsiding, and again rising, perhaps in anguished silence, within the selfsame room? The poet could not speak for others, of course; she could only speak for herself. But she would describe this man's devotion as a madness, the monstrous sort which, pure of itself, might possibly bring troublous, scented scenes to recur in the other's sleep. (33)

Notable in this passage is the way that Kiku translates the world of internment through Miss Sasagawara's poetry. The internment, again, never mentioned by Kiku (or by the poem?) is absurdly responsible for the "sublime condition" this man has achieved. The other, though, his companion (presumably Miss Sasagawara, his daughter) does not wish to reach this way of being. The man, "deaf and blind" to the passions rising in the room can be compared to all of the internees who were deaf and blind to Miss Sasagawara's true nature. Ironically, Miss Sasagawara's attempt to narrate her traumatic treatment at the hands of her fellow internees (by way of a description of her father) is silenced yet again by Kiku who does not provide (through narration) access to the poem, or any of the writing within it. Miss Sasagawara calls this man's actions "madness" and "monstrous" in their blindness and deafness to someone's painful needs to be heard, to be seen, to be acknowledged. And so, even through writing, Miss Sasagawara does not achieve restitution for her treatment at the hands of her father, who stands in for the internees and for the United State's government and society as a whole.

In this last scene, however, Yamamoto destabilizes and shifts the normative gender and racial binaries that for the most part have remained intact through the story. Just as we have become ‘comfortable’ as readers with the production of Miss Sasagawara, the Legend, Yamamoto pulls the rug out from under Western thinking and us. The “legend’ of Miss Sasagawara creates her as the embodiment of Japanese race, culture, history, and country: she is almost invisible or disembodied in her smallness, she floats about like the geisha figure, she is exoticized in her mysterious and inscrutable silence, and she is violated and metaphorically ‘raped’ through internment. However, the discovered poem disturbs this production of Miss Sasagawara and reveals a woman whose very body has resisted the invisibility of internment. According to her poem, she is the antithesis of the invisible, infantile, feminized Japanese body; she is a heightened material presence with aggressive passions and sexuality reminiscent more of ‘Western’ masculinity than femininity. Her bodily presence in her poetry (but not the narrated poetry itself) erases her silence and negates the Western attempt to silence her behind barbed wire.

### **“The High-Heeled Shoes”: Out of Proportion**

The destabilization of gender and racial roles that marks the end of “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” is the center of Yamamoto’s “The High-Heeled Shoes: A Memoir.” Furthermore, an analysis of “The High-heeled Shoes” reveals an even greater destabilization of the gendered, raced, and sexualized body, in which Hisaye Yamamoto

raises questions about the not so clear-cut assignation of blame after trauma or violation. Reading “Shoes” alongside “Legend” reveals this destabilization as a concept that runs through Yamamoto’s writing. This destabilization is perhaps Yamamoto’s method for exposing constricting gender and racial roles, and for exploring potentialities for being that might preclude racial violations/traumas and the self-blame or body-resentment that occurred along with it for Japanese Americans who were “betrayed” by their Asian faces and “yellow screaming flesh.”<sup>19</sup>

“The High-heeled Shoes: A Memoir” is a first person fictional account configured as a “memoir.”<sup>20</sup> The story begins with a prank phone call in which a caller (“Tony”) speaks “as man to woman” about a sexual proposition that remains unsaid in the narrative (2). Although the unnamed narrator slams the phone receiver onto the hook and proceeds to go outside to pick flowers, the remainder of her day is haunted by this one phone call and the bizarre and troubling traumatic memories it stirs. First, the narrator recalls an incident in which, a few years earlier, a young woman (Mary) with whom she lived had been approached in an alley and forced to make a “choice between one kiss and rape” (2). When the woman “indicated what seemed to be the lesser requirement,” her assailant

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<sup>19</sup> In an interview with Charles Crow, Yamamoto refers several times to the idea of “potential” and “what might have been” not only for Miss Sasagawara had she not been interned, but also for contemporary Japanese writers who write outside the prescribed and expected plots for Asian American writers.

<sup>20</sup> I take the position that Hisaye Yamamoto uses the “memoir” tag in the title in order to draw attention to the personal aspect of the story. “Memoir,” in this sense, is used to designate the memoir of a fictional character, yet draw attention to the similarities between the fictional character’s life and Hisaye Yamamoto’s life.

allowed her to continue walking to work, “warning her on no account to scream for help or look back, on penalty of death” (3). When she twice reports the crime because it “was her duty to the rest of womankind,” policemen “snicker” and laugh at the reported crime, then placate her with promises of extra patrols that amount to no patrols at all (3). The narrator then recalls “similar episodes, fortunately more fleeting [but that] stayed with me longer than Mary’s because [they] were mine” (3). First, there is the incident of seeing a pair of bare legs protruding from an open car door. The narrator had assumed the legs were a woman’s, but at glancing, discovered them to belong to a man who “with frantic gestures . . . enjoined her to linger awhile” (3). Though she speaks to no one of the incident, it haunts her day, seared into her brain like a traumatic memory. As she sifts through ways she might have reacted to this incident, the narrator quickly mentions other more disturbing personal experiences of sexual harassment and sexual molestation, but then just as quickly buries those incidents in a narrative return to the present and the various ways she might have responded to the obscene prank caller. The story ends abruptly with a phone call from her aunt Miné, who proposes a dinner of “ricecakes with Indian bean frosting, as well as pickled fish on vinegared rice” (6-7) at the narrator’s own house. The narrator wonders, “It is possible she [the aunt] wonders at my enthusiastic appreciation, which is all right, but all out of proportion” (7).

As the unnamed narrator in “The High-heeled Shoes” enthusiastically invites her aunt to dinner at the end of the story, she realizes that her response is “all out of proportion” (7). The narrator’s enthusiasm is probably due to relief at hearing her aunt’s voice, rather than the voice (from the story’s beginning) of the unsolicited male caller

who harassed her with an untold lewd sexual proposition. For the reader, the words “out of proportion” apply to much of the story’s plot. First, the narrator wonders if her response to the male caller was appropriate to the circumstance. Perhaps, she wonders, she might have made any number of polite, comical, or rude replies rather than having abruptly “let the receiver take a plunge down onto the hook from approximately a one-foot height” (2). Second, a young woman who chooses one kiss rather than rape in a dark alley becomes the object of police laughter and snickering because her report of the crime is (to them) out of proportion. She wasn’t, after all, raped – was she? In the third “out of proportion” incident, and central to the story’s meaning, the narrator remembers once having encountered a pair of legs wearing high-heeled shoes, yet she soon realizes that the legs belong not to a woman, but to a naked man who beckons her to “linger awhile” (3).

The third “out of proportion” incident is similar to the others in that rape (in its literal definition) does not occur. The women are not physically harmed; even young Mary is allowed to continue walking to work after submitting to a kiss. Psychologically, however, the incidents form a lasting traumatic impression burned into their memories. The lewd phone call is such a psychically charged and anxiety-inducing incident that it inspires the memory of Mary’s ‘attack’ in the alley and the narrator’s own high-heeled shoes incident. Truly, these incidents weigh upon these women and have become important pieces of their personal histories; they are incidents that, however traumatic, form pieces of their identities.<sup>21</sup> The police snicker at Mary and the narrator feels the

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need to belittle her own experiences. In their refusal to validate Mary's attack, the police attempt to erase her trauma and divest her of the right to own the narrative of her abuse, to own the hurt and have the memory. Furthermore, the narrator's questioning of her own reactions to traumatic incidents and their place in her memory reveals the tendency to internalize the response of the other: "It wasn't so bad, was it?" In effect, the police appropriate Mary's narrative and deem it unworthy of its traumatic significance through their snickering dismissal of her violation.

This erasure of personal history and invalidation of trauma mirrors the historical erasure and negation of the traumatic Japanese internment experience. The parallel between "Legend" and "Shoes" goes further than this erasure of personal histories. First, "Shoes" expands the destabilization of gender and racial norms by refusing to name the narrator. Naming, by its very nature, establishes cultural identities; yet Yamamoto's narrator is identified *as female* only at first in her opposition to the male caller, and *as Japanese American* (we suspect) only through the last lines that announce the aunt's intentions of bringing a traditional Japanese meal to her home. Second, "Shoes" exhibits a greater questioning of gender and race in the shifting play between male and female coding when the narrator sees the legs dangling out of the car. If we read the codes at face value in Western culture, the shoes signal woman and femininity; the reclined position signals passivity and femininity; the lewd and suggestive behavior signals masculinity; the invitation to join the naked stranger signals femininity and masculinity at

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<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche relates memory and trauma in such a way that the dismissal of someone's traumatic memories allows the memories to become even more tragic.

once.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the narrator as a female would normally be coded as the object being gazed upon by the voyeur, a typically male figure; however, she unwittingly becomes the voyeur in this incident. This voyeur/object or voyeur/victim model corresponds with the traditional West/East binary in which the West objectifies the East through exoticization and exploitation. Suddenly thrust into the role of voyeur, the narrator is not sure what to feel and continues quickly walking to work. She wonders at her flustered reaction, “This was nothing so uncomplicated as pure rape, I knew, and the need of the moment was to go away by myself, far from everybody, and think about things for awhile” (4). Rape would be “uncomplicated” she feels, because (as an available narrative crime to the police) it would perhaps entitle her to her feelings and to the right to hold on to that moment as part of her personal history; it would explain why her mind has chosen to keep the image and connect it to a host of other incidents that left her feeling sexually violated or vulnerable.

Rape, although horrific in nature, is absurdly deemed “uncomplicated” in this story, just as the internment is absurdly described in Mari Sasagawara’s poem to be a nirvana-like experience in “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara.” Just as the word “rape” conjures a notion of a crime that can be translated to the police and literally filed as an event (written down, investigated, even prosecuted), so does the internment in “Legend” take on an absurd “narratability” that elides the true traumatic nature of the experience.

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<sup>22</sup> See Traise Yamamoto’s discussion of the Japanese woman “configured as ontologically mysterious, sexually available and hungry for contact with the West – via the white Western male” (22).

Despite Kiku's uncomplicated narration of the internment in "Legend," and Mari Sasagawara's suggestion in her poem that the internment allowed her father to reach nirvana, the true traumatic nature of the internment is buried in the narrative along with Mari Sasagawara's poem. Similarly, the narrative of "The High-heeled Shoes: A Memoir" buries both the narration of sexual crimes against the narrator and the history of racial oppression against Japanese Americans and the internment. The story, published in 1948, and told by an unnamed narrator, is I argue, named a "memoir" in order to suggest a similarity to the author's life. The traumatic events of the story are buried by virtue of not being fully told (the sexual molestation in a streetcar and in a movie theater), and by virtue of being unnamed at all (racial oppression and the internment). For example, it is likely that the police might have taken Mary's story of being accosted with the choice of a kiss or rape more seriously had she not been a Japanese American woman. However, Mary's gender and race figure against her as elements that contribute to the policemen's irrational disbelief that she has truly suffered and been traumatized. The unnamed narrator and Mary are victimized by sexual crimes, yet also victimized by their race, which remains hidden in the narrative. Upon reaching the end of the story, the reader is confronted with the knowledge that the person to whom they have been listening for several pages is indeed a Japanese American. The reader is then made complicit in the racial traumatization of the narrator by virtue of perhaps also being fooled into missing the full scope of the traumas suffered within and without the story.<sup>23</sup>

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The questioning of what she might have done or how she might have reacted to the legs or to the caller reveal the narrator's suspicion of her own complicity in the violations that are not "pure rape" yet leave her feeling violated. Ming Cheng discusses how Yamamoto requires her readers to interrogate issues of gender roles and complicity in trauma, violation or oppression, and to "emphasize gender, economic, and social limitations both male and female face, and to explore respective responsibilities including complicity in one's own oppression" (92). Certainly, the narrator and Mary did not cause the troubling incidents to occur, nor are they responsible for the resulting trauma or anxiety; rather, through the notion of complicity, Yamamoto draws our attention to the tragedy of being first victimized through the Western gaze and second through the silence that the Western world has imposed upon them. As Traise Yamamoto's study makes clear, and Mirikitani's poetry painfully depicts, "to be silent is to be silenced":

Silence [...] is identified with frustrated repression, racism and powerlessness configured through the trope of sexual violation. [...] in a society that recognizes only speech as power, the language of silence is no language at all. Silence does not protest but enables rape, systemic racism and imperialist aggression. (232)

The unnamed narrator, Mary, and Mari Sasagawara are all silent and silenced, and suffer an invalidation and erasure of their traumas and narrative histories at the hands of the Western white majority.

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<sup>23</sup> I refer here to the traumas outside the scope of the story, traumas that lie at the edges of narration. Namely, the racial trauma of being Japanese American in the United States in the decade following the Second World War.

The systematic erasure of the reality of Japanese internment camps from American history is the result of rigid codes of gender and race that work within the West/East binary, in which the majority get to tell the story, decide how it really happened, and cause the minority/victim to not only deflect their own violation onto others (as in Miss Sasagawara's case), but to also feel responsible for their own violation. In this way, the West simultaneously silences the racial and sexual/personal traumas endured by Japanese Americans and creates a "Legend" of Japanese Americans that relies on producing subjects without agency, subjects who unwittingly construct a 'self' derived from Western codes. Hisaye Yamamoto's stories explore reflexive moments when that self becomes dislodged through destabilized codes of Western gender and race.

On the surface, the similarities between the two stories are difficult to ascertain; the stories and main characters seem to share something in common, yet they inhabit entirely different worlds. One main character is named, the other unnamed; one is clearly marked by race and gender, the other seemingly unmarked by race and marked by gender only through subtle plot workings; one is imprisoned at an internment camp, the other is free to pick flowers, work, and have dinner with a dear aunt; one longs for passion and a sexual existence in a barren world, the other swims in a world of both bizarre and common uninvited sexual overtures of varying degrees. However, both are divested of the ability to narrate and own their own racial traumas and sexual traumas, which are not so "severe" as rape, but metaphorically represent a sexual violation akin to rape.

## CHAPTER II

### TELLING THE NARRATIVE OF SEXUAL ABUSE IN JOY KOGAWA'S *OBASAN* AND *THE RAIN ASCENDS*

“To produce an entirely autonomous piece is less commendable than to produce a variation whose relation to the theme is sufficiently wily to remain enigmatic for a long while.”  
(Gerard Genette, *Essays in Aesthetics*, 104)

This chapter examines Joy Kogawa's writing of her third novel, *The Rain Ascends* (2003), as a companion narrative-telling of sexual abuse to her first novel, *Obasan* (1981). I argue that the hidden narrative telling of sexual abuse in *Obasan* is overtly manifest in *The Rain Ascends*. Furthermore, I contend that this manifestation within *The Rain Ascends* of the silences in *Obasan* underscores the subverted simultaneous narration of sexual abuse and racial awareness in *Obasan*. The central question directing the comparison between the texts is about the narrative silence surrounding the sexual molestation of Naomi, the main character in Kogawa's first and second novels, *Obasan* and *Itsuka* (1992). Why and how is Naomi's story of sexual abuse and the subsequent psychic trauma stifled and hushed in *Obasan* and *Itsuka*? In what ways does the telling of sexual abuse in *The Rain Ascends* provide what is missing from the narrative in

*Obasan* and *Itsuka*? Most importantly, how does a novel (*The Rain Ascends*) about a white Canadian Protestant minister's sexual abuse of boys fill in the narrative gaps and silences of a novel (*Obasan*) about the internment and relocation of a young Japanese Canadian girl?<sup>24</sup> Lastly, why does Kogawa provide a deep focus on the narration of sexual abuse in *The Rain Ascends* – a novel about an entirely different scenario, race, and gender – yet silence that narration in *Obasan*, and even *Itsuka*?

The textual relationship between *Obasan* and *The Rain Ascends* is, in Genette's words, "sufficiently wily" to call for an intertextual analysis. Since the publication of *Obasan*, critics have well documented the treatment of speech, silence, the internment of Japanese Canadians, and a long catalog of other critical issues in the novel.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, *The Rain Ascends* remains critically untouched by literary scholars. This chapter aims to not only fill in the gap left by Kogawa's critics, but also to highlight the inherent thematic relationship between the two novels. Through an intertextual methodology, I will show how the narrative of *The Rain Ascends* describes the difficulty of "telling" sexual abuse, and offers readers a context for what is barely told in *Obasan*: Naomi's awareness of and psychic trauma from sexual abuse. I argue that Kogawa turns to *The Rain Ascends* to not

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<sup>24</sup> Although the Canadian government made a distinction between "detention camps" and "internment camps" for "disloyal" "Japanese," criminals, and prisoners of war, I concur with Nancy Peterson (*Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crisis of Historical Memory*) "that forced confinement – whether in 'relocation centers' or in 'detention camps' – made them all internment camps" (214)

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, *Obasan* is one of the most often critically analyzed and taught Asian North American novels.

only narrate the psychic trauma that results from sexual abuse, but also to narrate what is unsayable in *Obasan* – the very difficulty of narrating a story of sexual abuse, the trauma that results from sexual abuse, and the awareness and healing that follows.

The sexual abuse in Kogawa's *Obasan* becomes muted by the story of the internment of Japanese Canadians. In *Obasan*, Naomi is sexually abused on several occasions by a neighbor, Old Man Gower. Furthermore, she is sexually assaulted by a boy at Slocan, the ghost town to which she and her family are sent during internment. Despite the traumatic nature of these abuses, only five pages of a three-hundred page novel are devoted to this abuse. I argue that the remainder of the novel is actively involved in a narrative burial of these sexual abuses. In effect, the story of racial oppression and persecution trump the sexual abuse narrative precisely because Kogawa's novel has become *the* story of the internment of Japanese Canadians: "it is the first novel written by a Japanese Canadian about the Japanese Canadian internment experience during WWII" (Hsu 200).<sup>26</sup> As a result, the sexual transgressions against Naomi at the

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<sup>26</sup> Peterson lists the many ways in which *Obasan* "seeks to document or record internment and its ravages. . . .Kogawa's novel alludes to and dramatizes such injustices as the confiscation of all boats owned by Japanese Canadian fishermen, the curfew and exclusion orders, the unsanitary and demeaning conditions of Hastings Park, the wanton seizure of property, the forced selling of Fraser Valley farms, the reduction of individuals to numbers (Uncle's is 00556), the fracturing of families under Canadian internment regulations, the poverty of the camps that continued under the coercive dispersal policy, and the threat of deportation and the absurdities of 'repatriation.' Throughout the novel, we also find mentioned some of the important public figures of the time: Prime Minister Mackenzie King; Tom Shoyoma, editor of the *New Canadian*; Mr. Morii, the sometimes unscrupulous liaison between Japanese Canadians and the authorities; Minister of Justice St. Laurent; the infamous anti-Asian alderman from Vancouver, Halford Wilson; T.B.

hands of Old Man Gower and Percy in Slocan fall into the background of the novel. Although introduced into the text fairly early in the novel, Naomi's suffering from sexual molestation is quickly displaced in the narrative by the departure of both her parents and her own relocation to an internment center. Within the entire novel, only several pages are devoted to the telling of the actual abuse. Furthermore, the narrative never returns to the abuse, a recognition of it, an awareness of what happened to Naomi at age four, or the reasons for evidence of psychic trauma present in Naomi's actions. Naomi's psychic trouble (she stops speaking, retreats into herself, and avoids others) can be easily attributed to the loss of her parents and her forced relocation. However, several critics have addressed this perhaps misplaced attribution of psychic stress by suggesting that "the process described within the two novels [*Obasan* and *Itsuka*] fits . . . neatly with models of trauma and recovery from sexual assault" (Tharp 214).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the sexual abuse is central to the story in *Obasan*, not tangential; the abuse shapes Naomi's experience of the internment. Just as silence is a coping mechanism to deal with the abuse, so does silence define Naomi's experience of losing her mother and being interned at Slocan.<sup>28</sup>

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Pickersgill, the commissioner of Japanese placement, who was in charge of administering the repatriation survey and deportation policies; as well as other officials" (153).

<sup>27</sup> In addition to Tharp, see Tourino, Cook, and Fu-Jen Chen

<sup>28</sup> Tharp comments on the conflation of traumas in *Obasan* and *Itsuka*: "By placing the childhood sexual abuse and separation from the mother at the center of Naomi's illness, Kogawa invites connections between sexual and nationalist assaults" (223-24).

Furthermore, I argue that the process of trauma and recovery that is barely narrated in *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, is narrated in *The Rain Ascends* in order to offer an alternative story of readerly empathy. As Keen writes, “readers’ perception of a text’s fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion. Thus they may respond with greater empathy to an unreal situation and characters because of the protective fictionality” (Keen “Preface” xiii-xiv). Reading Kogawa’s *Obasan* and *The Rain Ascends* together encourages an empathic response for the sexual abuse Naomi suffers in *Obasan*, but that Naomi and the reader are not allowed to fully experience due to the overwhelming narrative of the internment, which overshadows the narration of sexual abuses.

According to Keen’s study of empathic reader response, the “fictionality” of *The Rain Ascends* is greater than the fictionality of *Obasan*, which may result in greater reader empathy for the characters and situations in *The Rain Ascends*.<sup>29</sup> *Obasan* is a semi-autobiographical account of a young Japanese Canadian girl’s personal experiences before and during the internment of Japanese Canadians. The novel begins when Naomi is in her thirties and returns “home” following the death of her uncle. *Obasan*, Naomi’s aunt and Uncle’s wife, was Naomi’s primary caretaker during the internment due to her mother’s trip to Japan (to take care of her ill grandmother) and her father’s relocation by the Canadian government to a war camp separate from his family. Upon arriving at

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<sup>29</sup> See Keen’s *Empathy and the Novel* for a thorough discussion of empathic responses to fiction.

Obasan's house, Naomi finds herself the unwilling recipient of Aunt Emily's package of diaries, letters, professional papers, and government correspondence. Reluctantly reading the package contents, Naomi is beckoned to the past as she remembers the year preceding the internment orders and the various relocations of the family at the hands of the Canadian government. Foremost on Naomi's mind as she begins to read is her mother's departure from Canada and finding the reason for why her mother never returned from Japan. The ending of the novel brings adult Naomi together with her extended family and family friends as letters are read aloud that reveal her mother's fate in Japan. The letters, written by her grandmother to her grandfather were never meant for Naomi's ears, and the information contained has been deliberately hidden from Naomi and her brother all of their lives. Naomi learns that her mother never returned from Japan because she suffered horrific disfigurement (and eventual death from radiation poisoning) following the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Kogawa closes the novel with an official historical government document that recommends ending the internment and exile of Japanese Canadians.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to *Obasan's* semi-autobiographical and historical nature, *The Rain Ascends* is an entirely fictional story loosely based on contemporary news stories about

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<sup>30</sup> Nancy J. Peterson discusses the historical nature of *Obasan*: "Kogawa's novel occupies an interesting space between history and fiction. Her family was interned at Slocan in British Columbia, Canada, so personal history (autobiography) informs her novel, but Kogawa also drew on materials from the Public Archives in Canada, in particular using letters of Muriel Kitagawa to her brother Wes as a source from the section of the novel that renders Aunt Emily's journal. The novel also includes a historical document: a memo protesting attempts to deport people of Japanese ancestry, which was sent to the House and Senate of Canada in April 1946" (141).



the molestation of young boys by priests. The characters are all fictional, and no official historical documents are included in the novel. The novel's protagonist, Millicent, discovers that her minister father has molested young boys throughout his life. Although she learns of the abuses and subsequent scandal in her teenage years, Millicent does not fully understand, or even want to understand, the large scope of her father's sins. The novel introduces Millicent as a middle-aged woman who is fighting her brother and sister-in-law's insistence that she fully face what her father has done by talking to her father about the abuse and turning him over to the authorities for his crimes. When she finally learns that her father has molested her own son, Millicent tells the Bishop what her father has confessed to only her: that he has molested not a few, but hundreds, of boys during his ministry. The first-person narration consists of flashbacks, dream sequences, Biblical stories and imagery, fairy tales, and fantasy sequences – all of which contend with Millicent's attempts to confront her aging father, speak his horrific crimes, and eventually come to some sort of healing in the same way an abuse victim might confront her psychic trauma and heal from abuse.

I argue that Kogawa's more outright fictional text (*The Rain Ascends*) tells the silenced story of *Obasan*: sexual abuse. This more fictional text allows Kogawa to fully narrate the process of knowing and healing from a sexual abuse, a process that was subverted in the narration of *Obasan* due to the enormity and intensity of the stories of the internment and racial experience. In addition, historical narratives, such as *Obasan*, do not often make allowance for narratives such as sexual abuse. Within her youth, many events traumatize Naomi and leave psychic scars – sexual abuse, the loss of her mother,

the loss of her home when she is evacuated by the government, the effectual loss of her childhood, etc. The story of the sexual abuses takes up the least amount of space within the text; however, its importance in the novel and in Naomi's psyche is clear throughout *Obasan* and the sequel, *Itsuka*.<sup>31</sup> This chapter will discuss the incidents of sexual abuse in *Obasan*, as well as the narrative clues of post-traumatic stress resulting from the abuse. I argue that the narrative separation of the two stories – sexual abuse and the racial internment – underscores their copresence within the novel. The simultaneity and copresence of sexual abuse and racial trauma, as the focus of this dissertation, manifests itself in *Obasan* through its conspicuous separation by the author.

### **Obasan: Narrative Silencing of Racial Trauma and Sexual Trauma**

Despite being an historical novel, *Obasan* is primarily a novel guided by Naomi's personal memories and recollections, as well as the narrative burial of her memories of sexual abuse. When the novel opens, the year is 1972, and Naomi Nakane and her Uncle (Isamu) are ceremoniously walking to the coulee – a walk they have taken every year at

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<sup>31</sup> This chapter takes as its focus only *Obasan* and *The Rain Ascends* because I am primarily concerned with the character of Naomi. *Itsuka* is a more politically charged text (rather than a personal text), and also focuses more on the character of Aunt Emily than on Naomi's character. There are, however, a few key scenes in *Itsuka* that I will discuss as they relate to Naomi's exhibition of post-traumatic stress due to a sexual trauma.

the same time despite Naomi's ignorance of its significance.<sup>32</sup> Nancy Peterson aptly describes the narrative structure of the novel as it is rooted in the past:

The second chapter takes place one month later: Naomi, who is a schoolteacher, is called out of class to take a phone call, a call that informs her that Uncle has died suddenly. She leaves immediately to be with Obasan (the Japanese word for aunt – or woman, as Gayle K. Fujita notes), whom she finds at the kitchen table as chapter 3 begins. From this point onward, the narrative dwells more on the past than on the present moment: Naomi recollects her childhood in Vancouver; her mother's journey to Japan and continuing absence; the years she spent in a ghost-town camp at Slocan with Obasan, Uncle, and her brother, Stephen; and the years of poverty and hard labor after the war was over, while working on a sugar beet farm in Granton, Alberta. The rush of memories become so intense that the present-time action of the novel – which really covers only a couple of days, from Uncle's death to the day after his funeral – takes more than thirty chapters to complete. (Peterson 154)

Indeed, the “rush of memories” often hijacks the narrative that began about Uncle's death. Naomi does not want all of these memories rushing into her mind, nor does she want to read Aunt Emily's papers about the internment, which she wants to believe are simply “crimes of history [that] can stay in history” (50). Aunt Emily, who was not interned, represents words, anger, and speech. However, Obasan, for whom the novel is named, represents silence, avoidance, and non-verbal speech acts. Naomi remembers arguing with Aunt Emily about her “thin wafers of paper . . . fragile with old angers” by exclaiming “why not leave the dead to bury the dead?” In reply, Aunt Emily had redirected the question back to Naomi: “Dead? . . . I'm not dead. You're not dead. Who's dead?” Noting the silence of Obasan and Uncle, who only exclaim “Gratitude” and “What energy” at Aunt Emily's protestations, Naomi sighs “Life is so short . . . the

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<sup>32</sup> Naomi learns at the end of the novel that the yearly walk commemorates the bombing of Nagasaki, which disfigured and fatally wounded her mother.

past so long. Shouldn't we turn the page and move on?" (51). Still not empathizing with Naomi's struggle, Aunt Emily shoots back at Naomi with "The past is the future." In this poignant memory, the narrative captures Aunt Emily's inability to really hear Naomi's resistance. In fact, Naomi's silence about *why* they should turn the page is left unquestioned and unanswered. For Naomi, the past is marked by several traumas that Naomi cannot or will not remember: the loss of her mother, the racial experience of the internment, and sexual abuse. Aunt Emily cannot relate to Naomi's desire to "turn the page" because she was not interned *and* because she does not know about the abuse Naomi suffered. Naomi aligns herself with Obasan and Uncle, who symbolize a silence about the racial trauma, and thereby (in Naomi's mind) a silence about the sexual trauma that is so inextricably connected to the internment.<sup>33</sup>

In the previous scene, Aunt Emily facetiously answers Naomi's reference to the "dead," but perhaps Naomi was arguing for peace on behalf of her mother, or at least for peace on behalf of the *pain* she feels from the trauma of her mother's absence from her life. Adult Naomi does not yet know her mother's fate, but surely must suspect that she is no longer alive. However, Aunt Emily seems unaware that Naomi's avoidance of discussing the past is related to a trauma: the trauma of losing her mother, and as we later

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<sup>33</sup> The issue of silence in the novel has been thoroughly mined and dissected by critics. For a close examination of these discussions see: Grice's "Reading the Nonverbal" and King-Kok Cheung's *Articulate Silence*. Grice explains: "Much critical attention has been accorded to Obasan, and a lot of it has focused upon the strangely silent nature of the text. However, as King-Kok Cheung has shown, this critical energy has, by and large, reproduced an Anglicizing tendency to read the silence of the text – and characters – of *Obasan* in relation to a paradigmatic dichotomy of speech and silence, whereby speech is valorized as self-assertion and silence regarded as negative absence." (93)

learn, the trauma of sexual abuse. For the victim of trauma, the past certainly is the future, as Aunt Emily exclaims, but not in a positive way. Yet, Aunt Emily wants the past to become part of the future in order to heal past wounds of internment and racial injustice. For Naomi, the past is continually in her present and future as she fights the traumatic regurgitation of her life's wounds.

The Epigraph of the novel poetically contextualizes Naomi's turn toward silence in the face of Aunt Emily's constant directives to speak the crimes of the past. Each time Aunt Emily insists that Naomi be part of the effort to speak for the past, to make present past injustices, Naomi cannot separate her personal traumas from the public traumas of which Emily speaks. Naomi thinks, "we're trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead – those who refuse to bury themselves . . . [w]hen I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark . . . ready to snap me up and ensnare me" (30-31). In the Epigraph, these memories that come "skittering out of the dark" are referred to as silences:

There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak.

Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone.

I admit it.

I hate the stillness. I hate the stone. I hate the sealed vault with its cold icon. I hate the staring into the night. The questions thinning into space. The sky swallowing the echoes.

This passage, pregnant with meaning in its prose as well as its empty spaces on the page, illuminates the depth of the trauma from which Naomi hides. This first-person Epigraph

symbolizes what Naomi already knows and feels about trauma: before speaking it, before hearing of it, before knowing it, the trauma exists as “silence,” “stillness” “stone,” “ a sealed vault,” and the “absence” of “voice.” Indeed, before readers receive the narration of the sexual trauma Naomi has endured, they must read the silence that she hears in the Epigraph. Her traumatic memories of sexual abuse are at the very core of the word “silence.” Before the novel’s revelations of Naomi’s trauma from losing her mother and being sexually abused, the Epigraph sets for the reader the notion of deep trauma associated with the womb: “the amniotic” and “sensate sea.”

The Epigraph is Kogawa’s attempt to bring readers to the heart of telling, of trying to tell a wound, of trying to make present that which “cannot” and “will not” speak. Here, we see Kogawa carefully placing her narrator in a tenuous relationship with language, which foregrounds the importance of giving words to abuse in the novel. First, the silence “cannot” speak, but this is quickly revised (after critical empty page space) to the silence that “will not” speak. Does the narrator, whom we do not yet know, possess the language to speak the crimes against her? Does she have the words to say the unsayable of sexual abuse? The fullness of absence is called forth again as the Epigraph continues:

Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall, are pockmarks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream.

If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word? I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply.

Here, in this place of where words fail, Naomi (who is not-yet-Naomi to readers because no characters have been introduced) reveals “there is in my life no living word” unless a seed “flowers with speech” or the stone itself “bursts with telling.” Even words themselves, when spoken, are simply “hailstones” that fall and fruitlessly seek meaning within that “amniotic deep.” This space of almost emptiness, where words do not signify as they fall into a fertile “sensate” sea resembles the Platonic *khora*, or “place,” which has the marked distinction of “allowing the unsayable to speak” (Budick and Iser, Introduction xv).<sup>34</sup> Not-yet-Naomi wishes to come to the “freeing word” in this *khora* but receives no reply from the “steadfast” silence of the night sky. Instead of providing answers, this Epigraph is like the *khora*: simply a “place of passage, a threshold.” In this space, Kogawa highlights the transitory nature of not-yet-Naomi who stands on the threshold, or edge, of narration and perhaps on the threshold of saying the unsayable. This sets the tone for the novel, in which the unsayable nature of sexual abuse is mostly unsaid for much of the novel.

I argue that readers become keenly aware from the opening of the novel that there are memories that are actively not narrated and silenced, memories that are revealed to be

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<sup>34</sup> “*Khora* is itself the atemporality of spacing, for it atemporalizes and calls forth a temporality, thus giving place to inscription. It signifies that there is something that is neither a being nor a nothingness. The spacing of *khora* introduces a dissociation or a difference in the proper meaning it renders possible. To receive all and to allow itself to be marked or affected by what is inscribed in it, *khora* must remain without form and without proper determination. Place of this kind is only a place of passage, a threshold. It allows us to speak about negativity itself. In subtle but marked distinction to this figuration of the unfigurable or the allowing of the unsayable to speak, negative theology aims at a silent union with the ineffable.” (Budick & Iser, Introduction xv)

her sexual abuse by Old Man Gower and Percy in Slocan. The present day of the novel, September 13, 1972, begins with Naomi's warning about the flood of memories to come in the space of the novel's narration: "In the future I will remember the details of this day, the ordinary trivia illuminated by an event that sends my mind scurrying for significance. I seem unwilling to live with randomness" (6). The "event" of which she speaks is her uncle's death, the event that sends her "home" to Obasan in Granton, where Aunt Emily's package of papers and diaries sends Naomi on a journey through her memories of the internment and relocation years. As soon as Naomi arrives at Obasan and Uncle's home in Granton, memories come flooding back to her. However, along with these memories also comes a metanarrative about memory itself, or rather, about fighting memory and avoiding the past. While searching along with Obasan in the old house's attic for some unknown item, Naomi muses, "All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past. Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery. Our attics and living rooms encroach on each other, deep into their invisible places" (30). In this reflection, Naomi highlights a recurring theme throughout the book: how the past is always already implicated in the present. Foreshadowing the memories to come of her days on Canada's prairies while beet farming during relocation following the wartime internment at Slocan, Naomi describes memories and dreams as "potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm." Naomi muses that the memories and dreams that reside in our attics, or inner minds, sometimes



“encroach” on our living rooms, or the façade we put forth in the present day. These musings on memory foreshadow the narration of the memories of the sexual abuse.

During the attic search, the past comes hurling forward into the present, just as “potent and pervasive” as Naomi had warned:

Just a glimpse of a worn-out patchwork quilt and the old question comes thudding out of the night again like a giant moth. Why did my mother not return? After all these years, I find myself wondering, but with the dullness of expecting no response.

“Please tell me about Mother,” I would say as a child to Obasan. I was consumed by the question. Devoured alive. But Obasan gave me no answers. I did not have, I have never had, the key to the vault of her thoughts. (31)

The central question of the passage: “Why did my mother not return?” haunts Naomi throughout the novel. This moment in the attic is a key moment in the novel’s narration because it is the first mention of the mother’s absence in Naomi’s life. In mid-life, Naomi is still traumatized by her mother’s absence, “consumed by the question” and “devoured” by the need to have an answer. Obasan, though, in her silence, has steadfastly avoided answering the query. And so, Naomi does not utter the question that haunts her mind while she searches the attic with a forgetful Obasan:

She [Obasan] seems to have forgotten her reason for coming up here. I notice these days, from time to time, how the present disappears in her mind. The past hungers for her. Feasts on her. And when its feasting is complete? She will dance and dangle in the dark, like small insect bones, a fearful calligraphy – a dry reminder that once there was life flitting about in the weather. (31)

The past, in this passage, functions as an agent that can devour its prey and leave only bones – a grim reminder that prior to painful memories, there was vibrant life, there was “weather.” As this poignant scene ends, Obasan shakes away the memories that haunt:

“Everything is forgetfulness” (31), she utters. In this one utterance, Obasan iterates Naomi’s life philosophy – to try at all costs to relegate that which is painful to “forgetfulness.”

The pain of sexual abuse, motherly absence, and racial internment that Naomi would rather relegate to “forgetfulness” has not yet been enunciated in the novel when Naomi first visits with Obasan following Uncle’s death. Naomi, who “seek[s] the safety of invisibility” (38) wishes to hide from the stack of papers that Aunt Emily has sent to Obasan’s house for Naomi to read. Aunt Emily, described numerous times as a “word warrior” (39) who fights for the Nisei to remember the crimes of internment and gain redress, attempts to galvanize Naomi into fighting for “visibility” (41), but Naomi is only left feeling “uncomfortable”: “People who talk a lot about their victimization make me uncomfortable. It’s as if they use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind. From my years of teaching I know it’s the children who say nothing who are in trouble more than the ones who complain” (41). Naomi’s feeling of dis-ease with Aunt Emily’s vitriol and commands to remember is conspicuously situated in the text just prior to a set of chapters that return Naomi for the first time to her childhood and the memories of sexual abuse. Poignantly, Naomi uses the word “victimization,” a word Aunt Emily does not use to describe the trials of internment. Using Obasan’s refrigerator as a metaphor for the mind, Naomi explores this feeling of discomfort with Aunt Emily’s directives to read her papers, to remember at all costs, and allow oneself to be a victim:

There are some indescribable items in the dark recesses of the fridge that never see the light of day. But you realize when you open the door that they’re there, lurking, too old for mold and past putrefaction.

Some memories, too, might better be forgotten. Didn't Obasan once say, "It is better to forget"? What purpose is served by hauling forth the jar of inedible food? If it is not seen, it does not horrify. What is past recall is past pain. Questions from all these papers, questions referring to turbulence in the past, are an unnecessary upheaval in the delicate ecology of this numb day. (54-55)

As the narrative rushes toward the revelation of Naomi's sexual abuse, the language of trauma becomes evident: memories "horrify" and cause "upheaval" because they are "indescribable," "lurking," "past recall," and "past pain." According to Naomi, memories are often "better forgotten" so that they do not disturb the "numb" feeling of the present. Here, again, we see Naomi fight against something that is yet unsaid in the narrative: her sexual abuse.

The unsayable, the abuse Naomi has suffered, is uttered in the novel only after this language of traumatic haunting has infiltrated the narrative. In *The Unsayable: The Hidden Language of Trauma*, Rogers discusses the intruding nature of traumatic memories: "They are stories of how something real impinges on us and marks us in our bodies. This thing – I'll call it trauma – enters our speech as if by stealth, through the back door, in the night. Then it sounds as though we are speaking in code to one another and to ourselves, and that code is both the mark of trauma and is, itself, traumatizing" (xiv). Indeed, the very language of trauma enters the narrative of Obasan "as if by stealth, through the back door." The language used to speak of the trauma is just as traumatizing as the original trauma itself. And so, as Naomi's traumatic past is wrenched into the present, we witness her anger at the intrusion. The following passage illustrates the shifts of inner dialogue in Naomi's mind as she fights, and yet allows, the memories on the edge of the trauma to surface:

The house in which we live is in Marpole, a comfortable residential district of Vancouver. It is more splendid than any house I have lived in since. It does not bear remembering. None of this bears remembering.

“You have to remember,” Aunt Emily said. “You are your history. If you cut any of it off you’re an amputee. Don’t deny the past. Remember everything. If you’re bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene. Look at you Nomi, shuffling back and forth between Cecil and Granton, unable either to go or to stay in the world with even a semblance of grace or ease.”

All right, Aunt Emily, all right! The house then – the house, if I must remember it today, was large and beautiful. (60)

This house that Naomi remembers is the house of her childhood, full of her Mother’s “soft and tender” voice and her father’s piano playing. The pleasant memories of this house take up the space of just half of one chapter (Chapter 9). But these memories are simply “bits of the house I remember. If I linger in the longing, I am drawn into a whirlpool. I can only skirt the edges after all” (64). In Naomi’s narration, again we hear the “coded” language of the unsayable as she stops and starts her narration, and allows herself to argue in her mind with Aunt Emily’s insistence that she not “deny the past.”

In Chapter 10 (the chapter immediately following pleasant memories of home, and immediately preceding the chapter about the sexual abuse), Naomi’s narrative turn toward nostalgia for a time of innocence foreshadows and underscores the horror of the sexual abuse narration to come. Naomi laments, “That we must grow up is an unavoidable sadness” (67). Kogawa carefully sets the tone for the horror of the abuse by highlighting the wonderfulness that preceded it: a childhood in which needs were anticipated and met without question: “When I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food. If I am weary, every place is a bed. No food that is distasteful must be eaten and

there is neither praise nor blame for the body's natural functions. A need to urinate is to be heeded whether in public or visiting friends. A sweater covers me before there is any chill and if there is pain there is care simultaneously" (68). This passage underscores the idea of innocence, particularly the innocence of having bodily needs. All functions of the body are normal and exist prior to thought or questioning. There is no shame associated with the body. Furthermore, emotional needs are met as well: "There was no need for crying" (68). This emphasis on the normalcy of bodily and emotional needs is juxtaposed with fear in the very next chapter (and page).

At the beginning of Chapter 11, the only chapter which focuses on the narrative of sexual abuse, Naomi begins by highlighting the disparity between the world inside her home and world of sexual abuse outside her home: "Inside the house in Vancouver there is confidence and laughter, music and mealtimes, games and storytelling. But outside, even in the backyard, there is an infinitely unpredictable, unknown, and often dangerous world. Speech hides within me, watchful and afraid" (69). This chapter opens up with a narrative vignette about that dangerous world as a place where, "If there is not carefulness, there is danger" (72). In this vignette, Naomi inadvertently causes a white hen to peck to death several small yellow chicks.<sup>35</sup> Her mother, with eyes "steady and matter-of-fact – the eyes of Japanese motherhood," rescues some of the chicks, and Naomi feels safe with her mother's swift rescue: "I tell her everything [about the chicks]. There is nothing about me that my mother does not know, nothing that is not safe to tell"

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<sup>35</sup> Many critics have read this incident as a binary racial incident of white vs. yellow, or Canadian vs. Japanese, in which the dominant overpowers the weak.

(72). This safety, however, is swiftly cast aside in the next critical sentence: “Except there is the one secret thing that emerges even now, curious as an infant fern, a fiddlehead question mark asking with its unformed voice for answers still unhidden from me. His name is Old Man Gower. He lives next door” (72). For five pages of text (out of a three hundred page novel), Naomi narrates several incidents of molestation: in Old Man Gower’s backyard garden, several times in his house, in the movie theater.

As Old Man Gower is quickly coded white (or non-Asian) with his brown hair, Naomi’s victimization at the hands of white manhood is made clear.<sup>36</sup> In addition, before Naomi narrates the flood of abuses, she first remembers his sensory unpleasantness: he smells “dank and unpleasant,” his breath is “noisy and too close,” and his mustache is “scratchy as a Christmas tree” (73). Naomi narrates this memory (as she does all of her memories) in the present tense, which signifies the rupture of the memory into the present: “I do not wish him to lift me up but I do not know what it is to struggle. Every time he carries me away, he tells me I must not tell my mother. He asks me questions as he holds me but I do not answer” (73). The simplicity of the language, as well as the comparison of his mustache to a Christmas tree, highlights the childlike persona and voice that narrates these memories. As she remembers, Naomi is that child again, retraumatized through memory by the sensory recall of her assailant. Although previous chapters are punctuated by Aunt Emily’s insistence on gaining redress for the internment, and following chapters are focused solely on the internment years, this chapter is

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<sup>36</sup> In the next chapter, Old Man Gower is clearly revealed to be a white Canadian as Naomi’s father entrusts him with their property if they should be deported or interned.

suspended in the novel as the only one in which Naomi narrates sexual abuse. Other than Old Man Gower's white 'coding,' the white hen/yellow chicks incident, and the portrayal of her mother within "Japanese motherhood," the abuses are narrated in this chapter almost completely separate from the internment narrative upon which the novel becomes focused.

In the midst of the narrative about Old Man Gower's transgressions, two memories that point toward racial injustices are recalled: first, her abuse at the hands of a fellow child internee at Slocan, and second, a recurring dream about "three beautiful oriental woman" who lay naked and vulnerable in front of soldiers (73). Although the narrative of the sexual abuse in this chapter is conspicuously separate from the narrative about the racial injustice of the internment, here Kogawa hints at the inability of separating the sexual abuse memories from Naomi's story of being wounded by her race.<sup>37</sup> Naomi narrates the incident with Percy in Slocan as if it foreshadows a full story that will appear later in the text, yet this is the only telling readers receive about Percy:

It is not an isolated incident. Over and over again, not just Old Man Gower – but years later there is Percy in Slocan, pressing me against the cave wall during hide-and-go-seek, warning me against crying out. The sharp stone cuts into my shoulder. I try to move but he holds me harder. The other children are running past on their way back to home base. We will be the last ones unless we go. I am filled with a strange terror and exhilaration. When does this begin – this fascination and danger that rockets through my body? (73)

Later, when readers encounter Percy in Slocan, they expect to finally receive the full narration of the sexual abuse, but it never comes. Yet, Kogawa has already planted the

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<sup>37</sup> See Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*

seed of the narration, and so all of Naomi's interned time in Slocan is haunted by a sexually abusive incident that is always already told but never 'officially' narrated in its own space within the text. Instead of narrating how Percy abuses her, either here or later in the novel, the narrative conceals and buries the sexual abuse.

The second memory-within-a-memory, the dream of the "oriental women," immediately follows the memory of Percy in Slocan, as it narrates a situation of "abject longing, wretchedness, fear, and utter helplessness" (74):

Two weeks ago, the day of our first staff meeting at Cecil Consolidated, there was that dream again. The dream had a new and terrible ending. In earlier versions, there was flight, terror, and pursuit. The only way to be saved from harm was to become seductive. In this latest dream, three beautiful oriental women lay naked in the muddy road, flat on their backs, their faces turned to the sky. They were lying straight as coffins, spaced several feet apart, perpendicular to the road like railway ties. Several soldiers stood or shuffled in front of them in the foreground. It appeared they were guarding these women, who were probably prisoners from a nearby village.

The woman closest by made a simpering coy gesture with her hands. She touched her hair and wiggled her body slightly – seductively. An almost inaudible whimper or sob was drowned in her chest. She was trying to use the only weapon she had – her desirability. (73)

Comparing the woman who acts seductively to a "punished dog," Naomi reveals through this memory her feelings of guilt, shame, and complicity associated with Old Man Gower's molestation of her. The woman, "stretched between hatred and lust," does not succeed in her ploy to assuage the soldiers from using their rifles (74). Aiming at the woman, the soldiers playfully shoot first at the women's toes, then at their feet, as one woman's foot lies next to her, "neatly severed above the ankles." Naomi concludes: "It was too late. There was no hope. The soldiers could not be won. Dread and a deathly



loathing cut through the women.” What is unclear in this passage is whether the women loathe the soldiers or themselves, or both. The loathing seems to be a generalized feeling, perhaps directed toward themselves and brought on by the feeling of helplessness, and the shameful hope that they might have been saved from death by rape. Naomi’s dream exposes not only her own feeling of vulnerability to Old Man Gower, but also the lingering feeling that she could have had some power (her desirability in his eyes), if only she had used it correctly or aptly.

When the narrative in this chapter returns to the original memory – the abuse at the hands of Old Man Gower – Naomi reveals the way that her abuser has haunted all of the places she has lived: “Does Old Man Gower still walk through the hedges between our houses in Vancouver, in Slocan, in Granton and Cecil?” (75). Although the abuse takes place when Naomi is four and five years old, she imagines that Old Man Gower has followed her to the internment in Slocan, to the beet farm in Granton, and to her present day home in Cecil. Naomi narrates memory after memory of being “carried away through the break in the shrubs where our two yards meet” (74). No place is safe from Old Man Gower, even the family garage, where he enters and carries her away under the pretense of fixing a scratch on her knee. The nature of the abuse is not uttered; the exact ways in which he abuses her remain silent. However, there are hints at his forcefulness in the way he holds her: “He does not release me. When I make the faintest move he puts his hand on my skirt. He offers me a toffee. . . . he thrusts it into my hands” (74). The language used (“thrusts”) hints at rape, and speculation is only increased when Naomi

mentions Old Man Gower's bed: "The bed is strange and pristine, deathly in its untouched splendor" (75).

Naomi's use of stillness and silence to combat the attacks foreshadows the silent way she will respond to the racial trauma of the internment and to Aunt Emily's insistence that she "remember":

I sit still on his lap.  
"Would you like me to tell you a story?" he asks.  
I do not respond. If I am still, I will be safe.  
Is this where the terror begins?  
I am four years old. His hands are large and demanding. He caresses my head as if I were a small animal. My short black hair straight across my forehead like a broom is blown aside as he puts his mouth on my face.  
(75)

Naomi's questionings throughout the memory – "Is this where the terror begins?" – and later, "Is it the lie that first introduces me to the darkness?" indicate the nature of the trauma memory becoming increasingly more intense. As the narrative progresses, the more deeply we feel that Naomi is lost within the trauma, questioning what has happened, when, and in what order. Again, she turns to silence: "If I speak, I will split open and spill out. To be made whole and safe I must hide in the foliage, odorless as a newborn fawn. But already the lie grows like a horn, an unfurled fiddlehead fist, through the soft fontanelle of my four-year-old mind. . . . He begins to undress me. I do not resist. One does not resist adults" (76). The language of splitting open, spilling out, and being uncontained reflects not only the fissure she feels deep within her soul, but also the shame she feels: "I am ashamed. If Stephen comes he will see my shame. He will know what I feel and the knowing will flood the landscape. There will be nowhere to hide" (76). Naomi imagines that her brother would see her negatively, rather than have

compassion for his sister who is being abused. Again, the language of flooding and not being able to hide exposes what most victims of trauma feel: that the abuse is their fault and that any knowledge of the abuse will destroy oneself and others, and in effect, shatter the world.

The trauma Naomi suffers from Old Man Gower's abuse tears at the bond between herself and her mother. In the darkness of a movie theater, as he pulls Naomi onto his lap, Old Man Gower whispers "Don't tell your mother," and Naomi wonders "Where in the darkness has my mother gone?" (77). Immediately following her question, Naomi imagines herself clinging to her mother's leg, "a flesh shaft that grows from the ground, a tree trunk of which I am an offshoot – a young branch attached by right of flesh and blood" (77). Naomi envisions that as her mother moves, so does she in unison because "Her blood is whispering through my veins." With a sharp turn, the narrative returns to Old Man Gower's power over Naomi:

But here in Mr. Gower's hands I become other – a parasite on her body, no longer of her mind. My arms are vines that strangle the limb to which I cling. I hold so tightly now that arms and leg become one through force. I am a growth that attaches and digs a furrow under the bark of her skin. If I tell my mother about Mr. Gower, the alarm will send a tremor through our bodies and I will be torn from her. But the secret has already separated us. The secret is this: I go to seek Old Man Gower in his hideaway. I clamber unbidden onto his lap. His hands are frightening and pleasurable. In the center of my body is a rift.

In my childhood dreams, the mountain yawns apart as the chasm spreads. My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. We cannot reach each other. My legs are being sawn in half. (77)

Naomi never recovers from the Old Man Gower's abusive seduction, as the narrative indicates through its move away from narrating the sexual abuse. The narrative diversion

from the sexual abuse story mirrors the breach in Naomi's memory about the sexual abuse. The abuse has seared and traumatized her brain, leaving a wound that cannot be narrated due to the deep pain brought forth by its recall.<sup>38</sup> Further complicating the trauma she experiences from the sexual abuse, Naomi reports in the next sentence (at the beginning of a new chapter), "It is around this time that Mother disappears" (78). Children who suffer the trauma of sexual abuse often blame themselves for the abuse, for the way their bodies betray them with feelings of pleasure, and for any rift in the parental relationship. According to Naomi, not only the abuse itself, but also Naomi's *role* in the abusive relationship, has torn her mother from her.

The rift in the center of her body is similar to how Krystal describes a traumatic event of such import that "no trace of a registration of any kind is left in the psyche, instead, a void, a hole is found" (qtd. in Caruth, "Introduction" 6). Dori Laub also describes trauma in terms of "a record that has yet to be made" ("No One Bears Witness to the Witness" in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*). This "rift," "hole" and "void" left in Naomi's body and mind (and in the narrative itself) is filled with the fact of her mother's departure for Japan, and the facts and experience of the internment. Caruth writes, "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" ("Introduction," 5). In this way, Naomi cannot complete the narration of Old Man Gower's crimes against her; all she can do is turn to

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<sup>38</sup> The Prologue, as referenced earlier, alluded to this inability to speak: "There is a silence that cannot speak."

other traumatic events (such as her mother's departure and the years of internment) that spill into the "void" left by the enormity of fully knowing sexual abuse.

Just as Naomi cannot continue to live within the memories of the sexual abuse or the resulting trauma from it, the narrative diverges from the abuse and plunges into the narrative of racial prejudice and internment.<sup>39</sup> The chapters that follow bury the sexual abuse story, and instead narrate the months preceding the internment, Aunt Emily's letters to Naomi's mother, the relocation process, the internment at Slocan, beet farming in Granton, and finally, the revelation of Naomi's mother's fate. Most of the novel's remainder (over two hundred pages) takes place in the past, either through memories or through Aunt Emily's letters, which effectively remove Naomi as narrator. Still, the language of the trauma that haunts the mind haunts the entire narrative:

In *Obasan*, the most uncanny space entered into, however, is not the devastating landscape of the prisons and ghost towns, but memory. It is memory which threatens and allows for the return of the repressed – which is triggered, for Naomi, by her Uncle Isamu's death. Because of his death she is forced to reopen old wounds, to return to the past, and the disjunction created by this rupture is Gothic in tone and circumstance. (Turcotte, "A Fearful Calligraphy," 132)

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<sup>39</sup> Tharp compares the domestic trauma to the political trauma: "Comparable events take place on the international level, as the white men in the United States federal government permanently and physically separate Naomi from her mother by bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki, inflicting grave injuries on her mother as well as on so many others. She is also separated from her father and from her home and community by the relocation policies that forced all Japanese Canadians into relocating to Canada's interior. Both the bombing and the relocation partially sever Naomi and her family from their ethnic identity as surely as Old Man Gower has separated Naomi from her mother. Japan becomes the parasite on the Issei's and Nisei's bodies, strangling them, but only because the Canadian government has deemed them parasites on the body of Canada." (218)

Coming upon Aunt Emily's newspaper clippings and files labeled "Facts about evacuees in Alberta," Naomi is rushed back to those dark, almost "Gothic" memories: "Facts about evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep" (232). Although on the surface Naomi rails against the memories of beet farming (excruciating work on Canada's dry prairies), the subtext of the narrative implies a deeper traumatic haunting that the narrative has buried in the same way that Naomi's mind escapes the pain of facing her trauma. Naomi begins to remember the hardship that is "pervasive, so inescapable, so thorough it's a noose," but then stops to address Aunt Emily indirectly through the narration:

Aunt Emily, are you a surgeon cutting at my scalp with your folders and filing cards and your insistence on knowing all? The memory drains down the sides of my face, but it isn't enough, is it? It's your hands in my abdomen, pulling the growth from the lining of my walls, but bring back the anesthetist turn on the ether clamp down the gas mask bring on the chloroform when will this operation be over Aunt Em? (232-33)

Each time Aunt Emily demands that Naomi "remember," Naomi cannot distinguish among the traumas she has experienced, and so she rages against all "memory" and the way it seems to be a parasite on and within her body, a parasite that can only be removed with excruciating pain and intimacy of removal.

Aunt Emily, who never experienced the trauma of internment because she received a pass to live in Toronto, demands remembering from Naomi, and even compares (in *Itsuka*) the internment directly to rape: "Over the years, the Japanese Canadian community went into hiding and became silent as rape victims" (208). In *Itsuka*, Naomi continues to bristle at Aunt Emily's attempts to make her remember and

join the redress efforts. However, as Tharp notes, “The symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that Naomi exhibits on a number of occasions within [*Itsuka*] seem inconsistent with a reading of her trauma as one stemming from political disenfranchisement” (214). In *Itsuka*, Naomi narrates, “Something vast as childhood lies hidden in a belly’s wars. There’s a rage whose name has been forgotten” (134). I argue that this rage, seated in the belly, and which has been forgotten and is unnamed, is the result of the sexual abuse she suffered as a child. Tharp writes: “The nightmares and panic attacks that Naomi experiences and her general emotional numbness throughout both novels – she describes herself on an emotional scale somewhere between a ‘cactus and a chimpanzee’ – and the abdominal pain she experiences when coming into contact with men suggests an inability to move beyond the abuse and separation she suffered as a child” (215). In one incident in *Itsuka*, when Naomi encounters a man driving his car on the edge of the beet farm, she responds like a victim of sexual trauma. The man is a “stranger” who has been said to have “cornered a girl behind the curling rink and fondled her” (30). When he stops his car, get outs, and yells toward Naomi, she runs: “the dizziness and the pain roll through me. I double over” (31). As she yells “Uncle,” and “stumble[s] over the clods of earth, faint and retching,” the stranger keeps coming towards her: “I have soiled myself. I’m mortified. I’m half crawling as I change direction and head for the irrigation ditch bridge. Uncle with his bowlegged rolling gait comes running across the field to where I lie, hiding under the bridge in the mud where the stranger can’t see. I remove my underpants gingerly” (31). Certainly, these incidents

seem like “sexual re-traumatizations” (Tharp 214), due to the original trauma of sexual abuse.

Although several critics argue that, through *Itsuka*, Kogawa creates a cohesive story in which Naomi is able to heal from past traumas as Japanese Canadians gain an apology and financial settlement from the Canadian government, I argue that this cohesiveness does not fully apply to the sexual traumas Naomi has experienced. In *Itsuka*, Naomi never returns to the narrative of sexual abuse; she never recollects what happened to her at the hands of Old Man Gower or Percy in Slokan.<sup>40</sup> Thus it is premature to say that Naomi has healed from sexual abuse by proxy of healing from the internment. By skirting the issue of sexual trauma, the narrative of *Itsuka* does not imply a healing from the abuse. Indeed, as trauma theorists, such as Cathy Caruth, argue, the wound that results from trauma is two-fold – it is the wound of the original trauma and the wound of the trauma’s telling. Trauma theorist Nancy Peterson also calls upon Cathy Caruth to explain Naomi’s position in relation to her traumas:

Caruth’s analysis of trauma as wound is particularly helpful for understanding Naomi’s distress. Noting Freud’s view of trauma as a

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<sup>40</sup> For example, Tharp writes that (through the writing of both *Obasan* and *Itsuka*), Kogawa creates a “safe space” in which “the fragmentation of styles in the first novel eventually merges into one more wholistic narrative by the end of *Itsuka*” (224). Furthermore, Tharp argues that Naomi is able to heal from sexual trauma: “At the end of the novel, when Canada finally agrees to the apology and financial settlement, Naomi realizes a final reintegration: ‘I laugh. I am whole. I am as complete as when I was a very young child’ (*Itsuka* 328). Judith Herman emphasizes the need for the survivor of sexual abuse to reconnect with community in order to heal. Healing both the internal rift and the intranational one restores Naomi to her whole self, I would argue in part because the internal body/mind rift is complicated by the body’s victimization on two fronts: sexual and racial.” (223)



wound of the mind, Caruth insists that trauma involves a double wound: the wound of the original catastrophe and the wound of its recollection. As Caruth carefully points out, however, the originating wound is unspeakable, even unrecognizable, at the moment it is experienced: it is 'not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor' (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4). (Peterson 155)

Certainly, throughout *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, the double-woundedness of Naomi's trauma is silenced. Naomi subjects herself, through the narrative, to only a glimpse of the abuse she suffered. Most of the abuse is past recall, and past pain. In only five pages out of more than five hundred does Naomi narrate the flashbacks of her sexual trauma; however, her post-traumatic behaviors persist throughout both novels. In *Obasan*, even after Naomi has learned of her mother's horrific fate, Naomi's dreams still hearken back to the trauma that "will not speak":

In my dreams, a small child sits with a wound on her knee. The wound on her knee is on the back of her skull, large and moist. A double wound. The child is forever unable to speak. The child forever fears to tell. I apply a thick bandage but nothing can soak up the seepage. I beg that the woundedness may be healed and that the limbs may learn to dance. . . . Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction. (291)

Being "forever unable to speak," Naomi leaves unsaid in the narration what is truly unsayable: not only a full telling of the abuse she endured, but a full recognition or knowing of the abuse. The wound on the knee refers to the sexual abuse as it recalls the memory of Old Man Gower "fixing" the scratch on her knee. The wound on her skull, reminiscent of Caruth's notion of the "double wound," is a result of a trauma that has not

been spoken but haunts the mind through her guilt and shame over the abuse.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, this passage illustrates the way that the sexual abuse trauma is intertwined with the trauma of losing her mother at such a young age and at such a crucial time (as she was being sexually abused). Thus, Kogawa is still unable to tell a story about the telling of sexual abuse; the other traumas force their way into the khora where Naomi stands on the threshold of speech.

### **The Rain Ascends: Narrating the Unsayable Quality of Sexual Abuse**

In *The Rain Ascends*, Kogawa provides a narrative-telling of coming to awareness of sexual abuse – a narrative that cannot come forth in *Obasan* and *Itsuka* because it is subsumed and overwhelmed by the racial trauma of internment. The internment, acting as a metaphorical rape, does not allow the telling of the actual rape to come through the narrative in Kogawa's novels about Naomi.<sup>42</sup> In *The Rain Ascends*, however, Kogawa narrates the very act and difficulty of trying to tell the story of sexual abuse. I argue that the language of telling that readers do not get in *Obasan* or *Itsuka* is present in *The Rain Ascends*. Naomi is “forever unable to speak,” and readers are consumed by a racial narrative of internment, the final horrific telling of Naomi's mother's fate in Nagasaki,

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<sup>41</sup> Gottlieb concurs: “Just important is the wound on ‘the back of her skull,’ the wound that comes from the victim's internalization of guilt of violation, the unhealing ‘seepage’ of guilt and shame in her consciousness – the wound that Naomi shares with her people, possibly with most victims of violation.” (34-53)

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the internment in *Obasan* as metaphorical rape, see especially Marilyn Russel Rose, who refers to the relocation and internment of Japanese Canadians as “sociopathic rape” (222).

and the closing historical document of the novel; therefore, Kogawa turns to a novel with an entirely different scenario, race, and trauma to not only show the difficulty of telling a story of abuse, but also to allow readers access to a narrative about trauma – access that is not available in the earlier novels. Through *The Rain Ascends*, readers receive the narrative of *trying* to talk about sexual abuse that cannot come forth in *Obasan*.

The differences between Naomi and Millicent, the narrator of *The Rain Ascends*, are many, yet Kogawa leads us to view her three novels together for what their narratives reveal about the nature of telling or writing about sexual abuse. First, Millicent did not personally suffer abuse, yet she is a victim nonetheless: “Told in a dizzying cascade of flashbacks and fast forwards, the drama isn’t about the discovery of the preacher’s unwholesome tendencies, but how Millicent makes sense of it over the course of decades. Millicent isn’t one of her father’s obvious victims, yet her wounds are deep” (Casey 11). Second, the most obvious difference between the protagonists is their racial difference: Naomi is a Japanese Canadian, and Millicent is a privileged, white Canadian. I argue that Kogawa provides differing views of victimhood as it pertains to sexual abuse in order to fully explore the process of telling about abuse. As this chapter discusses, the narratives about maternal loss, racial wounds, and internment overcome Kogawa’s ability to allow Naomi to stay within the space of telling about *sexual* abuse. As the first novel about the Japanese Canadian internment, Kogawa’s *Obasan* has another (primary) story to tell besides the sexual abuse of her protagonist. However, I argue that readers understand the importance of this sexual abuse to Naomi’s story throughout *Obasan* and *Itsuka* through

the repetitive language of post-traumatic stress resulting from a sexual abuse (not only a racial abuse).

Much like the Epigraph in *Obasan*, The Prologue in *The Rain Ascends* takes speech and silence as its subject. Whereas *Obasan*'s Epigraph is a metaphor for the inability to speak, *The Rain Ascend*'s Prologue is a metaphor for beginning the journey of speaking about the reality of trauma resulting from sexual abuse.<sup>43</sup> The Prologue in *The Rain Ascends* functions as that kind of "wound" that "attempt[s]" to tell the truth about trauma. After a brief paragraph that announces the supposed beneficence of the Reverend Dr. Charles Barnabas Shelby, who has founded the Juniper Centre of Music and three other centers of music and healing in Canada, the Prologue plunges into a metaphorical, lyrical discussion of beginning to accept and speak about a trauma that has been hidden by lies: "In the beginning is the fog, the thick impenetrable fog. The lie is the source of the fog and the lie is the fog" (2). Here, we have the circuitous language of speaking about a trauma, a language that was conspicuously absent from the narrative of *Obasan*, yet sounds as if it could be Naomi's journey toward speech:

The day you start out, the fog is so thick that when you open the window, it rolls into the room. Where the streetlight used to be, there is only a fuzzy yellow blur. From the corner by the bed comes the low growl of the cat, the fur on its back slowly rising. You see her there, her green glowing eyes alert. You try but you cannot close the window again. You back away. The dampness invades with a hissing sound, flowing over the calendar, the telephone, the desk, down to the floor. It rolls over the cat and the green eyes blink and disappear. It attaches itself to your skin and

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<sup>43</sup> See Caruth: "Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise unavailable" (*Unclaimed Experience*, 4).

forms tiny droplets on the fine hairs of your arm. It seeps into your pores. It moves softly, softly through the keyhole and under the closed door.

Weariness.

You crawl along the moist floor, feeling for the desk legs, the knobs on the drawers then up to the corner where the phone sits ringing in the grey haze. You lift the receiver. You crouch against the wall. You cannot speak. Eventually your hand grows numb. (2-3)

The entire Prologue takes the form of this metaphor of being overcome by fog on “the day you start out” on a journey toward speaking or writing the truth about trauma. Throughout the Prologue, the narrator “cannot speak” despite the trauma’s insistence as it comes closer as a “fog” and “dampness” that overtakes everything in its path. The fog, which symbolizes trauma and the ways that we hide from the trauma, “invades” the “calendar, the telephone, and the desk,” each of which represents an aspect of traumatic haunting: time, speech, and writing.<sup>44</sup> For example, traumatic memories disrupt time in rupturing through the present moment. Furthermore, each attempt to speak or write the nature of the trauma is thwarted, as language itself can be re-traumatizing.

In this “pen-holding moment” of not yet speaking or writing, The Prologue thrusts readers into a biblical tale that symbolizes the act of slaying the traumatic truth from which one hides (3). Setting out on the journey to sacrifice what is most dear to oneself is compared to setting out on the journey to reveal the truth about the past, to finally

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<sup>44</sup> I mean to suggest that trauma haunts (or distorts reality) through time, speech, and writing. For example, as the trauma victim attempts to recall a traumatic experience, she is dislodged in time through flashbacks and physical sensations (quickenings of pulse, for example) that make it difficult to narrate the abuse through speech or writing. See the Introduction for a discussion of how the recollection of a traumatic experience can cause the same physical symptoms as directly experiencing the trauma.

speaking the painful truth about a past trauma. Kogawa introduces the story of Abraham who walks “obedient and faithful, into the dense fog, carrying the fire and the knife”:

You are Abraham, that patriarch, that trusting servant of God, with a child, your son, the light of your life, walking beside you, the firewood on his back, his child’s hand in your gnarled old hand. . . . It is innocent blood that is to be shed. You shield the child from the awful, the unspeakable truth. It’s Isaac, your love, your laughter, your joy, your everything, who is the sacrificial lamb to be slain and offered to your ravenous God. . . . Look how obedient I am. Look how I build the altar and arrange the wood, the kindling first, then the brush and the heavier branches on top – here and here, just so. And I take it apart and build it again. And again. And finally now, after all these years, because the wood is so dry, and the pyre is good enough, because I must get on with it, I bind him and lay him on the altar on top of the wood. I stretch out my hand. I take the knife and raise it high. And higher. (3-4)

In this metaphor, the horrific act of sacrificing Isaac is like the re-traumatizing act of telling and writing about a past trauma. The narrator, as Abraham, asks, “Where is the ram? Where in the bushes is the alternate sacrifice? Where is the voice that says, ‘Don’t kill’?”(4). I suggest that this biblical metaphor foreshadows the narrator’s eventual realization halfway through the novel that her father has molested her own son. Furthermore, the metaphor symbolizes that moment of wishing to be rescued from the pain of fully knowing, embracing, and telling a painful truth from which one has always hidden, yet always known:

My soul wails for direction. I walk the streets looking everywhere. I know the ram is there “caught in a thicket by his horns.” If I hold the pen tight enough, with enough determination, if I let it fall just to the point – right up to the throat – that’s when the ram will appear. I won’t have to say the lethal words, will I?

I have enough faith to sit here in the fog by the phone, writing, not writing, telling, not telling. I have enough faith to try again, one more, one more time. I wait, the knife waits, the air sharp as earliest morning waits. (4-5)

Here, we see the metaphor becoming unraveled as the narrator confuses the “pen” and the “knife”: the pen is being used to slay Isaac and the knife is suddenly in the hand that waits to write the truth. This unraveling, in which the pen and knife become confused for each other, not only mirrors the way a trauma victim’s memory of abuse often becomes complicated and blurred, but also reveals the extreme “unspeakability” of trauma so that the telling itself wounds (Balaev 157).<sup>45</sup> The transcription of the pen and the knife reveals the way a trauma survivor experiences the trauma itself and the experience of knowing it as both deadly in nature. Also, we cannot ignore the fact that a knife can wound or kill, and that Kogawa chooses to have the trauma victim hold that knife. Caruth writes: “Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core . . . 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” (*Unclaimed Experience*, 7). For the one who sets out on a journey to speak a painful truth, the words themselves are “lethal,” and so the would-be teller is caught between “writing, not writing, telling, not telling.”

This space of being caught between telling and not telling is like the platonic *khora* in which Naomi waits for much of *Obasan*. The process of telling exactly how Old Man Gower abused Naomi, and how Percy in Slokan abused her, of telling how

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<sup>45</sup> Here again, I refer to Caruth’s notion of the double-woundedness of trauma, in which a traumatic event is marked not only by the original trauma, but also by the second wound of telling the trauma.

much it hurts *to be in that place of telling*, is absent from *Obasan*, and even from *Itsuka*. Naomi stands for only a few pages in that *khora*, on the threshold of knowing and not knowing, telling and not telling as she narrates her abuse for a few short pages. *The Rain Ascends*, however, functions entirely as the *khora*: the entire novel takes as its subject the difficulty of being in that space where one must choose to speak or not speak, to write or not write. *The Rain Ascends* is that metanarrative about telling a trauma – the very metanarrative we did not get in *Obasan* because Naomi turned toward other traumatic memories of her absent mother and the internment.

Although some critics contend that through *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, Kogawa provides a healing narrative, I suggest that Kogawa turns to *The Rain Ascends* to complete her narration of what it is like to be in the place of telling about a sexual abuse.<sup>46</sup> By switching scenarios, races, and type of victimhood, Kogawa invites us to witness how a narrative about sexual abuse can be told. Furthermore, through *The Rain Ascends*, we witness a painful telling that collective history does not allow for Naomi in *Obasan*. In fact, Kogawa invites us at the very beginning of *Obasan* to explore the merging of identities of victims when Naomi and Uncle walk out onto the Coulee:

Within a short space of a chapter, Naomi compares Uncle to “Chief Sitting Bull squatting here” and draws parallels between the Native students in her class and Japanese children in Slocan, one of the internment camps

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<sup>46</sup> For example, see Grewal’s description of the “process of loss and recovery” in *Obasan* and *Itsuka*: “Exhorting words from the speechless landscape of grief, the novels excavate, mourn, then ceremoniously bury the past. Memory’s journey into the individual and collective past becomes the means of self-knowledge, catharsis, forgiveness, and release. . . . Gaining access to the collective past means getting in touch with the individual experience of abandonment” (142).



where Japanese Canadian families were forcibly relocated. Through this landscape, the injustices of colonial racism and imperialism are connected, merging identities of victims. (Karpinski, *The Book*, 49)

In this passage, Kogawa alludes to the sometimes necessity of collapsing the boundaries between victims because the labels “victim” and “victimizer” are not always so clear. Through *The Rain Ascends*, Kogawa explores these concepts of the victimizer not always being so clearly identifiable, and of the similar traumatic experiences of different kinds of victims.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as Gottlieb writes, all victims of sexual abuse share a sense of shame, “self-loathing” and the “denial of their own humanity.”

The first chapter of *The Rain Ascends* depicts the shame and self-loathing that victims of sexual abuse feel. The exception, here, is that Millicent did not directly suffer the abuse. The book plays largely on this idea of a phone call (the very phone we hear ringing in the Prologue) that Millicent cannot answer because she cannot speak. This phone call is from Eleanor, Millicent’s sister-in-law, who is married to her brother Charlie. Millicent narrates: “What Eleanor does not understand, what she refuses to understand, is that the truth is unspeakable. The truth is a knife that slays. That September night a year ago, when she called from Edmonton, she was as incoherent and

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<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Gottlieb explores this notion of the problematic relationship between victim and victimizer by using the example of Naomi’s dream of the three “oriental” women: The dream acts out the mutually corrupting relationship between victim and victimizer. The victim would like to win over the aggressor, to seduce him. The process is humiliating and self-destructive. The aggressor has a sadistic enjoyment of power – he has the bayonet, the uniform, while the victims are defenseless and naked. In the very process the victims experience the nausea of shame and self-loathing – the denial of their own humanity. This self-loathing is becoming a sense of paralysis, the inability to move.” (34-53)

hysterical as she had been the night before” (8). Eleanor, whose “roots touch clearer water” has been “grafted” onto the family and knows the truth about Millicent’s father, Reverend Shelby. Eleanor’s pleas to Millicent are to get her father to tell the *whole* truth: exactly how many boys did he abuse? And, most important, did he abuse Millicent’s son Jeffrey? This last question that Eleanor asks as insistently as Aunt Emily asks for truth in *Obasan*, is not revealed to the reader until halfway through the book. In fact, for half of the book, readers are unaware that Millicent even has a son. Millicent’s narration is sparing in what it reveals and conceals. Because Millicent cannot possibly consider the idea that her father is a sexual abuser, let alone an abuser of her own son, she makes her son’s existence unsayable for half of the novel. Readers might believe for half of the novel that she is childless, and that Eleanor causes her such pain only because she asks for the truth about what happened to boys the family does not know. However, Jeffrey is only introduced into the narrative at the precise moment that Millicent is able to deal with the second part of Eleanor’s questions: did Jeffrey suffer sexual abuse at the hands of his grandfather?

Millicent is finally able to reveal her son’s existence, and thus his victimization by her father, through a fairytale.<sup>48</sup> Kogawa uses a fairytale to introduce Jeffrey to show that trauma is easier to narrate when it is removed from the painful particulars of its horrendous reality:

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<sup>48</sup> Again, here, I refer to the “double-woundedness” of trauma that Caruth discusses. The telling of a trauma acts as a second wound that retraumatizes the victim.

In the faraway island of Dr. Moreau, the years went by and the years went by and the king's daughter spent her time by the silent stream with the countless gnats that twirled and swirled and spiraled about. She drifted more and more into sleep, into a world of dream and shadow where her father was once again upright, unblemished, lordly and good. But beyond the silent stream was another world of courtiers and minstrels, a forest dripping with gossip and whisperings, full of wild and peaceable beasts. Into such a world, the king's daughter brought forth a child, a comely, bright-eyed baby boy. (108)

This baby boy, conceived through an affair with an older married man, is "lovely and laughing and full of song," but also as "vulnerable as the tiny wildflowers on the damp forest floor" (109). Millicent continues the narration of the fairy tale as signs of problems (the sexual abuse) begin to manifest themselves in the boy's behavior:

But into her pastoral, stealthy as a thief, crept mist and cloud, came the sound of muffled weeping and wailing. Now once again and more than ever, a heavy gloom engulfed her, and the daughter of the part-lion king knew no peace. At night, she hid her child beneath petals and leaves. She guarded him by day, her eyes alert. She shouted at shadows. She was fearful of she knew not what. (109)

Here, in a fairy tale, Millicent is finally able to face the ways that she failed to protect her child from being sexually abused by his own grandfather. The primary sexual trauma at the heart of the novel (the sexual abuse of Jeffrey, Millicent's own son), can only be narrated through several narrative "removals": the narrator herself did not directly suffer the sexual trauma, Jeffrey (the victim himself) is not a character in the novel, and the narration of the sexual abuse itself is introduced only through a fictional fairy tale. However, these narrative "removals" allow the readers to finally receive a full narration of sexual abuse. Just as Millicent's mind cannot hold the truth of the trauma, so can the narrative not hold together as it narrates the trauma. Thus, the trauma is narrated in a space outside the "double-wound." In this narration, we understand why Naomi in

*Obasan* is unable to stand within the space of her own sexual trauma for longer than five pages out of five-hundred pages and two novels. Here, Kogawa indicates the shape of a narrative about trauma, the shape of a narrative that does not bury abuse, but allows it to be told. Even in giving words to the trauma, however, we see that the language itself still must come at the painful truth of the trauma from a slanted view, that of fairy tale. The fairy tale mode is fictional enough to be safe as a mode of telling a story about sexual abuse. Only through the fairy tale mode is Millicent able to answer Eleanor's pleas for truth.

Eleanor's pleas to Millicent sound like the pleas of *Obasan's* Aunt Emily to remember, to uncover the truth, to deal with a painful past. Eleanor begs, "How on earth can there be peace if we don't deal with this? Now! Before it's too late! It's not just for him, Mills. I know I need answers. I need the truth, for God's sake. Let's have some truth!" (9). Just as Aunt Emily invokes history in her verbal assaults on Naomi, so does Eleanor to Millicent: "Millie – God help us – if there's just one thing that history teaches us, just one thing – it's that bystanders and perpetrators are both on the same side. . . . Face the rage, Millie. Let it out before it eats you alive" (10-12). Millicent responds mostly with silence to Eleanor's vitriol, but in her mind a war rages:

My father, Eleanor, my father, dear people of the jury, is known to be a good man. And so help me, God, this is also true.

But Eleanor, who knows better, who knows worse, chants her mantra in my midnight ear: The truth, the truth, the hidden truth. Take the sword and cut the knots. Then you'll be free.

The knots are in my bowels, Eleanor. A sword in the bowels is not usually there to make one free. (13)

The “sword in the bowels” symbolizes the acts of abusive sodomy her father committed with young boys, and reveals the trauma Millicent has suffered, just as if she herself were abused. Millicent reveals, “People go mad in these circumstances. Their minds unravel. As she drags me into the courtroom to take my stand, when I raise my hand and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, I am stating what cannot be done” (13). This unraveling of the mind that Millicent fears is indicative of post-traumatic stress, in which sense-making is a seemingly impossible task or journey. The journey that Millicent sets out on, begun by the phone call from Eleanor, is at an “impossible beginning”:

Once again, then, you are here at the impossible beginning, struggling with the fear that all you love may yet be required. You are standing at the top of the creaky stairs in the long moment before diving. You begin the decent, one stumbling step after another. The act of beginning is the same act over and over, the half-crazed act with pages torn from the heart’s walls and flung onto the debris-covered floor.

For almost as long as you can remember, you have been here, at the beginning, at the edge of knowing. (14)

Millicent, however, eventually tells the truth to the Bishop about her father. Although the church has known for years about the abuse, it is not until Millicent heeds Eleanor’s call to ask her father how many victims there may have been, that any healing can begin for anyone. Millicent makes that painful journey down those steps, as she “dives” and “stumbles,” “half-crazed” to talk to her father, to claim the truth from him and set herself on a course of healing.

When asked about the connection between *Obasan* and *The Rain Ascends*, Kogawa points out the importance of viewing trauma victims in a universal way:

Whether it [a trauma] expresses itself in a group, ethnic sense or in an individual context, to me they're both part of trying to unravel a mystery. The narrator, Millicent, says that a sword in the bowels is not usually there to set one free. That novel tried to unravel some of the entangled bits of the human psyche and put a face on evil. We don't overcome evil by burying it, by *not* seeing it. Why am I writing such work? Right from the earliest days of my life I had hunger to know the truth. I remember as a small child praying daily for it. I still do. I still want to know. I still hunger for something. I get baffled by our capacity to escape, to keep running on the surface of our lives. I get impatient with that. (Clayton)

The unraveling of the "entangled bits of the human psyche" is also a revealing look at the trauma survivor's difficulty in facing "evil," in giving words to the unsayable. In *Obasan* and *The Rain Ascends*, readers are encouraged to "put a face on evil," as Kogawa points out. Just as Naomi dreams of the "oriental woman" who tries to seduce her attacker in order to survive, and just as she finds shame in the pleasure her betraying body feels during the abusive episodes, so does Millicent need to come to terms with her father who is both "innocent as a cloud" and "a god," yet also a horrific monster who abused hundreds of boys and her own son (16). Evil, as Kogawa writes, is not easy to escape because it is not easily identifiable, slayable, and ultimately *sayable*. During the same interview mentioned above, Kogawa agrees that the main point of comparison between *Obasan* and *The Rain Ascends* is sexual abuse. The interviewer asks:

I wondered if the fictional expression of child abuse wasn't an attempt to address hypocrisy, because child abuse is often covered over by social hypocrisy, just as the treatment of the Japanese was covered over by political hypocrisy. I noticed that when you described the split that happens in the young girl in *Obasan*, it was done in terms of a lie. It wasn't so much the invasion of the body that was at the centre of attention, but the idea of a man going out in public and presenting a public face of decency when privately there is atrocity. That was my understanding of it. Does that make sense to you? (Clayton)

Kogawa responds to this query: “Yes, that does. That’s helpful. I always like it when someone comes up to me and explains something I’ve done. I really do. Often one becomes simply the vehicle for something that somebody else understands. Thank you.” Indeed, I argue that just as Naomi watches in terror as her father entrusts his possessions to Old Man Gower, so must Millicent understand that her loving father has been to hundreds of young boys the abusive “Old Man Gower” figure. I would add to Kogawa’s comments that Millicent’s book-length stance in the khora, at the “impossible beginning,” on the threshold of telling, is the picture of Naomi’s psyche as well. In this way, *The Rain Ascends* completes the journey toward speaking about abuse that *Obasan* began.

### CHAPTER III

#### TRAUMA MADE MANIFEST:

#### NARRATING RAPE IN LOIS-ANN YAMANAKA'S *BEHOLD THE MANY*

“My spirit will not leave them, and neither will these words I have given you. They will be on your lips and on the lips of your children and your children’s children forever.”

~Isaiah 59:21

Spoken by the Lord in the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, these peaceful words that end *Behold the Many* convey a peaceable world that ironically eludes the narrative of Yamanaka’s novel. Fraught with curses, vengeful ghosts who molest and are molested, and children who are abused and raped, *Behold the Many* (2006) narrates how trauma haunts a victim until the story of the trauma is fully exposed to the world. The novel begins in 1939 with an image of a young woman, horribly abused and raped, who is left naked, legs spread open, in the valley of Hawai’i’s Oahu island. Hosana has been bound, raped, her mouth cut from ear to ear. The narrative, which quickly travels back in time to 1916, does not return to this image, and how the woman has come to be raped, until the end of the novel.

Telling the story of Susanah (Anah) Medeiros’s life as a young Japanese and Portuguese girl until the death of her eldest daughter Hosana, the narrative of *Behold the*



*Many* buries sexual trauma as it happens, refusing to narrate Anah's rape by her Portuguese father, and the many other sexual traumas that occur throughout the novel. These incidents of sexual abuse receive passing mention while the other abuses that Anah and her sisters endure take center stage. Stricken with tuberculosis and sent away, one by one, to a Catholic orphanage, the sisters are physically and emotionally abused by the nuns; two sisters (Leah and Aki) eventually die from tuberculosis. Anah, the oldest sister, survives and leaves the orphanage as a bride to a Portuguese islander. However, the ghosts of her sisters and the other children who have died at the orphanage continue to haunt her new life on one of Oahu's cattle ranches. Cursed by one of the ghosts of the many dead children, Anah suffers a wedded life in which her body, her womb, and her children are physically and spiritually haunted. Yet, the narrative ends with the joyful words of Isaiah because Anah is forced to seek out her daughter's violated body in the valley, and in so doing, she metaphorically seeks out, locates, brings to light, and finally faces a past of sexual trauma. Hosana's violated body is sacrificed to the narrative of the novel so that Anah may finally heal from the physical, emotional, and sexual traumas that have resulted from the power struggles within Hawai'i's colonial ethnic hierarchy.

With a Japanese immigrant mother and a second generation Portuguese father, Anah Medeiros lives until the age of ten on an Oahu sugar Plantation in Portuguese Camp Four. Her Mother (Sumi) and father (Tomas) married when her mother escaped from her impending arranged marriage to a Japanese immigrant in Hawai'i and eloped shortly after Sumi arrived in Hawai'i. With an alcohol-induced temper, Tomas physically and sexually abuses his wife and three daughters, as well as physically abuses his second-

born son, Charles. A first-born son, Tomas, does nothing to stop the abuses, and, in fact, facilitates some of the physical abuses, because he is his father's favorite. Stricken with tuberculosis, little Leah is the first daughter sent to St. Joseph's orphanage when she is a young girl in 1913. Although Leah's age is not stated, her mother often calls her *akachan* (baby), and readers can infer from the story that Leah is about four or five years old. Following Leah, Aki and Anah also contract tuberculosis and are sent to St. Joseph's in 1914 and 1915. Anah is ten years old when she is forced to leave home and stay with the abusive Catholic nuns at St. Joseph's, never again to return home or see her mother and father again. Before Leah dies, and then Aki, Anah takes care of her sisters and promises them that their parents will visit them and eventually take them back home. Aki bitterly calls Anah a liar (*mentirosa* in Portuguese) and curses her before she dies.

As she grows up at St. Joseph's, Anah is haunted by her sisters' ghosts and the ghost of a little boy named Seth, who died several years before when he fell from a tree at the orphanage. Although Seth does not harm Anah, Aki not only haunts her, but also physically abuses her by scratching and tearing at her so much that Anah becomes unable to even wake up and leave her bed. While the sisters are at the orphanage, Anah's mother kills their father, who then haunts and sexually abuses the ghosts of his daughters. When she turns 18, Anah leaves the orphanage to marry Ezroh, ghostly Seth's brother, and the one who nursed her back to health following several particularly severe and bloody attacks by Aki's ghost. On her Portuguese father-in-law's cattle ranch, Anah and Ezroh have four daughters, but each is born cursed by Seth with a deformity or disability. Seth's curse on her womb and children comes to a climax when Hosana, Anah's eldest

daughter, is raped and murdered at the age of fourteen by a ranch hand with whom she had run away. Anah knows her daughter is dead when she sees the ghost of Hosana, and sets out on a quest to find her body on horseback in Oahu's rainy valley. After Hosana's funeral, the ghosts of Aki, Leah, Seth, and all the many children who have died at St. Joseph's leave the earth for heaven with Hosana as their guide, and Anah is finally freed from the curses of Aki and Seth.

### **Colonial Hawai'i as Setting: Anti-National, Interethnic, and Corporeal**

Unlike Lois-Ann Yamanaka's earlier novels, which are set in Hawai'i as a state of the U.S., *Behold the Many* is set entirely in Hawai'i as a territory of the United States when the plantation system ruled the political, social, and economic life of the islands' inhabitants. I suggest that Yamanaka's return to the territorial past of Hawai'i places the corporeal body at the center of the narrative by displacing national and citizenship concerns. In three key ways, which I will discuss in detail below, the setting of *Behold the Many* highlights the centrality of the traumatized, corporeal, ethnic/raced body. First, the setting erases the most common tropes of Asian American literature: nation, home, and citizenship. Second, the setting creates a kind of interethnic, transnational, and global literary space called for by current Asian American literary critics.<sup>49</sup> Third, the setting establishes the territory as an "ethnoscape" that refutes the notion of Hawai'i as an

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<sup>49</sup> Specifically, I will discuss Kandice Chuh's emphasis in *Imagine Otherwise* on the need for Asian American literature to "disown" America, and Caroline Rody's focus on the transnational, interethnic, liminal space in her book *The Interethnic Imagination*.

exotic/erotic tourist space.<sup>50</sup> In these three ways, Yamanaka's novel elides the usual binary focus of Asian American novels (and of critiques of Asian American novels) on assimilation and resistance, and allows bodies, the materiality of bodies, and the traumatized body to come to the foreground.

### **The Rise of the Body Through the Erasure of Nationhood and Citizenship**

*Behold the Many* does not cater to the usual tropes of Asian American literature, or other ethnic literatures, which provide "linear narratives of immigration, assimilation, and nationhood" (Saldívar 1). Zhou Xiaojing also writes about this tendency of Asian American literary texts to be set *and* read as assimilation narratives:

The relationship between Asian American literature and mainstream America has frequently been identified in terms of Asian American literature's resistance or subordination to mainstream America's domination . . . critics tend to evaluate individual texts and authors according to whether the texts demonstrate complicity with or resistance to hegemonic ideologies of assimilation. This critical approach overlooks the ways in which Asian American authors have resisted, subverted, and reshaped hegemonic European American literary genres. (Xiaojing, "Introduction," 4)

I concur with Xiaojing's opposition to reading Asian American texts purely in terms of a "binary scheme" in which "Asian American writers are either independent from or guilty

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<sup>50</sup> Arjun Appadurai coined the term "ethnoscapes" to indicate "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals are an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree." (*Modernity*, 33)

of complicity with dominant ideologies” (5, 4). I argue that Yamanaka anticipates and avoids this type of reading of *Behold the Many* by erasing the notion of nationhood, citizenship, and home-as-nation in her setting of Hawai’i-as-territory.<sup>51</sup> In this way, her characters are not overtly involved in an assimilation narrative; rather than being national *subjects* who are either complicit or not with their own assimilation, they are territorial *subjectivities*.

By removing the bodies of her narrative from a U.S. national, contemporary context, Yamanaka frees these bodies from being metaphors for the nation or national body politic.<sup>52</sup> As Zamora argues in *Nation, Race & History in Asian American*

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<sup>51</sup> Spickard writes about the socioeconomic differences between the island territory and the U.S.: “The main features that set the Hawaiian Japanese experience off from that in the continental United States were the islands’ plantation economy, the limited geographical movement available to Hawaiian Japanese, the contract labor system, the islands’ colonial status after the American takeover, a complex racial hierarchy, and the presence of a larger percentage of women in the Japanese population in the islands” (23).

<sup>52</sup> Zamora writes about the way that bodies are traumatized by virtue of being metaphors “for/to the nation.” By removing the nation as agent and traumatizer, Yamanaka highlights the other traumas enacted on the body within her narrative. According to Zamora, “the idea of the human body as ‘open’ text yielding a multiplicity of readings is at once at odds with the predominant impulse to authorize bodies, to limit and furnish their meaning with a final signification. In what ways has the body’s representative power been interpreted, especially in terms of nation and citizenship? It is in this interminable process of lending bodies metaphorical and figural meaning that literal bodies have often been violated. In the context of nationalism, literal bodies have become powerful metaphor or symbol for/to the nation, yet such figural appointments customarily result in the very real violation of the person inhabiting such a designated body. The material body often suffers under the sway of the figurative regime.” (25, 8)

*Literature: Re-membling the Body*, bodies are defined by the material and cultural facts of their existence:

When we look at bodies we don't just see biological nature at work. We see values and ideals, differences and similarities that national culture has 'written.' How can we understand the contributions of the body to the production of knowledge systems, regimes of representation, cultural production, and socioeconomic exchange? Bodies are necessarily interlocked with cultural, racial, and class particularities, and such 'interlocking' is by way of mutual constitution. (7)

However, in *Behold the Many*, Yamanaka experiments with this body to show how narrative itself constructs the body when the national discourse is lifted. I argue that Yamanaka connects "bodies and narrative structures," which is absent from most theories of narratology and theories of the body (Punday 8). Bodies and narratives are usually considered to be separate, but Punday attempts to describe and develop a "narratology of the human body" (9). Punday's lament is that "We have no 'corporeal' narratology – no serious or sustained attempt to give the human body a central role within the narrative" (2). I argue that by suspending the notion of nation, *Behold the Many* is a text that fills the void Punday notes. Yamanaka's novel allows the body to take that "central role within [a] narrative" about sexual traumas, physical traumas, racial traumas, and the inability to directly narrate those traumas.

### **The Rise of the Body Through the "Interethnic Imagination"**

Caroline Rody coined the term "interethnic imagination" to express the current moment in Asian American fiction in which the binary of us/them is displaced:

The America that Asian American literature now ventures to claim is no longer the symbolic possession of select, remote Others; rather, this

literature now claims the power of free entry into a multiply articulated and contested collective space. . . . Recent Asian American fictions portray less the struggle for a place in the American mainstream than the negotiation of shifting roles in an intercultural arena. Rather than contest the monolith America, recent texts tend to foreground regional U.S. settings, to some degree displacing the national episteme in favor of specific local forces and urgencies. Seeking to make themselves at home in the complex, multiethnic plots of the body of fiction, contemporary protagonists puzzle out an Asian Americanness uneasy with binary notions of “us” and “them.” (Rody 19, 21)

In *Behold the Many*, Yamanaka creates a “multiply articulated and contested space” in which the characters are not struggling against the “monolith America.” In Yamanaka’s colonial Hawai’i, “us” and “them,” as well as the notion of “assimilation,” are not terms with any currency. By “displacing the national episteme,” the novel creates a world similar to our contemporary world “of multiply articulated and contested collective space,” in which ethnicities clash more against each other than against a nation. This new “interethnic” novel “is being shaped in the hands of contemporary ethnic interactions, to record the ring and clash of multitudes meeting, and in doing so, to redraw social, geographic, and literary boundaries” (Rody 7). By setting her story outside the realm of the U.S. and citizenship, Yamanaka foregrounds the personal traumas that Anah faces, and the silences about those traumas. When the nation is the overarching, active agent of the story, “the necessity of projecting homogenous national citizens erases embodied difference” (Bow, *Betrayal*, 40).<sup>53</sup> In this way, Yamanaka’s readers are able to see more clearly the power struggle among opposing ethnic groups in

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<sup>53</sup> Zamora echoes Bow’s sentiment that citizenship “erases embodied difference”: “Citizenship thus depends on the projection of uniformity and equivalence. And perhaps more significantly, citizenship rests on a fundamental disavowal of difference” (19).

Hawai'i, including the way that power struggles affect Anah's home life and contribute to the cause of her sexual abuse. Anah's father rapes her not because he feels powerless at the hands of "monolith America," but because he is powerless in the complex ethnic hierarchy of colonial Hawai'i.<sup>54</sup>

Yamanaka's deviation from what Chang-Rae Lee calls the "very circumscribed family stories, within-the-house kind of stories [that are] expected of Asian American writers," also deviates from the *within-the-nation* narratives expected of ethnic writers. Thus, Yamanaka creates a literary space to "imagine otherwise," according to the title of the popular Asian American critical text by Kandice Chuh. Chuh suggests that Asian American writers need to "imagine" a new literary landscape in which the idea of "nation" is disowned:

What, then, are the implications of highlighting the deconstruction of nation as the framing grounds for Asian American studies? They include, I believe, the imperative to disarticulate 'nation' from 'home.' I want to suggest that Asian Americanists conceptually disown 'America,' the ideal, to further the work of creating home as a space relieved of states of domination. In other words, I am conceiving of home as that condition in which there is an equality of ability to participate in negotiating and constructing the ethos of the places in which we live. . . . 'Nation,' when it stands as a representative of the form of the modern nation-state, may be seen as a materially consequential epistemological construct that hinders imagining otherwise. I argue for disowning America with the awareness that the freedom to disown, conceptually or otherwise, depends on to some extent already possessing the advantages that nation-as-home avails. (124-25)

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<sup>54</sup> See Rody, especially pages 17-19, for a discussion of cross-ethnic relations in the new interethnic literary America.



Chuh reads Yamanaka's earlier novel *Blu's Hanging* as a narrative that "mak[es] available such an alternative frame" and that "theorizes an alternative epistemological space through its articulation of the failures of the heteronormative family as construct that secures the promises of 'home' as a space of fulfilled needs and safety" (140, 142). I argue that, with *Behold the Many*, Yamanaka continues to conceive what Chuh has called a "transnational sensibility," or a "space that eludes conscription by the national imaginary" (144). This different epistemic terrain in which "subjectivities [are imagined as] complex and troubled, not as purely oppositional or liberating," allows *Behold the Many* to critique the Asian American body as "subjectless" and emergent (144).<sup>55</sup> In this "transnational" state of imagining otherwise, the personal and racial traumas of the bodies within the narrative are heard, revealed, and acted out in a liminal "in-between" space amongst Hawai'i as state, Hawai'i as territory, the U.S. and Japan. Just as "trauma is enacted in a liminal state," so is Anah's trauma unique to her interethnic and liminal existence within territorial/colonial Hawai'i (Tal 15).

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<sup>55</sup> Chuh writes about the need to imagine "Asian American" outside the "presumptive" national formula: "[*Blu's Hanging* and studies about it] illuminate the need for Asian American studies to revisit the implications of working with nation as its presumptive basis and parameters. I have attempted to show here the impossibility of understanding 'Asian American' as an unproblematic designation, as a stable term of reference and politics that transcends context. And I have wanted to emphasize that given, as in the Hawaiian context, that Asian American studies stands as a discourse not of 'minorities' but of the 'emerging dominant,' to borrow Gayatri Spivak's phrase (1997), Asian Americanist discourse must look to itself to ensure that the partial and variegated freedoms enjoyed by both Asian American studies and various Asian-raced peoples are not merely celebrated but are leading to an elsewhere." (Chuh 145)

### The Rise of the Body Through a Negation of the Exotic/Erotic State

Although Hawai'i functions in the current national imaginary as an exotic and erotic space, Yamanaka's *Behold the Many* disavows this conceit of Hawai'i, and puts in its place a territorial Hawai'i rife with disease, trauma, and macabre ghosts.<sup>56</sup> In this Hawai'i, "the cultural style" and idea of America are not imported (Zamora 27). Anah lives within the world of the disease-ridden sugar plantation, and moves further away from, not closer to, opportunities for health and Americanization. She is born on the plantation and then goes to St. Joseph's orphanage and infirmary deep in the foothills of Oahu, and away from the city, away from Honolulu, away from modernity as represented in the city with its busy port and docks. From St. Joseph's, she moves to a cattle ranch in the mountains, where she lives among native Hawai'ians, Chinese, Portuguese, and other Japanese immigrants and Nisei. As a liminal subject, "outside the boundaries of the American nation-state," Anah experiences trauma that results from her liminality and the liminality of the island itself. For example, for much of the novel, she exists on a plane somewhere between health and illness, between life and death. She has tuberculosis, but

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<sup>56</sup> Of Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*, Zamora writes, "The portrayal of these three young children's world ruptures the popular myth of Hawai'i as an island paradise or a vacation resort (free of racial tension and ethnic strife)" (55). Zamora also describes how Hawai'i came to be a symbol of the exotic for the mainland U.S.: "Entangled in the imperial politics of globalization, Hawaii would come to serve as a crossroads, mediating interchanges of the Asian/Pacific east with the Anglo-Saxon West. And as Hawaii came to be fully linked and acculturated to the modern capitalist world system, it became a location not only of missionary conversion and plantation labor, but a site of tourist fascination and romantic endearment. Hawaii in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has emerged in the American popular imagination as a fantasyscape/ethnoscape or erotic/exotic bliss." (56)

never succumbs to it. In that space between living and dying, Anah interacts with the “Many,” who are the ghosts of all the dead children at St. Joseph’s. They call to her, abuse her, haunt her, curse her, and even possess her. Surely, this is not the splendid, tourist Hawai’i of popular imagination.

### **Physical Trauma in *Behold the Many***

The suspension of the nation-state and the exotic island allows Yamanaka’s narrative to foreground the varied bodies in crisis throughout the novel. By transcending the idea of Hawai’i as exotic Other to the mainland U.S., and by creating a world filled with ghosts who act on the living, Yamanaka underscores the way that the bodies of the text interact with and within the narrative. Divested of their supposed exotic history as inhabitants of Hawai’i, Yamanaka’s characters are imagined as subjects in relation to the personal traumas they have experienced, and the ways in which those traumas are either narrated or buried within the narrative. In this way, Yamanaka engages in a dialogue about the “tenuous coalitions of Asian American identity”:

A recognition of the overriding tension between the power of literature and art to transcend race/gender/sex/history, and the deconstruction of such presumptions . . . show[s] how strongly those differential forces impinge upon any notion of universality. And yet this consideration of the ‘worlding’ of these texts necessarily grasps the sleight of hand with which literature conjures historical specificity – using the medium of aesthetic distancing, the poetic, the obscure signs of the spirit-world, the sublime, and subliminal. Literature provides a chance to glimpse revisionary time and a chance to reinscribe our human historic commonality. Literature can imagine places beyond the *determined* representations of our world. (Zamora 31)

Yamanaka's "worlding" of *Behold the Many* uses the aesthetics of narrative and "sleight of hand" to present the way that trauma is buried in a narrative, which mirrors the way a trauma is often buried within the mind.

The opening of the novel focuses the narrative on bodies, materiality, and hidden trauma. In a prologue titled "Kalihi Valley," readers receive an image of a woman who has been raped and murdered. At first, however, the narrative conceals the traumatized body as part of the landscape, and in so doing, reflects the theme of narrative burial of trauma that haunts the entire novel:

The valley is a woman lying on her back, legs spread wide, her geography wet by a constant rain. Waterfalls wash the days and nights of winter storms into the river that empties into the froth of the sea.

In the valley, the rain is a gossamer cloth, a tempest of water and leaves. The rain is southerly with strange foreboding. The rain is northerly with cool rime.

The rain glistens on maiden fern, the wind rustling the laua'e, the palapalai touching there where it is always wet and seamy.

The valley is a woman with the features of a face, a woman whose eyes watch the procession of the celestial sphere; a woman with woodland arms outstretched and vulnerable, a woman with shadowy breasts of 'a'ali'i and hāpu'u, lobelias and lichens; a woman, a womb, impregnated earth.

O Body.

When they find her, she is shiny, she is naked, she is bound, but for her legs, spread open and wet with blood and semen. Tears in her eyes, or is it rain? Breath in her mouth, or is it wind? Her thicket of hair drips into her mouth, sliced from ear to ear. She is pale green, *the silvery underside of kukui leaves*; her eyes and lips are gray; *the ashen hinahina*; her fingers and feet are white; *the winter rain in this valley*.

O Body.

O Hosana. (3-4)

At first, this opening passage seems to present a metaphor in which nature is compared to a woman, but the passage quickly reveals the darker nature of the comparison. The passage hints at a "strange foreboding" and begins to describe the "outstretched and

vulnerable” parts of this woman’s body. Suddenly, “O Body” makes clear what the narrative had initially hidden: the valley may be compared to a woman, but this narrative is about *a particular* woman and how she came to be “found” in this valley. Nature conceals and reveals the woman as her tears, her breath, and the various colorings of her dead body are disclosed to the reader. Hosana has not just been raped and murdered; the crime has been hidden, the knowledge of it concealed within the landscape. Here, any notion of the exotic and erotic nature of Hawai’i crashes at the novel’s precipice.

This short, five-page prologue that begins with Hosana’s dead body in 1939, and that also flashes back to 1916 when Anah’s sister Leah dies, functions as an introduction to a question posed by Anah that drives the novel: “‘Tell me how, O Lord,’ Anah cries, ‘how have I offended thee?’” (8). This question, which ends the prologue, is addressed to “O Lord” because much of the prologue consists of variations of responsorial hymns of the Catholic faith. These responses are interwoven with the narrative, just as the body at the beginning of the prologue is interwoven with nature: “She places the corpse of her firstborn, her beloved Hosana, on a long table covered with her best lace tablecloth in the parlor. *Watch, O Lord.* She lights beeswax candles blessed by Father Maurice. *Those who weep tonight.* She folds her daughter’s hands on her breast with the knotted sennit rosary. *Bless your dead ones*” (6-7). The responsorial hymns that lace the story’s action underscore the importance of not only the Catholic faith to this novel, but of the *material nature* of the Catholic faith that is central to the narrative.

In this land without a “monolith” America, Yamanaka roots the Japanese Hawai’ian experience against the Catholic faith of the nuns, and the pagan traditions of

the Hawai'ian islanders. Juxtaposed in this funeral scene with the arrival of the Catholic priest and nun, the responsorial hymns, and a prayer to the Virgin Mother Mary, are Anah's pagan traditions of covering the body with special Hawai'ian foliage, and anointing the body with honey and royal jelly. Hosana, meaning "Save, we pray" in Hebrew, is often referred to in this prologue as "O Body," as if she were herself the body of Jesus Christ slain on earth and risen. The physical nature of the Catholic church, in which God is made manifest as his son on earth, Jesus' physical body rises and walks the earth after his brutal death, and worshipers partake of a wafer that (through transubstantiation) is believed to be the body of Jesus, is central to *Behold the Many* because it underscores the traumatized body as a character within the novel. Hosana, though dead, haunts the narrative as the reason why readers are rushed back to 1913, when the chain of traumatic events that ends in her death began.

As Father Maurice and Sister Mary Deborah arrive to take Hosana to the burial site, the narrative again introduces Hosana's traumatized body as a sort of sacrificial Jesus:

*Glory be to the Father.* The horse-drawn buggy pulls away.  
*To the Son.* The church bells echo.  
*And to the Holy Spirit.* She follows the body deeper into the valley.  
*As was in the beginning.* The valley is a woman lying on her back.  
*Is now and ever shall be.* The rain is a gossamer cloth.  
*World without end.* Her many dead ones surround her.  
*Amen.* A vincible God resides in this valley. (7)

The prayer seems to be said not *for* Hosana, but *to* Hosana, who is that "vincible" God who was violated and slain in the valley. Named after a call to God ("Save, we pray"), Hosana, and her traumatized body, must be sacrificed like a Jesus figure so that Anah can

come to full acknowledgement of the traumas that have occurred in her life. Thus, the narrative forges forth into the sugar plantation world of 1913, when Anah is a girl and the narrative goes about the business of semi-revealing and burying the various traumas she endures.

Although the Prologue focuses on trauma and a traumatized body, the first several chapters focus on race and how it contributes to the traumatization and violation of Anah, her mother, and her sisters. Race and trauma, specifically Anah's and her sisters' sexual violation at the hands of her father, are intertwined in these first chapters, and throughout the remainder of the novel, just as the traumatized body, the earth, and Catholicism are intertwined in the Prologue. In fact, the traumatized body, racial trauma, and landscape/nature remain in a triangular play with each other throughout the novel.<sup>57</sup> The first chapter opens with an image of Anah's mother secretly combining Hawai'ian herbal remedies to cure her youngest daughter, Leah, of tuberculosis. Okaasan, Anah's mother, is sharply contrasted in these opening pages with Dai, the Portuguese father who has built their house in Portuguese Camp Four "far away from Japanese Camp Three" (9).<sup>58</sup> In

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<sup>57</sup> Catholicism plays a larger role in the novel after Anah is sent to St. Joseph's Orphanage.

<sup>58</sup> See Spickard for a review of plantation life, especially the ethnic housing situation: "The plantations were multiracial places, but not melting pots. From 1892 to 1915, between one-half and three-quarters of the plantation workforce was Japanese. But there were also large numbers of Filipinos, and Chinese, as well as Hawaiians, Haoles (Whites), Koreans, and Portuguese. An ethnic hierarchy prevailed: owners were Haoles, mostly Portuguese filled the luna [overseer] spot, and the darker races did the manual work. Owners divided the field laborers into separate ethnic gangs, each typically with

this scene, as in several others, Dai comes home angry to find his wife dallying with island remedies that are a mix of Hawai'ian and Chinese medicines. Sumi (or Okaasan, as the children call her) has been “disowned” from her family in Japan, and is cut off from her Japanese heritage on the sugar plantation: “she had no one, no family to turn to, disowned from Nihon to Hawai'i to Amerika to Kanada to Buraziru. She had disgraced the aggressive village matchmaker from Yanai City and her own desperate father by running away from her marriage contract, running from the docks of Honolulu Harbor with the filthy, hairy Porutogaru-go” (17).<sup>59</sup> Sumi's vulnerability to Tomas (or Dai, as the children call him), is apparent when he first appears in this opening scene “as a huge, grotesque shadow” who “push[es] Anah out of his way, knocking over crates and planks” (10):

“Sumi,” he called to his wife, “whassamatta you?” Homemade mead on his breath, he grabbed the tin can from her, sniffed it, then threw it over his shoulder.

“No, no! Baby sick-u, Tomaso,” Okaasan cried. She coughed into her hands to demonstrate the child's illness.

“How come you no cook my kaukau? Pau work, past pau hana time,” Dai said, pulling Okaasan toward him by the sleeve of her cotton kimono. Okaasan would not respond. Dai was drunk. He spoke in Portuguese even though Okaasan did not understand. “My house is always filthy. And there is no food on my dinner table. My mother cooks better, anyway. Thomas and Charles,” he called to his sons, “I am eating dinner

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its own living quarters and each paid a different wage. The separate quarters gave people a place to speak their native languages, cook their native foods, and keep company with people from their homelands. They also helped the planters rule, by dividing the working class. Some mixing did occur in the workplace, however. One fruit of that mixing was Pidgin, a polyglot language built on Hawaiian grammar using words from all of the languages of the plantation” (Spickard 24-25).

<sup>59</sup> Yamanaka uses the pidgin dialect and a combination of phonetic spellings throughout the novel, to mimic the nuanced languages of Hawai'i.



with your grandmother. You can come with me or go hungry with your damned useless sisters.” (10-11)

Dai, with his abuse toward Anah and Okaasan, takes physical charge of this scene. The children and Okaasan are defenseless against his rage and his racist verbal torrent. Dai’s remarks clearly show his view that Okaasan is inferior due to her Japanese heritage and her status as woman and wife.

Race, as traumatic wound, is compounded in these early pages of the novel by the association of illness, dirt, and filth with the Japanese immigrants and workers.<sup>60</sup> Dai is “ashamed of the stigma of the consumption that threatened his entire extended family living in Portuguese Camp Four. And all because of *his* infected youngest daughter” (12). The white doctor who examines Leah recommends that she be taken to St. Joseph’s orphanage because Dai cannot afford to send her to the hospital. To Okaasan’s question about the diagnosis of “consumption,” the doctor replies “as though she were deaf and stupid”:

“Yes, Mama-san, tu-ber-cu-lo-sis . . . . Con-sump-shun. Very ki-ta-nai. Very pi-lau. Very su-jo.” He looked pleased to speak the word *dirty* in many plantation languages. (12)

When Okaasan questions her husband in her native language about consulting with the Japanese doctor provided by the plantation owner, Dai and the white doctor insist again

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<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of the association of immigrants in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with filth and dirt, see Markel & Stern who assert, “at critical junctures in American history, immigrants have been stigmatized as the etiology of a wide variety of physical and societal ills. Anti-immigration rhetoric and policy have often been framed by an explicitly medical language, one in which the line between perceived and actual threat is slippery and prone to hysteria and hyperbole” (757).

“with great impatience and import” that “the girl is ki-ta-nai, Mama-san, *dirty*” (13). Fraught with rhetorical misunderstandings, racial disparagement, and misogyny, the discussion amongst the doctor, Okaasan, and Dai clearly designates the illness as dirty and a racial rather than medical problem:

“Me take her back to Nihon,” Okaasan said. “Maybe they can provide proper treatment in Japan,” she consoled herself in Japanese.

“We have no money. The poor send their children to orphanages. It must be done or Mr. Campbell will take away my job,” Dai said in an angry Portuguese. “It cannot be helped. It is God’s will.”

She did not understand his words.

“We no mo’ money, Sumi-san. Listen doctor,” Dai said, taking her face in his hands. “No mo’ money for sanatoria. All kine family in plantation same-same. Children sick, go St. Joseph.” He would have hit her had the doctor not been there. “Meu familia,” he said at last with great concern, looking out the window toward Vovó Medeiros’s [his mother’s] house. “I no like them sick from this *Japanee* illness.” He stopped, catching himself.

“*Your* family. You only think about your own kind. Your own kind is filthier than the pigs,” Okaasan said in Japanese. “The Portuguese do not even bathe every night. Even the women are covered with hair. Your kind stinks worse than the Chinese. Our daughter was infected by the Portuguese.”

“Speakee English,” he said, glowering at her. “You listen me. And you listen doctor. All pau. No mo’ talk.” (13-14)

In this passage, language itself becomes a barrier and a tool of assault that victimizes all parties involved. Most importantly, though, is the way that both Sumi and Tomas attempt to cast the stigma of disease onto the other’s ethnicity. In the end, however, Sumi loses the battle. Not only are her opinions and desires negated because she is a woman, but also because her social and ethnic/racial status is lower than the doctor’s and

her husband's.<sup>61</sup> In this "space of hybridity" between Sumi and Tomas, ethnicities are rooted against each other and the "lower" ethnicity loses (Kobayashi 65).

As each of Anah's sisters is sent away to the orphanage, the rift torn between child and mother traumatizes them. Furthermore, Anah is traumatized by the way her sisters are literally and metaphorically ripped from her. Leah, the first to go, is left on a bridge, symbolically cast outside her home and outside the orphanage to no particular place she will ever again be able to call home:

Then under a grove of mountain apple trees, near a patch of beautiful white ginger, on a bridge over a raging Kalihi Stream, they left her.

She clung to Okaasan as Anah untied her from the sling. And then she held on to Charles, who screamed her name as the nuns pulled her away from him. Leah wriggled loose and ran back to Anah's open arms, the huge white nun restraining her tiny arms and legs.

Anah felt Leah torn from her body, torn from that space in her belly left churning and empty. (17-18)

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<sup>61</sup> See Kimura's discussion of racial hierarchy among plantation workers, especially as this relationship is revealed through wage earnings: "According to the report of the president of the Board of Immigration for the period from 1888 to 1890, the monthly wages paid to contract laborers by ethnic group were \$19.53 for Portuguese, \$18.59 for Hawaiians, \$17.61 for Chinese, \$15.81 for South Seas Islanders, and \$15.58 for Japanese. The differential wage scale for different ethnic groups for the same type and amount of work continued after Hawaii became a United States territory. The discrepancy in daily wages applied to skilled workers in 1905 was cited by William L. Abbott, educational director of the United Rubber Workers, AFL-CIO, as follows: \$4.38 for Caucasians, \$1.68 for Hawaiians, \$1.61 for Portuguese, \$1.06 for Chinese, and 97 cents for Japanese. As late as 1909, Japanese plantation laborers were paid \$18 a month while Portuguese and Puerto Rican workers received \$22.50 and were given better housing as well. Also, the Portuguese, Spanish, and Russians who were brought to the Islands under the *Induced Clauses* of 1907, whose objective was to curb the numerical predominance of the Japanese plantation laborers, were paid a wage one-third higher than that paid to the Japanese." (89)

Anah's pain in her belly foreshadows the connection of this trauma to the eventual trauma she will suffer when her womb is cursed, resulting ultimately in her oldest daughter's rape and murder. Yamanaka uses narrative interludes within chapters to signal the way that the trauma the girls' experience ruptures forth and impedes a cohesive narrative. The first of these narrative interludes, called "Little Leah's Lament," is Leah's first person narrative account of the first day at the orphanage. Importantly, this interlude, which like the others narrates traumatic moments, also introduces us to the ghostly Seth, with whom Leah converses. Leah believes that Seth is Jesus, but the narrative later reveals Seth to be the ghost of a Portuguese boy who died by falling out of a tree when his dairy rancher father delivered goods to the orphanage.<sup>62</sup> Leah begins her "lament" through child-like song, and then begins to comfort her parents with reassurance that she will return home:

Rain rain go away come again another day.  
No cry Okaasan. Only rain in my mouth. The blood all pau. I like  
come home.  
See Dai. No more blood. I promise. The cough all pau now, Dai. I like  
come home.  
No more pilau.  
No more blood.  
Only the blood of a lamb. Jesus stay with me now. He the boy with  
white hair. The one was waiting for me on the bridge.  
'Be not afraid,' he say to me.  
I not afraid. I Leah.  
'Sister of Rachel,' he say.  
No, sister of Anah.  
'Sister of Zilpah,' he say.  
No, sister of Aki.

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<sup>62</sup> Anah eventually marries Ezroh, Seth's brother.

‘Sister of Bilhah,’ he say.  
No, sister of Charles.  
‘Daughter of Laban,’ he say.  
No, daughter of Sumi.  
Jesus get all the white ginger.  
Make tonic, I tell him. Just like my mama.  
‘For your long hair. Wear it in your hair,’ he say to me.  
But they take me away from him. He stay on the bridge with the white  
ginger in his hand. (19-20)

Introducing Biblical stories to a narrative that begins with the messiah-like sacrifice of Hosana, Seth places Leah in a biblical lineage of characters from the Old Testament Book of Genesis.<sup>63</sup> Although Leah ‘argues’ with Seth about who she is, his presence is a comfort to her in the midst of the trauma of being abandoned by her family.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to the trauma Leah suffers by being torn from her family, she is further traumatized by the nuns who abuse her as they “clean” her with pig soap, shave her hair to eliminate lice, and beat her when she attempts to use pagan rituals to heal herself.<sup>65</sup>

Seth, who follows Leah into the orphanage, manifests himself the first time by placing

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<sup>63</sup> See Genesis 24:24 – 31:55 for the story of Laban, a member of Abraham’s ancestral family and father of Rachel and Leah. Bilhah is the servant of Rachel and concubine of Jacob, an adopted son of Laban.

<sup>64</sup> Leah narrates, in her lament, Seth’s constant presence with her: “Rain rain has gone away. Another day. No one has come see me. I like go home. No one come get me. I like go home. No one but Jesus. Jesus with me now. Jesus is a boy with white hair. Jesus is a sad boy. Jesus is a lonely boy. Jesus is just like me” (21).

<sup>65</sup> Leah’s traumatization, and Aki’s that follows, are key to Anah’s personal trauma because all of the traumas are linked in the story. Anah is eventually cursed and suffers because she gets better and leaves the orphanage, while Leah and Aki die without ever seeing their family again.

white ginger all over her bed. A German nun, believing that Leah has placed the ginger there as a pagan healing ritual, punishes her:

“Nein heathen practices. Nein pagan rituals. You will confess your sin.”  
Head stomach shoulder shoulder.  
The stick on my head. The stick on my back. The stick on my legs.  
Somebody had put white ginger all over my bed. (22)

Aki and Anah receive the same treatment when they arrive at the orphanage. They are abused, especially by the German nun, Sister Bernadine. Another nun, Sister Mary Deborah comforts the sisters as much as possible through the abuses they endure.<sup>66</sup> As their mother and father never return for them, and never visit on Visitation Sundays, the sisters have only each other and the ghost of Seth to help them cope with the physical abuse of whippings, forced hard labor, and being locked in a closet for days without food, water, or a toilet.

### **Ghosts and Spirits: The Haunting of Anah**

Although Seth is a calming, reassuring presence for the sisters, he is also a mischief maker (see the earlier example of how he causes Leah to receive a beating by placing ginger on her bed) and eventually comes to symbolize, along with Aki’s ghost, the manifestation of all of the pain and trauma endured by Anah’s sisters and all of the other abandoned, dead children who haunt the orphanage. When Aki dies, she joins Seth

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<sup>66</sup> The sisters are abused by the nuns due to their ethnicity and illness. Other children at the orphanage have families that visit once per month, and so the nuns cannot leave visible scars on those children. The Medeiros sisters, however, are abandoned by their family and never receive visitation. The nuns, especially Sister Bernadine, use their higher social position (as whites) to abuse the abandoned *Japanese* sisters.

in cursing Anah for still living and for lying to Leah and her about their parents' eventual return. In one key scene, the narrative reveals how Aki's traumatized and angry spirit fuses with the living Anah. In this scene, Leah has already died and the Medeiros family has sent a note requesting that Aki and Anah not be allowed to return home for their father's funeral. Aki "relinquished all hope" upon hearing of the Medeiros family's letter, and succumbs to the tuberculosis. However, before Aki's death, Anah stands watch at the locked infirmary doors:

But late at night, Anah stood whimpering behind the locked doors, the glass painted a shabby opaque mustard.

'Aki, hear me. You are my only remaining family.'

With her fingernails, jagged from scrubbing pots and dishes as punishment for not attending to her lessons and her refusal to speak the holy Rosary for her dead father, Anah began to etch a peephole in the paint. Small enough to see her sister, small enough to be undetected, Anah watched Aki through that hole. There was no one beside her bed to comfort her.

Aki emerged from that bed six days later, her body thin and frail, her pallor gray, eyes black rimmed and sunken, her hair brittle to the touch. She breathed heavily through her slack, open mouth, her back bent, and her spirit finally broken. But the spirit that left Aki's body fused with Anah's.

*You will never break me.* Anah spit into Sister Bernadine's oatmeal before serving her.

*You will never break me.* Anah endured the whip of her guava switch across her face.

*You will never break me.* Darkness entered; her heart was a cold stone.  
(81)

In Aki's resurgence before she finally dies a few days later, her spirit "fuses" with Anah, and Anah begins to take on the feisty, quarrelsome nature of Aki. During those few days in which Aki seems to exist between life and death, Anah and Aunty Chum Song, one of the kitchen hands at the orphanage, hear Aki talking to Seth:

“Seth?” Auntie Chong Sum gasped as Anah finished wiping the last of the dinner dishes. “Seth Soares?”

“She calling him Monkey Boy,” Anah told her. “Leah use to call him Jesus. He live around here? Maybe he come play with them from someplace around here?” Anah did not want to believe the stories that Leah and Aki had told her about the boy. He had *not* fallen from the tree. He was a *real* boy who came onto the grounds to play with them.

“They *seen* him?” Auntie Chong Sum asked, wiping her hands on her dirty apron. “They *play* with him?”

“Yes”

“*You* seen him?”

“No. Why?” Anah asked her, soaking the baking sheets in the sink.

“No, you no play,” she scolded, taking Anah’s hands in hers. “No play. He longtime dead.” (82)

As Auntie Chong Sum tells Anah about Seth’s death, she assures Anah, “He good boy, very good boy, but dead, very dead boy.” However, Aki immediately perks up, and responds that Seth is not dead and is, in fact, standing next to her. Yamanaka’s world of real, active ghosts and spirits (i.e. Aki’s spirit) who help and prey on the living reveals itself through these passages.

The world of ghosts that Yamanaka creates includes Dai, whose abuse of his children even after he dies indicates how trauma haunts victims. First, when Leah dies, she exclaims, “No, Dai, no!” and “Dai, no!” (5). Second, when Aki is about to die, she exclaims “Dai. No, Dai! Run, everybody, run!” (83). Finally, when Aki dies her words “extinguish the candle on the bed stand”: “Go, go ‘way, Dai” (91). The scene of Aki’s death is heart wrenching for readers who understand, as Anah does not, that Aki is about to die and be physically and sexually abused by her father. As she coughs up blood, Aki tells Anah, “He *is* coming” (91). Thinking that Aki is referring to Charles, their brother, Anah responds with a lie:

“Yes, Charles coming.”



“Liar,” she [Aki] said, wincing with her next breath. Then she opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling just as Leah had done and took in a labored breath.

“Aki,” Anah whispered, taking her sister’s face in her hands. “No leave me.”

“Dai, no!” she cried.

Anah placed the cube of honeycomb between Aki’s lips. She closed her mouth to its sweet melt, her body melting in Anah’s arms. “Stay here, Aki. In remembrance of me,” Anah frantically whispered.

Aki’s body stiffened. “Go, go ‘way, Dai,” she said, her words extinguishing the candle on the bed stand. She took in a final breath, held it, then exhaled one last time. A single tear fell from her eye. [...] But Aki returned to struggle one last time against the threat of knife and the coming of death. She scratched at the air and then at Anah’s face.

“Mentirosa,” she hissed at Anah in their father’s Portuguese.

And then she left, calling Anah with her last word:

*Liar.*

Her mouth was open, her eyes horrified and stunned.

Hand clenched in hand, Anah waited for morning. (91)

While Anah ritualistically anoints her sister, and even invokes the words of Jesus at the last supper (“in remembrance of me”), she is unaware of the trauma that awaits Aki on the other side of life. Through the invocation of the Catholic faith, Yamanaka suggests the materiality of the spirit or soul that can walk/haunt the earth.<sup>67</sup> Aki literally sees Dai and may be said to have a traumatic response to his ghostly/bodily presence as she “stiffen[s]”, cries, “struggle[s]” and “scratche[s]” at the air.

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<sup>67</sup> My argument here rests on the cornerstones of Catholic faith: that bodies can rise from the dead to walk the earth, and that bread and wine can become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. I refer here to the Catholic belief that Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and buried, and rose on the third day to walk the earth. See Matthew 28:9-10 and 16-20, Mark 16:9-18, Luke 24:13-49 and John 20:14-31. Also, see Matthew 27:52-53 in which the “bodies of saints” are resurrected and “appeared to many.” Most importantly, I refer to the Catholic belief in transubstantiation, whereby the bread and wine of the sacrificial offering literally (some would say “magically”) become the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Through a narrative interlude entitled “They Speak in the Tongues of their Ancestors,” Yamanaka not only develops her ghostly world that mirrors the way that trauma victims are continually haunted, but also inextricably connects sexual trauma and race.<sup>68</sup> In this narrative section, Sumi (Okaasan) talks to the dead Tomas (Dai) and Leah, who visit her as ghosts. Sumi has murdered Tomas with poison, and he returns to haunt her and tell her that he will rape the ghostly bodies of her dead and dying children. Calling her a “beloved whore” who made him useless girl babies with her “useless body,” Dai calls, “Sumi? Is that you, my sweet little Sumi-chan? Come closer and spread your legs so I can smell you” (86). Even in his death, Tomas objectifies Sumi and renders her nothing but a body recognized by and used for sex. Further connecting sexuality, trauma, and race, Dai’s narrative continues:

Catch her [Leah] if you can. Come out, come out wherever you are. She wants to play with me, Sumi-chan. She wants me to touch her. And I will. The way I touch you at night, put my hand over your mouth, put my

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<sup>68</sup> For a discussion of ghosts in Asian American literature, see Jung Ha Kim: “What’s With the Ghosts?: Portrayals of Spirituality in Asian American Literature.” Kim suggests that ghosts are a “positive” force in Asian American fiction; they are “life-sustaining” in the “ghost country America.” Furthermore, Kim asserts, “these stories of ghosts represent a way to resist the powerful force of assimilating racialized people into the dominant culture. The stories of ghosts can be read as attempts to narrate the ‘social construction of reality’ of Asian Americans. [ ...] The ghosts are spirits of the ancestors, rhetorical agents, repositories of the past, and useful cultural interpreters. They demand the protagonist to remember, invent, and change the past to fit the situated present. As relational characters with their own idiosyncratic tendencies, the ghosts also change their minds and learn from the protagonists. The authors often use the outcries of ghosts to critique, correct, and heal survival traumas in Asian America” (241-43). My argument diverges from Kim’s in that I suggest that the ghosts are tools of the narrative that show how memories rupture forth in the present. Furthermore, it is important to note that Yamanaka’s ghosts are not “positive” in nature; they injure and rape, as well as comfort and heal.

weight on your struggling body, then put my long deep flesh inside until you bleed. Japonêsa cunt. Did you know that the match-maker sold you to me for cheap? For a one-way ticket home? He is still around somewhere drinking sake all day all night. I see him all the time. He is a happy drunk. He likes to watch you bleed. . . . Hey, little one. Hey, little Leah. Come to Dai. Come sit on my lap. Paipa drives a nice buggy. See the big horsey? Let's go for a ride, just you and your paipa. (87)

Tomas admits that, when he was alive, he nightly raped his own wife “until you bleed” and warns that he will rape Leah “wandering around in that yellow dress. . . I will rip it off her before I spread her legs. As soon as I catch her” (88). In his exchanges with his living wife, Dai continues to sexually traumatize his wife (and children) even after his death.<sup>69</sup> Located in a narrative interlude between chapters, this exchange highlights the erupting nature of trauma, which ruptures forth at the reader through chapters, in the middle of the narrative. The narrative continually breaks away in these interludes among the chapters; the interludes usually introduce first person narrations of trauma (often sexual) that disrupt the narration of *Anah's story*, of the stated narrative purpose of the novel: why has Hosana been raped and murdered?<sup>70</sup> The narrative, with its shifts and interludes suggests that all of these other traumas in the novel contribute to and cause Hosana's death.

In a narrative interlude titled, “This is Who Killed Her,” Yamanaka reveals not only how the murder happened, but also suggests the way that trauma can only be healed

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<sup>69</sup> See also p. 25: “Anah listened to Dai grunting in the next room, Okasaan's quick breath, placating his anger with her numb body. The shucked grass mattress shifted and moved under their bodies.”

<sup>70</sup> Refer back to p. 8 of the Prologue: “‘Tell me how, O Lord’ Anah cries, ‘how have I so offended thee?’”

by locating, narrating, and defining the trauma. After Hosana has run away, at age fourteen, with a ranch hand but then declares her intention to return to her mother after finding herself pregnant, the ranch hand (Shifuku) hires a vagrant to kill her. The hired ‘hit-man’ is to take Hosana from their house and murder her. So, while Shifuku listens loudly to music at precisely the time he told the hit-man to arrive, Hosana is stolen from the home and dragged to a nearby field:

The pale man with the sandy hair bursts in on her. He hits her over the head with a heavy piece of wood. She is unconscious. He binds her hands with rope as planned. It is raining. He drags her by the hair to the open field nearby as planned. He slices her throat from ear to ear.

The pale man with the sandy hair goes back to the house. He is paid for his work.

“Why did you have to make it so fucking bloody?”

The pale man shrugs his shoulders. He leaves the house. He leaves the island. He is a vagrant. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida. (330)

The narration of the crime is striking for what it reveals and conceals. Although Hosana has been raped, the aspect of the crime that is made apparent in the Prologue, the rape itself is not narrated. I suggest that this is because Yamanaka focuses her novel on what happens when a trauma is ignored, buried, and dismissed from consciousness as intrusive and too painful. Furthermore, this narrative interlude focuses on the one who inflicts the trauma on Hosana: a white, sandy-haired man who is a “vagrant” from Tallahassee, Florida. Here, Yamanaka makes clear to the reader that this a racial crime inflicted by a “pale man” on a racial other.

This racial and sexual crime, occurring in a liminal space outside the nation-state in territorial Hawaii reflects the liminal state that results from trauma. As Yamanaka has suspended the notion of the nation, or “disowned” it as Kandice Chuh suggests,

throughout the novel, here in this interlude we see the nation-state intrude on the island territory in the form of a white vagrant who inflicts the kind of trauma usually reserved for bodies traumatized, as Zamora writes, by virtue of being metaphors “for/to the nation” (25). In this interlude, where readers expect to receive a narration of the sexual trauma endured by Hosana, Yamanaka provides a narrative of a racial trauma removed from the “us/them” binary of the traditional assimilation narratives popular in contemporary Asian American literature. In this way, the racial and sexual traumas are inextricably linked, especially through the reader’s voyeuristic expectation of finally receiving the narration of the rape. Instead, the rape is withheld from the reader, and is notable in the way it is silenced and buried by the narrative. The vagrant who inflicts the trauma leaves the “island” once the crime has been committed, but has left his mark forever on Hosana and the landscape of the island, which symbolically “holds” the trauma endured by Hosana.

The narration of searching for Hosana, punctuated throughout with “O Body” and “O child” is a metaphor for Anah’s searching within her own memory and lifetime for the traumas she has endured and that have been narrated throughout the novel. The novel focuses not only on the traumas, both sexual and racial, that are endured by Anah, her sisters, and her mother, but also on the way that Hosana’s death forces Anah to finally confront the traumas that have been endured by all, by the “many” of the title. Anah has already been forced in the novel to get on a horse and ride into the valley to search for the body of her murdered daughter. Anah, who has been raped by her father, but whose rape is buried in the narrative, and her sisters whose ghostly bodies have been sexually

molested by their dead father, have not ever told the traumas they endured, in life or death. Their ghosts are not even allowed to narrate the sexual abuses against them within the space of a chapter narration. Instead, the ghosts, and the traumas they represent, haunt the edges of the narration in narrative interludes, on the edges of the story about the living Anah. All of the victims in the novel are victims by virtue of their gender and race. Yamanaka's novel provides a narration of how racial and sexual trauma become conflated and eventually rupture through the narratives that trauma victims attempt to tell about themselves.

## CHAPTER IV

### READING RAPE IN PATRICIA CHAO'S *MONKEY KING*:

#### REJECTING THE BODY AND DOMESTICITY

“As I hope my study illustrates, power lies in the capacity to find or *create* individual, personal meaning from a traumatized and tortured past. If traumatized events are not repressed, they can be *used*: victims remember and imagine stories to be repeated and passed on. That is, when the stories of the past are consciously recognized, the cycle of violence can end, because the *narratives*, not the sadomasochism or the trauma, are repeated and passed on.”

-Deborah Horvitz<sup>71</sup>

Sally Wang of Patricia Chao's *Monkey King* (1997) is a victim of sexual abuse and incest who tries to “use” her memories, and the multiple narratives tangled within them, to create meaning from her “traumatized and tortured past.” Although Sally is not outwardly concerned with ending a “cycle of violence,” as Deborah Horvitz writes above, she does eventually bestow long-needed words to the memories of her father raping her and to the ensuing psychic trauma. Through her narrative, she becomes an “active

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<sup>71</sup> Horvitz, Deborah M. *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2000.

witness,” which this chapter elucidates through a close analysis of Sally’s response to the sexual trauma. Of being an “active witness,” Kalí Tal writes: “Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression” (Tal 7). Sally’s decision to become an active, “aggressive,” witness to the trauma of her sexually abusive past is punctuated by the self she recovers at the end of this fragmented, disjointed novel which mirrors the fragmented nature of recalling trauma. Reviews of Chao’s novel focus on the racial journey of protagonist Sally; however, I argue that the novel’s driving force is the story of her sexual abuse and the struggle to narrate the trauma that results from the abuse. I return to the larger, central question of this study: how are memories of sexual abuse so often narrated alongside tales about racial oppression in Asian American narratives by women? How do these memories of sexual abuse come to be entangled with memories of racial existence in America? How is the telling of these experiences bound together? Furthermore, how does this simultaneous narration affect the reader?

Sally’s simultaneous narration of sexual trauma and racial awareness within a disjointed text of flashbacks, time shifts, and ghostly imaginings mirrors the way a trauma victim narrates abuse. The narrative itself reflects the trauma victim’s situation of being stuck within traumatic memories of sexual abuse and racial oppression that are too difficult to narrate. According to Grice, “This secret of sexual abuse is wholly enmeshed with Sally’s and her parents’ experiences as Chinese Americans, and the process of



coming to terms with her abuse is bound up with the integration of her Chinese and American selves in a coherent selfhood” (“Mending,” 84). I argue that this novel, so silent about *racism*, is nonetheless filled with continual references back to her Chinese ancestry whenever the memories of her abuse intrude into her consciousness. Furthermore, this return to race as a narrative focus occurs at the expense of narrating sexual abuse so that the racial and sexual traumas within the novel must compete for narrative primacy.

In this way, Sally’s personal narrative of trauma against her physical body becomes entangled with her narrative(s) of racial awareness, social status, and political identity. Chao intertwines these narratives of sexual abuse and racial existence, but the narrative of the novel, like the recall of trauma, is fragmented, demanding an equally fragmented narration. Not only does Chao appropriate the form of the novel to tell a story of sexual abuse, she also re-appropriates the narrative form by fragmenting it to mirror the fragmented protagonist. Furthermore, I focus on the various broken domestic spheres (caused by the rape) through which these fragmented narratives are woven in order to demonstrate how Sally’s childhood rape by her father in her own bed, and the lingering trauma resulting from the abuse, result in Sally’s rejection of the American domestic dream.

The novel opens when twenty-eight year old Sally has just tried to commit suicide by swallowing pills. Her attempted suicide is precipitated by a slow but steady decline into “incoherence” and clinical depression in which she divorces her husband, distances herself from friends, endures frequent nightmares, and loses the ability to work, read,

drive, paint, and talk to others.<sup>72</sup> After checking herself into a Connecticut psychiatric hospital, Sally eventually tells her mother and sister about the abuse as well as narrates what she remembers to her therapist and in-hospital therapy group. After leaving the hospital, Sally stays with her Aunt and Uncle in Florida, commences a sexual affair with a former patient from the hospital, and finally moves back to the apartment she shared with her ex-husband in New York City. When the novel ends, Sally has faced many of her worst nightmares, her ghostly father no longer haunts her, and she is able to fully feel “exquisite” life (307).

Earlier chapters establish the richness of reading works by Hisaye Yamamoto, Joy Kogawa, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka through attention to form and literary tradition, as well as to culture, ethnicity, and sociology. This chapter follows with a continuation of Rocio Sue-Im Lee’s call to find a balance between “materialist and formalist Asian American literary criticism” (1). Lee suggests that our interrogation of Asian American literature needs to seek a “complimentary possibility of historically and materially engaged analysis that *also* recognizes the aesthetic as a rich critical variable” (1). By the “aesthetic,” Lee refers to the form and function of a text, narrative style, and genre. Zhou Xiaojing echoes this needed intervention in Asian American literary studies:

[...] until recently, in much criticism the locations of Asian American literature were usually conceived in terms of geography, ethnicity, sociology, and national history. More often than not, critics have situated the formations of Asian

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<sup>72</sup> Ghislaine Boulanger writes about the universally ‘human’ process of simultaneously being “voyeurs” and “witnesses” of traumas so that “experiencing an initial state of incoherence might be a necessary condition of the healing process” (21).

American literary traditions within Asian and Asian American histories and cultures, in opposition to or separately from “mainstream” European American culture and literature. The relationship between Asian American literature and mainstream America has frequently been identified in terms of Asian American literature’s resistance or subordination to mainstream America’s domination. [...] This critical approach overlooks the ways in which Asian American authors have resisted, subverted, and reshaped hegemonic European American literary genres. [...] Formal and stylistic features are sites of struggles, for they are coded with ideologies and marked by subject positions. (4-5)

Xiaoqing’s invocation of the ways Asian American authors have “resisted, subverted, and reshaped” traditional genres echoes the narrative and aesthetic strategies at play in *Monkey King*. Just as “formal and stylistic features are sites of struggles,” so does Chao construct a fractured and fragmented narrative that conveys the nature of Sally’s trauma through narrative repetition, flashbacks, imaginings, and abrupt shifts of time and place. Through these modes of narration, the very act of remembering is aesthetic in this text. This aesthetic view of the text offers clues for understanding the relationship between the sexual and racial traumas in the story. While critical studies of the novel have completely ignored the domestic themes within the novel, and almost completely ignored the incest plot, I focus specifically on placing this text within the trope of American domesticity and within the genre of modern trauma literature. Furthermore, I explore what *Monkey King* contributes to literary trauma studies as the novel brings domesticity, or a rejection of it, into a triangular play with ethnicity and trauma.

## Narrating Traumas

Kandice Chuh questions the seeming impossibility of narrating a traumatic past, and also ponders the “investment” in narrating an experience, trauma, past, or memory.<sup>73</sup> For Sally, the “investment” in narrating her trauma is evident at the end of the novel; however, readers never get the chance to “hear” the narration of the trauma because these narrations take place outside the text. Readers of the novel learn secondhand that Sally has discussed the details of her abuse to her therapy group and to her mother. In this way, Chao refuses to narrate the unnarratable. Instead, Chao depicts the aesthetic wanderings and copings of the traumatized mind and body. In this novel of unnarratable events, Chao shows us Sally coping with her traumatic past in some negative ways (cutting and destructive relationships) and in some positive ways (re-imaginings of her father’s life, and artistic renderings of her surroundings). The novel is also punctuated throughout with Sally’s most common coping mechanism (and in fact, a common trope within the novel): the escape from domestic spaces.

Deborah Horvitz stresses that the “investment” in coping with a trauma and narrating a trauma is in the coherence achieved, and in the fact that no two narratives of trauma are the same, despite any similarity of traumatic event. Thus, Horvitz rejects the notion of a universal, “uni-dimensional,” or “totalizing” narrative of trauma (5-6). This necessary disavowal of any essential trauma experience negates the totalizing notion, for example, that all internment narratives by Japanese American writers can be grouped into one

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<sup>73</sup> See Chuh’s “Discomforting Knowledge, or, Korean Comfort Women and Asian Americanist Critical Practice”

category of trauma literature. Similarly, as pertains to this chapter, all Chinese American fiction narratives cannot be grouped out of a presupposed notion of the trauma of assimilation and prejudice. An essentializing analytical practice not only elides the specificity of the texts, but also misses what Horvitz astutely describes as a *reciprocity* of both internalizing material life conditions *and* projecting oneself onto material surroundings: “individuals internalize the material conditions of their lives, by which I mean their social and economic realities, through symbols, fantasies, and metaphors in order to build a unique and personalized interpretation of the world. [...] Personal meaning is either consciously or unconsciously projected onto materialist culture by intersychic representations” (5). Thus, in the study of literary traumas, the specific material conditions of a protagonist’s life need to be considered: home, personal belongings, speech patterns, narrative style, etc.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman writes, “Chronic childhood abuse takes place in a familial climate of pervasive terror” (98). In *Monkey King*, Sally’s father rapes her repeatedly from the age of five until puberty. The narrative alludes to the fact that the abuse stops only when Sally moves away to boarding school in eighth grade. Herman describes how we might imagine an incest victim’s home life, and the state of terror that induces Sally’s cutting behaviors, nightmares, flashbacks, and attempted suicide:

Survivors [of chronic childhood abuse] describe a characteristic pattern of totalitarian control, enforced by means of violence and death threats, capricious enforcement of petty rules, intermittent rewards, and destruction of all competing relationships through isolation, secrecy, and betrayal. Even more than adults, children who develop in this climate of domination develop pathological attachments to those who abuse and neglect them, attachments that

they will strive to maintain even at the sacrifice of their own reality, or their lives. (98)

We can see, then, how Sally has developed an attachment to her father, to a “working out” of her relationship with him, even long after he is dead. Sally is stuck seeking a way to understand what her father has done to her, how he can be both cruel and kind. Sally looks to her father as the head of the family, the leader of the domestic space, the one who sets tone and authority, who establishes right from wrong, acceptable behavior from unacceptable behavior. In this way, children look to their parents to understand their identities, to understand their origin of being, and to create narratives about their lives. In *Women, Native, Other*, Trinh Min-Ha writes about this narrative-making and seeking to understand one’s authenticity and origin, but losing the connection and logic amid the fear that the origin may not be pure, relatable, and comprehensible:

Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, mend, categories always leak. Of all the layers that form the open (never finite) totality of “I,” which is to be filtered out as superfluous, fake, corrupt, and which is to be called pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic? Which, indeed, since all interchange, revolving in an endless process? [...] *Authenticity* as a need to rely on an ‘undisputed origin,’ is a prey to obsessive *fear*: That of *losing a connection*. Everything must hold together. In my craving for a logic of being, I cannot help but loathe the threats of interruptions, disseminations, and suspensions. To begin, to develop to a climax, then, to end. To fill, to join, to unify. The order and the links create an illusion of continuity, which I highly prize for fear of nonsense and emptiness. Thus, a clear origin will give me a connection back through time, and I shall, by all means, search for that genuine layer of myself to which I can always cling.” (94)

At the beginning of the novel, we see Sally’s life collapsing around her as she desperately tries to “mend” the “leak[y]” fragments of her self. In the beginning of

the novel, Sally wanders around Chinatown, imagining she sees the ghost of her father everywhere, which symbolizes the lost childhood that haunts her. Sally “craves” for a “logic of being” and a narrative without the “interruptions, disseminations, and suspensions” of her flashbacks. Searching for an answer, for that “genuine layer of [self],” that might break the spell of the flashbacks, Sally searches the streets of Chinatown for an origin of her pain or very being. Whether inside, outside, or even on the very streets that represent her ethnicity, Sally still feels the disconnection with her core self that resulted from the abuse.

### **Reader Expectations: Popular and Critical Reception of the Novel**

Chao has said in an interview that she was surprised by the reader reception of her work: “At my readings, there’s been an interesting mix. Out of, say, 35 people, there will be about five Asians. I also thought when I was writing it that it was a ‘chick book.’ But my audience has been divided about fifty-fifty between men and women.”<sup>74</sup> We can see then, that something about the narrative of *Monkey King* calls forth the more

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<sup>74</sup> In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth writes about how a writer’s readers are found, or “made” by the author: “The author makes his readers. If he makes them badly – that is, if he simply waits, in all purity, for the occasional reader whose perceptions and norms happen to match his own, then his conception must be lofty indeed if we are to forgive him for his bad craftsmanship. But if he makes them well – that is, makes them see what they have never seen before, moves them into a new world order of perception and experience altogether – he finds his reward in the peers he has created”(397). Of Booth’s discussion of how readers are made, Esther Ghymm writes: “Booth’s point is especially relevant ... for if an American audience is to understand stories with Asian and Asian American characters, the authors have to employ the right elements of style and structure to make the audience understand their intentions” (*Images of Asian American Women*, 6).

“mainstream” reader audience that Chao notices at her book readings. Chao herself noted that she was writing a “chick book,” not an “Asian American” story about the immigrant experience. Indeed, this novel is not about racism or race so much as it is about a girl who is raped by her father. Narrative theorists Scholes and Kellogg write “the story takes the shape its author has given it, a shape governed for us primarily by the point of view through which the characters and events are filtered” (275). This narrative viewpoint suggest that Chao’s novel appeals to a more “mainstream” or “white” audience because it fits into a tradition of American literature aligned with canonical American themes or narrative structures.

Although *Monkey King* received impressive reviews upon its release, most reviews referred to what Jeffrey Partridge calls the “sacred” and “hidden” in order to attract mainstream American readers to the “exotic” flair of the novel.<sup>75</sup> In fact, the back cover of *Monkey King* refers to secrets that have torn asunder Sally’s Chinese and American identities:

Monkey King tells the story of twenty-eight-year-old Sally Wang, a young Chinese-American woman whose mental breakdown and sojourn in a hospital set her firmly on the path of memory. Her recovery takes place against a rich tapestry of culture and personality that unfolds before our eyes under the Monkey King’s ghostly shadow. For Sally has been living with a terrible family

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<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the descriptions on the back covers of many novels by Chinese American authors are misleading in their attention to supposedly “mysterious” and untold secrets: “The descriptions seem to suggest that by uncovering the mystery of one family, we will uncover the mystery of the Chinese people. Moreover, that which is secret, hidden, terrible, haunted, and tangled in the family becomes indistinguishable and inseparable from that which is secret, hidden, terrible, haunted, and tangled in Chinese culture” (Partridge 71).



secret, one that has shattered her life. How she pulls together her Chinese and American identities into a cohesive self and rejoins the land of the living is recounted with a wry and refreshing honesty.<sup>76</sup>

The advertising of the book, then, reveals a tendency to market the book as both Asian American and mainstream, to be both “exotic” and “safe” in the minds of the average (white) reader. In effect then, the paratext of the novel, as well as the reviews of the novel, appropriate and label the novel as an Asian American text rather than a text about sexual abuse and incest.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the novel’s praising reviews, research reveals a paucity of critical studies devoted to the novel. At this writing, the novel receives scant attention in critical studies of Asian American literatures or ethnic literatures, and only three scholarly articles are devoted to an analysis of the novel.<sup>78</sup> Thus, a novel praised for its skill, narrative, and characterization receives little critical analysis. I surmise this may be a result of the novel’s main focus. *Monkey King* is the only Asian American novel whose narrative is specifically about incest, and in fact, even takes its title from the incestuous episodes in

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<sup>76</sup> David Palumbo-Liu and Jeffery Partridge criticize these types of book descriptions as being part of the “model minority discourse” that creates an Asian American literature limited to an “arena of disease and cure” (Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American* 401). Partridge correctly points out that the copy misstates the source of Sally’s pain and trauma: “The copy suggests that the protagonist’s problem of ‘split self’ comes not from an abusive father (as the actual novel has it) but from the split between her ‘Chinese self’ and ‘American self’” (*Beyond* 72). Also, note that the back cover incorrectly states Sally’s age as twenty-eight. In the text, Sally states her age as twenty-seven.

<sup>77</sup> See Gerard Genette’s *Paratexts*

<sup>78</sup> For a critical discussion of *Monkey King* in a monograph, see Partridge, Jeffrey F.

which the protagonist refers to her father as the monkey king. I suggest that the Asian American categorization/ghettoization of the novel as well as the taboo of incest keeps critics away; furthermore, the narrative focus on incest trauma scares away Asian American literary critics, who try to fit novels by Asian American authors within a tradition of Asian American history, culture, and literature.

In favor of appropriating the novel as an Asian American narrative, reviews of the novel tend to ignore or only marginally mention the incest in the novel. When a review does mention the incest, it tends to incorrectly state the source of the Monkey King moniker, downplay the significance of the incest, and verge on deriding the incest plot. For example, Deborah Kirk writes in *Salon Magazine* (27 Feb 1997): “As it happens, ‘Monkey King’ is also the name assumed by the narrator’s father in the middle of the night, when he comes to his daughter’s bed to force himself on her. This is where you start thinking: Please not another Dad’s-magic-pole story. But Chao succeeds with a difficult subject; she has taken a topic that nowadays veers dangerously close to cliché and written a well-crafted and engaging story.” Furthermore, the three scholarly articles about *Monkey King* are not solely studies of the novel; rather these articles analyze the novel *along with other texts* through themes of memory, hunger, and canon formation. Furthermore, each of these articles contains factual errors about the novel, which I will explain below. A close review of these three articles reveals not only surprising relevance to the factual errors, but also critical silences created by the authors of the articles.

The most recently published article is Pearson’s analysis of the legend of the Monkey King in the American literary canon. Pearson studies Chao’s novel along with

another novel by Gerald Vizenor to suggest ways that American authors appropriate the Monkey myth, and essentially “Americanize” or “naturalize” (358) the legend. In this way these authors “appropriate non-Western traditions as material for American literature,” just as “Washington Irving naturalized his German and Spanish sources or that China naturalized its Buddhist Indian influences or that Japan naturalized its Chinese, and by extension, Indian influences” (358). Pearson seems to suggest that this authorial appropriation of cultural myth and legend is a natural part of canon formation and widening; he writes that Chao and Vizenor “imitate, parallel, or invert” the Monkey King character in order to integrate him into American literature. While I agree that Chao is not writing within a strictly Asian context, or even within a strictly Asian American literary canon, I am shocked by the near silence within Pearson’s article about the incest plot. Pearson talks around the edges of the abuse and comes to the preposterous conclusion that Sally realizes she has had to “endure” her life in order to be enlightened: “Just as the Buddhist pilgrims learn they must endure their trials in order to gain enlightenment, Sally realizes that her attachment to her hatred and anger is self-destructive” (365). In order to achieve enlightenment, must she endure being raped by her father, as well as relive the rape and post-traumatic psychosis that ensues? Surely, this is a far too pithy conclusion to draw.

When Pearson does discuss the abuse, he misstates the title’s significance and presence in the novel: “By having Sally’s father call himself the Monkey King while abusing her, Chao turns the figure of Monkey against itself” (360). Pearson is incorrect that Sally’s father calls himself Monkey King; it is revealed in the novel as a Chinese tale

her mother used to tell her, and that Sally then focused on during the abusive episodes. In this way, Sally would disassociate from her body, the rape, and the fact that her own father was raping her (in order to pretend that it was the figure of the Monkey King). However, Pearson's analysis of her father being Monkey (regardless of who gives him that moniker) while raping her is quite astute: "Instead of being a heroic pilgrim who leads others to enlightenment, Chao's Monkey wounds his family, drives wedges between them and almost pushes Sally to her death. Similarly, Chao converts Monkey's favorite defensive weapon, his magic cudgel, into an instrument of rape, incest and child abuse" (360). Pearson refers here to the magic stick Monkey King can make either long and pointy or short, which is clearly a phallic symbol representing the rape. The remainder of Pearson's discussion of the novel centers on Sally's movement within the novel, which I interpret to be her relation to domesticity. This concept will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

A second article about Chao's novel, a book chapter by Kurjato-Renard, also eschews discussion of incest for a focus on "hunger and satiety." Again, Chao's novel is not the only focus, but shares the chapter with an analysis of Lan Samantha Chang's collection of short stories, *Hunger*. Kurjato-Renard's silence regarding Sally's abuse is profound, especially considering that Kurjato-Renard specifically focuses on silences in the novel: "food as art and rejection of food, the metaphors of hunger and the silencing of the parallel trope of satiety [...] attract the readers' attention to the spiritual and physical feeling of emptiness." The article, then, focuses more on Sally as an artist, and less on what the title of the novel directs attention to: the rape of Sally by her father.

A third study of Chao's novel is Helena Grice's book chapter on memory, trauma, and narrative in novels by Chao, Aimee Liu, and Joy Kogawa. Grice points to the tendency in Asian American women's narratives to "place an experience of trauma within a cross-cultural context, in which explicit parallels are drawn between parental experiences of immigration and racism, and the daughters' own suffering as a result of sexual abuse" (82). Grice specifically studies Patricia Chao's *Monkey King* (1997), Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1985), and Aimee Liu's *Face* (1994) to show how narratives of sexual abuse are narrated alongside narratives about being an ethnic person in America:

All of the novels place an individual experience of the trauma of sexual abuse in a wider cross-cultural context of their parents' own experiences as ethnic subjects in America. While the narratives often commemorate these experiences, and explicit parallels are drawn between ancestral/parental suffering and daughterly suffering, in each case, the parental desire to forget the past is ultimately shown to contribute to the daughters' on-going psychological trauma. (82-83)

Grice points out that this literary "phenomena" of simultaneous narration of racial oppression and sexual abuse is not specific to Asian American literature alone; rather, it is integral to the narratives of all "culturally marginalized writers" who tend to write about an "insistence on workings of memory as incomplete, flawed, often ahistorical and subjective" (81). Thus, in the literatures of all ethnic writers in America, we tend to encounter narratives about the recovery of memories of physical abuse, particularly sexual in nature.

These memories come through the narrative *with* and *through* stories about the realities of being an 'other' in America: racism, oppression, and degradation due only to being a non-white person living in America. Grice elucidates the simultaneous white

American attempt to forget its own acts of oppression and the inability of the past to stay hidden: “Many ethnic American writers remember the racism that WASP American culture has asked them to forget; while ethnic American writers also remember oppressions that result from both racism and sexism” (81). I agree with this main concern about common tropes of abuse in Asian American and ethnic literatures; however, Grice writes only about the *tendency* within Asian American prose narratives for a daughter to remember her parents’ histories of personal oppression along with her own memories of abuse. I argue that the simultaneous narration of sexual abuse and race in Asian American narratives is manifest through narratives that mirror the traumatic experience. In *Monkey King*, Sally is the victim of her father’s racial oppression, as he takes out on her (though sexual abuse) the powerlessness he feels as an immigrant in America. In his home, he steals the power that he cannot get outside the home; he appropriates the domestic sphere, turning it into a sphere of terror and abuse of his own making.

### **The Monkey King Myth**

The Monkey King legend appears halfway through Chao’s novel, which is significant particularly for the silence about it through much of the novel for which it is named. For bed-time stories, Sally’s mother reads from a book of Chinese folktales, specifically the Monkey King legend. The scene is painted sweetly, juxtaposed strongly against a terrifying scene only a few pages earlier in which Sally narrates a full flashback of her father raping her while she imagines him as the Monkey King. During the bed-

time story, Sally's mother sits in "one of the baby rocking chairs Nai-nai gave us when we were born" (155) as five-year old Sally and four-year-old Marty listen with "suspense" to this tale about a god-like monkey with a phallic tale:

One of the stories is called Monkey King. The Monkey King is a god and he doesn't look like a monkey at all. His head is painted blue and red and yellow and he has the body of a man and a long curly tail. He has a pole that he can make small to carry, big to hit people with. Even though he has eternal life, he's not happy, and is always making trouble in heaven. When he's assigned to guard the Queen Mother's magic peach garden, he ends up gobbling up all the peaches himself. (156)

Sally notes that her mother punctuates the story with "such a greedy, greedy monkey" while "looking at us [Sally and Marty] like we're greedy too" (156). Although scared as well, Sally assures her younger sister that the Monkey King is just "make-believe." Her mother, however, asserts that he is real by claiming to have seen him once in China as a little girl when she took a cruise on the Yangtze River. To console the frightened children, she adds, "he's not interested in humans, in a small boat like that" (156). It is important to note that at this point in the narrative, Sally has already been raped by her father, who she imagines as the Monkey King. Furthermore, this episode of the Monkey King bedtime story is bookended in the narrative by two upsetting scenes. In the first episode, Sally uncomfortably sits on her father's knee as he holds her "stiff, too tight." With hesitation, she lovingly gives him a picture she has drawn of a shell, but the next morning she sees that the picture has been discarded and "caught under a chair leg [on the patio], already ruined by rain" (155). The second episode, also unsettling, is the removal of all children's books and stuffed animals from Sally and Marty's bedroom, despite the fact they are only five and four years old: "'You read by yourselves now,' Daddy says"

(157). When her stuffed animals are removed, her mother tells her “Your daddy says you are grown up now, you don’t need anymore” (157). Sally lies in the bed that night and declares to Marty that she is going to run away. Both of these episodes highlight Sally’s lost childhood and superficial connection with her father.

In addition to establishing the negative relationship with her father, each episode links Sally’s relationship with her father to a negation of the domestic sphere. In the first episode, the drawing intended for her father lies symbolically tattered outside the house. In the second episode, Sally expresses the need to leave her home and run away after her childhood has been swept away in a symbolic heap of toys and books. Just as Sally’s father appropriates her body by raping her, so do her parents appropriate her childhood by eschewing all things innocent and childlike. Later, as Sally reaches adulthood, she negates and rejects the domestic sphere that her father appropriated and contaminated with each visit to her bedroom.

The Chinese legend of the Monkey King is a popular myth about a trickster monkey, yet Sally appropriates this myth and sexualizes it in order to cope with sexual abuse. J. Stephen Pearson discusses the use of the Monkey King legend in American literature, using Patricia Chao’s novel to make use of the mythology in her fiction:

What is here called the Monkey tradition refers to a family of legendary stories that grew up around a historical incident from the seventh century: the journey taken by the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang (also spelled Hsun-tsang, but usually referred to by his Buddhist name, Tripitaka) to bring Buddhist scriptures from India to China. Over the centuries the stories were expanded to include a set of three magical disciples – Monkey, Sandy, and Pigsy. Several versions of the tradition have been written, the most famous of which is the sixteenth-century novel *Xiyou ji* (also spelled *His-yu Chi*), generally attributed to Wu Chengen.



The Monkey King has already been given the name 'Sun Wukong' (Monkey who awakes to vacuity) when Tripitaka encounters him. In fact, the first seven chapters of Chengen's novel involve the elaborate adventures of the Monkey King, whose most important characteristics (for the purposes of Chao's novel) are his greed for power, his omnipotence, rebelliousness and his magic cudgel that he can make long or short (phallic symbol). The stories begin with Monkey's birth from an immortal stone, and progress to Monkey becoming a beloved king of a group of monkeys at a magical land behind a waterfall. Eventually, Monkey becomes restless with his power over the monkey group; he wants more power, the power over life and death. His quest for immortality also earns him the ability to fly, change shape, and various other magical powers. All of this happens before Monkey is commissioned to help Tripitaka on his divine journey. Pearson writes: "As a cultural icon, Monkey is loved as much for his rambunctious behavior in heaven as he is for his maturation into a heroic Buddhist disciple whose faithfulness to Tripitaka's journey not only promotes the growth of Buddhism in China but also earns him Buddhahood, being promoted by the Buddha himself as 'Buddha Victorious in Strife' (357). By appropriating the myth of the Monkey King as the moniker for her father, Sally inherently connects her trauma to her Asian America heritage. Thus, a legend (the Monkey King) that has nothing to do with sexuality is made overtly sexual by Sally's juxtaposition in her mind of the Asian American myth and the incest episodes.

The incest is introduced in the novel as a flashback while Sally visits a Chinese medicine woman in Chinatown; the smells of the Chinese medicine woman's shop and

the flashback to abuse that immediately follow inextricably connect Sally's sexual abuse with her Chineseness. Her mother has taken to the medicine woman because she has been acting differently: she no longer plays with her friends, her teacher has said that she is suddenly non-responsive at school, and she retreats into silence at home. As the medicine woman pulls out a jar of oil and water, the smell of the jar's contents bring Sally back to a night of sexual abuse:

It's the smell. I open my eyes to dark and there's a change in the air, a new body in the room. The bed sagging gently as someone sits down.

In the faint light from the window I can see his outline: the long curving torso, the bulbous head set into a thin neck, just like pictures in the book. There's no tail, but I imagine it curled underneath like a worm.

"Be quiet," says Monkey King.

Look Marty, I want to say, but of course Monkey King is right, I am not allowed to talk. It would break the spell.

So I lie still, as still as if I were dead. The hand, pushing up my nightgown. I can feel the ridges on his fingertips against my skin. Then my underpants are dragged down to my ankles, a flood of cold, and I think I might wet myself, but I don't. (137-38)

These first images of her flashback to the abuse, nestled within a narrative about visiting a Chinese medicine woman to cure her of her dis-ease, highlight the way that Sally pretends that her father is the Monkey King – the very legend her mother reads to her before bed at night. He looks "just like the pictures in the book [about the Monkey King]" as she "imagines [his tail] curled underneath like a worm." The memory continues to rush back to Sally, unobstructed by the present:

Nails as rough as crab claws between my thighs. That stick he has, that he can make bigger or smaller when he feels like it. Or is it his tail? I can't tell. Ma said it hurt like this when I was born. Like she wanted to die. Like it would never stop. It cracks my bones apart. The curtains are flapping. Go to the ceiling. But sometimes I don't fly up there fast enough, or else drop down too soon.

With one hand he holds my wrists together over my head, with the other he covers my mouth. He is the Monkey King, he is immortal, he cannot be stopped. Tears wet my hair, but I do not make a sound. He doesn't need to cover my mouth, he doesn't need to whisper that he will kill me if I say anything to Ma. He lets go of my wrists and I feel his fingers in the hair at the back of my neck. This is the sign that it is ending. The first time I thought he was throwing up, but nothing came out. When he is quiet I let my eyes fall closed. (138)

The flashback makes clear that the abuse is not a one-time event. Her father has not only raped her on several occasions, but has threatened her life if she tells anyone. In her powerlessness, Sally imagines that he is "immortal" like the Monkey King, and that she cannot possibly stop him. Indeed, how would a young girl stop her father from raping her? Rape, regardless of whether it is incest, is a crime of power. In this instance, her father asserts over Sally the power he cannot have as a Chinese immigrant within the public sphere of the United States. For example, in the next chapter, Sally announces that her father "teaches Chinese to Yale students but not to us, so although we understand a little we can't speak it" (141). Sally and her sister are passive recipients of their Chinese heritage, a heritage that is seemingly lorded over them as control of them, through language, legend, and even through sexual abuse.

Further connecting the incest episodes to her race, the incest flashback is immediately followed by two episodes that draw attention to her Chineseness and her father's control over the domestic sphere. First, the flashback is abruptly ended with asterisks within the text and a return to the Chinese medicine woman's shop:

"Aiih!" the lady's voice is right in my ear and I want to wince away but I can't, I'm being held tight around the shoulders by Ma.

"Look Sally," she says. . . "Mei Shei says that someone has put a curse on you." (139)

As the women are “jabbering away in Chinese,” Mei Shi hands her mother some “cures” in plastic bags, one of which contains dried blood: “Ma will boil it in water for me to sip from a mug. It will turn my breath and sweat bitter so that the kids from school will say pee-yeww! And no one will want to stand next to me in line. . . . It works. The Monkey King never comes to my bed again” (139). The second incident that connects the incest to her Chinese heritage and her father’s appropriation of the domestic sphere occurs in the chapter immediately following the incest flashback when her parents argue over corporeal punishment and Sally’s hair. At first, Sally’s mother and father argue in Chinese, and Sally’s sister “claims she understands” (140). When the parents begin speaking in English again, Sally’s mother scolds her husband for spanking the girls: “Bad for character. . . My father hit me and it didn’t make me study more” (140). Spanking, another way in which her father attempts to gain power over his children is a sensitive subject for Sally, who imagines that she can have power over her father in at least this one area (corporeal punishment): “No matter how hard our father hits us, though, he can’t make me cry. I can tell by his face just how much he hates that I can get to my feet, pull my skirt down, and walk upstairs like nothing happened. Marty used to cry, but I have taught her not to. Now my sister and I show each other our bruises and agree that he is a weakling” (140). Attempting to strip her father of his power over her when he is not the “Monkey King,” Sally is at least able to wrestle control of her bodily and emotional reaction to being abused. However, the abuse itself is not something she can stop. Suddenly, the conversation switches to an argument about Sally in particular: the length of her hair: “My father’s voice gets higher, louder, filling my head no matter how hard I

press my palms against my ears. He is cursing in Chinese, peasant curses. Marty and I call it his murder voice. Ma's voice stays low and cool, like he could shout all night and she wouldn't care. Still, Daddy will win the argument, like he always does. I will have two long braids until I die" (140-41). Here, Sally's father exercises his control over all aspects of her life, particularly her body. Furthermore, his desire to keep her hair long signals his desire to keep her young and conquerable; long braids symbolize her girlhood, the very thing he appropriates when he rapes her.

Sally must feel that the Monkey King (her father) controls her life by not only appropriating her body, but also by appropriating the very space in which she lives. Viewing the legend of the Monkey King in terms of Asian American reception of myth and legend, Sally's parents would have told this myth as a means of teaching limits: that one should understand authority and not question it. In fact, a study of reader reception of Chinese American writers in Hong Kong, Hardy C. Wilcoxon found that Chinese students valorized myths and legends as morality tales that offer the correct way to live in order to please one's family.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Sally would have understood the myth this way; her mother frequently reminds her of what a good Chinese daughter should and *should not* do or say in order to make her parents (particularly her father) proud.<sup>80</sup> Students felt that "to a greater or lesser extent, [...] Asian American works tend to misrepresent and

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<sup>79</sup> Wilcoxon's study focuses specifically on reader reception of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

<sup>80</sup> Wilcoxon borrows from Jauss' theory of reception and "horizons of expectation."

defame Chinese culture and Chinese people” (316), but that the texts were also “a reminder that we need to see things from our parents’ point of view” (322). For example, students remarked that the myth-heavy Asian American texts made plain their parents’ benign intentions to help them “retain their culture in the face of outside influences” (323). However, this magnanimous view of Chinese parents’ motives in relaying these myths to their children is countered by a less noble view among the students in Wilcoxon’s study that parents “use these myth[s] ... to control us” (320). Indeed, by naming her rapist the “Monkey King,” Sally signals that her father, partially through his Chineseness, controls her body, her sexuality, and even her language.

### **The Monkey King: The Novel**

Since *Monkey King* receives its title from an ancient Chinese oral legend, it is especially fitting to shape a discussion of the novel through the Chinese legends within the novel. In the fourth part of this four-part novel, Sally imagines an episode in which her father tells his college students about the Chinese legend of the herdsman and the weaving maid. This vision is seemingly precipitated by Sally staring at the self-inflicted scars on her arms, and then at her hands:

I looked at my arm, the right one, without the scars, at the curve of the forearm bone, the pronounced knob on the outside of the wrist like my mother’s. My hands, of course, were my father’s. I imagined the way his long fingers had held the chalk as he stroked characters on the blackboard for his first-year class. Though my mother was known for being strict, Daddy was willing to be led off on a tangent. What are the characters for planet? for comet? his students would ask. He’d put down the chalk and tell them the legend of the herdsman and the weaving maid, two stars doomed to be separated by the Milky Way because they had loved each other too much and forgotten the rest of the world. My father

would have turned it into a moral tale. The weaving maid had deserted her father for another man and he had punished her by forever denying her what she desired most. (259-60)

The relationship between the father and daughter in this Chinese astrological tale parallels the way Sally's father treats her: as an object to be owned and manipulated. In the original mythology of the Weaver Maiden (Chih Nü) and the Herdsman youth, the maiden's father is the Sun-king. Jealous of his daughter's diligently endless attention to her weaving loom, the Sun-king determines to find a husband for his daughter in the hopes that she will then desert her loom for her husband and also be more often within the Sun-king's presence. However, after marrying a herdsman (Niu lang), Chih Nu is as blissfully and singularly devoted to her husband as she was to her weaving. Thus, the Sun-god is still alone, without his daughter, and no longer the most important man in her life. Out of jealousy, he punishes the young couple to be separated all but one day of the year: the seventh day of the seventh month. On this day, Magpies will form a bridge over the River of Heaven (The Milky Way) and the wife will be allowed to cross to visit her husband. This union, however, is never certain. Tragically, in years of too much rain, the river will flood, the magpies will not be able to form a sufficient bridge for crossing, and the lovers will remain separated for another year or more.

Sally imagines the Weaver Maiden's tale from her father's perspective, of how he would interpret it for the students: the daughter disobeys through her lack of devotion to her father. He punishes her by denying her "what she desired most." While this denial literally refers to the herdsman husband, it metaphorically symbolizes how Sally's father denies her ownership of her own body, her sexuality, her womanhood. By raping her, he

has broken her ability to call her body her own, he has broken her spirit, and doomed her to chase a happiness and peace that he has made near impossible to grasp. Furthermore, Sally imagines that her father casts the daughter (herself), not as victim, but as guilty offender; she imagines a scene in which he vilifies her to people she does not even know. Thus, in her imagination, the private becomes public: her father's classroom becomes "a public life saturated with images of family intimacy" in which Sally shamefully fears that everyone must know of the abuse (Heller, "Anatomies of Rape," 340). Furthermore, the Weaver Maiden's punishment to be alone foreshadows Sally's bleak and troubled future relationships with men.

The guilt she feels results not only from the rape but also from her need to narrate events that could potentially destroy her mother and sister's idyllic life. Although she suspects her younger sister is aware of the abuse that occurred in their shared bedroom, and that her mother must have also known about the abuse, Sally participates in the silence about her father and herself. However, Sally narrates scenes, such as the scene of the visit to the Chinese medicine woman to cure her of the manifesting symptoms of her abuse, that inextricably connect the incest to her Asian American heritage.

Another of these scenes that connect the incest to her Asian American heritage is the novel's visionary Prologue, which begins with Sally's imaginings of her father: Sally "sees" her father as a vulnerable, powerless, soon-to-be American, immigrant on China's shores. Through her imagination, she strips him of his power; however, his unwilling presence in her mind belies his continual ability to haunt her waking hours. In fact, this imagery of her ghostly father permeates the novel as Sally frequently sees the figure of



the dead father who raped her repeatedly when she was a child. The Prologue's opening lines immediately reveal the protagonist's lost sense of self, her misgivings about her father, and her inability to trust her own senses, vision, or imagination:

My father stands on a hill in a high wind, a strapped black bag at his feet. No, it's a dock, a stupendously busy dock, in the port of Shanghai, the most crowded city in the world. Anyone can see that he doesn't belong here, that he's a peasant from the outbacks of the north, from the style of his cheap blue serge suit, made by a local tailor, and his ill-fitting black shoes with their bulbous toes. Still, even among these city slickers he cuts a remarkably handsome figure. He is tall for a Chinese, nearly six feet, with the proportions of a tall person, lean-necked, arms and legs long for his torso. (1)

This opening points the reader to an outside scene on a hill, then abruptly pulls back to a busy dock, and then pulls back once more into the protagonist's dream-world. This jaunty narrative reveals the narrator's ability and desire to bestow herself with some power by imagining her father in progressively vulnerable scenarios. Something is not quite right within this dream world: her father is "terrified" and "his eyes have the doey look of a matinee idol's" (1). In addition to his cheap suit, and ill-fitting shoes, his tall lankiness doesn't seem to fit or belong on this dock, or in this imaginary world. Despite moving from a windy hill to the most crowded city in the world, the narrative becomes more lonesome. Her father is scared because "this is the first time in his life he has seen a steamer. He has never ridden in a car, and the night express that took him from Wuhan to Shanghai is the only train he has ever been on" (1). The narrator seems to sympathize with her father's odd physique and awkward suit in a strange city. Quickly, however, the narrator erases that notion from readers' minds: "The shape of his lips is generously drawn, as if he were a sensual man, although he is not (1). As the narrator injects her

own personal knowledge of her father, it becomes clear that her father's unthreatening appearance is deceptive. Furthermore, why would the narrator use the word "sensual"? Surely this is not a common word or characteristic used when describing one's father. This is the novel's first foreshadowing of the incestuous relationship, a hint that something is not quite right in the relationship between father and daughter.

The Prologue continues with language of falsity and derision about her father. As the steamer pulls up, he waits "not out of politeness, or even tentativeness, but because he is sailing steerage [...] he waits without aggression [...] he waits without heart." At just one page into the novel, the reader does not yet know that the father has raped the narrator, or that the father is now dead. The novel's cover only tells us that Sally has been "living with a terrible *family* secret" (my emphasis), which greatly understates the severity of her *personal* history as a victim of incest.

The narrative play in the Prologue from one scene to the next, in which Sally's mind continually tries to make sense of her thoughts about her father, mirrors the nature of the trauma narrative we receive in the novel. The trauma narrative, like trauma itself, is not neat and tidy in its narratability; it is messy, jaunty, full of rewritings, flashbacks, and shifts of time and place. Suddenly, the narrative takes us away again: "The hill again. A cemetery by the sea" (2). Reading like camera direction on a screenplay, the narrative pulls us along with the pull of Sally's mind to a cemetery in California, where her father's ashes were flown and buried after cremation. Her father, now dead, and no longer even a whole physical body within the earth, haunts her still. She reveals that the man she called "Daddy" is now a ghost. In this Prologue, we have been privy to her own

private haunting: “The ghost’s eyes are larger than the man’s were in life. He has shed the blue serge suit jacket and now stands only in trousers and a loose white shirt. The black bag [by his feet] has decayed into shreds. His feet are bare. His hair is turning white” (2). Through Sally’s imaginative revisions and the narrative camera sweeping, readers see that, although Sally’s father haunts her, she has the power to strip the façade of normalcy from her father’s former image. His clothes are now revealed to be only informal apparel without even shoes, and his bag has deteriorated into tatters. Does she imagine (wish?) that he never came to America, but stayed standing at that port in Shanghai? Never married her mother and had the chance to have a daughter he would mistreat so horrendously? Does she wish that history had not converged to produce her birth? Her power in these wishes – the power to strip her father of his façade of harmlessness – ironically foreshadows the narrated rape by her father. For in this deteriorated image, her father wears the simple white night-shirt he might have worn at night, while he slipped into her room to violate her love for him. In fact, this white shirt he wears is quickly revealed to be a harbinger of bad things: “White in China means death. Corpses are wrapped in white blankets, mourners wear white, white flowers are carried in funeral processions. White is bloodlessness, despair, the color of the sky on the March morning I tried to kill myself” (2). This last sentence of the Prologue reveals that she does indeed wish to never have lived; certainly she wishes not to be living now.

Chao begins and ends the Prologue with reference to China: first, the port in Shanghai, and then the significance of the color white in China. Noting this emphasis on immigration, Helena Grice draws a steady connection throughout the novel between the

incest and the father's immigration to America: "The opening section firmly connects Sally's own psychological trauma with the enduring presence of her father in her imaginative, if not physical, life, as well as tying her own troubles to her father's experiences of immigration many years earlier, a connection which is continually stressed throughout the novel" ("Mending," 84). Grice's Asian American literary critique finds cause to begin a study of this novel within the typical avenues of Asian American studies. For example, critics might discuss how the reader is invited and lured into a sort of ethnic spectatorship while "watching" her Chinese father. Readers are encouraged to construct his persona based on his global location, and based on what his clothes say about him in a particular location/country/region. Furthermore, cultural symbols abound in the text: bulbous toes stand out in a crowd of small male feet and bound female feet, lanky arms and legs label her father as an outsider in this nation of short-statured citizens, an in-between position on a dock highlights the transitory nature of a person about to leave one land and travel to another. All of these are fruitful critical avenues to follow, and add to the significance of the twinning of the Asian American-ness of the novel with the incest plot. After all, this is a novel whose very title is *received from a Chinese legend yet refers to a personal act of violation*. I argue that Chao's Prologue is a narrative model to encourage her readers to maintain an in-between position: to place the novel within its Asian/Chinese American traditions, but also to read the novel with attention to its fragmented narrative that mirrors the narration of incest.

### Sally's Trauma: Facing the Past and Rejecting Home

The first chapter immediately reminds readers of the white “death” symbolism from the Prologue, as Sally rides in a car through “a cluster of white Colonial houses.” Readers won’t know until the next page that 27-year-old Sally is being admitted to a psychiatric facility following a suicide attempt.

*Christ, it looks just like that prissy boarding school you went to.* I could hear my sister’s voice in my head as we started up the winding drive. A cluster of white Colonial houses, with several tasteful modern buildings thrown in. Near the gate to the left were half a dozen tennis courts and to our right was an amoeba-shaped lake surrounded by neat flagstone paths. On one of these paths a group was walking with cheerful expressions, faces upturned to the weak sun. A teenage girl stopped, yawned, and slipped her sweatshirt over her head to tie it around her waist, casual, like any kid, anywhere, on an early spring day. It really could have passed for a campus, except for the wire fencing out front and the fact that it was much too quiet.

This seemingly idyllic description, and Sally’s appreciation of the scene, is interrupted by the sister’s voice alluding to a boarding school where Sally lived and from which she hardly ever returned home. The scene at first seems like a suburban neighborhood with the typical American-style Colonial home, yet the “modern buildings” don’t belong, as well as the perhaps man-made “amoeba-shaped” lake that surrounds the corporate-style tennis court cluster. The group of people walking along may at first seem to be a strolling group of neighborly people, except for their perhaps too-eager faces turned toward “the weak sun” that they (perhaps) aren’t often allowed to see. The final clue to the area’s unauthentic claim to peaceful life is the wire fencing that surrounds the “much too quiet” area. This first paragraph of the novel foregrounds Sally’s repeated and overt contextualization of domestic and non-domestic spaces.

Immediately following this description, the direness of her situation becomes clear: “This was my second hospital in five days” (5). Sally and her psychologist are headed to a psychiatric facility to recover from an implied suicide attempt that broke the “pact” Sally had made with her therapist, presumably a pact not to kill herself. Sally muses that she might instead have “stuck my head in the oven,” but her therapist reminds her that her situation should not be romanticized: “This isn’t England in the sixties. You’re not Sylvia Plath” (6). Although the narrative has not yet revealed why Sally has attempted suicide, the Prologue has already illuminated her father as a possible cause of her psychic turmoil. In addition, the driveway to the hospital abounds with phallic symbols in the trees with “massive trunks,” “dark snaky lower limbs,” and the “fatalistic lean oaks” (6). Sally vividly remembers these trees and the “spears of birches angling whitely<sup>81</sup> and every which way against the lightening sky” (6). Thus, the imagery hints at the sexual trauma, the incest, at the heart of the novel. In the space of only a few pages at the beginning of *Monkey King*, several of the novel’s themes are apparent: first, Sally’s relation to domestically-coded spaces; and second, Sally’s negotiation of her traumatic past.

The deteriorating state that led Sally to attempt suicide is apparent throughout these opening pages when Sally checks herself into the hospital and becomes acclimated to her surroundings and fellow patients. In her first-person narration, Sally mentions feeling in a “trance” and numbly reviewing and signing the admission papers that seemed

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<sup>81</sup> The Prologue established the negative connotation of white being associated with death.

“like leases” (6). In contrast to the tragic suicide attempt with pills and the frenzied ambulance and emergency room scenes, the signing of her “official-looking documents” is “civilized” and “nothing like I’d imagined” (6). Despite the official nature of the documents and the severity of her situation, nothing can bring Sally out of her numbness: “I signed, using the ballpoint attached on a string, not bothering to try to make out any of the small print. I can’t tell you how my handwriting had deteriorated by then, I was lucky to be able to make any kind of mark at all” (6). Sally signs away her freedom to leave the hospital without so much as a pause. Yet, the methodical nature of the signing with a pen does not really offer her a moment to truly contemplate signing away her rights to leave the hospital and do as she wishes at any time. Considering that she finds it difficult to even make a mark to sign her name, the task of reading the forms or even pondering her situation must be beyond her cognitive abilities at this point.

In addition to losing the ability to write, Sally notes that she has lost the ability to do many daily tasks — reading, driving, and conversing — all of which are avenues by which she fails to construct a life or narrative of herself.

Reading was another ability I’d lost — it was the reason I’d quit my job as an art director in New York City. I’d managed to hide it for a while, marking time at my drafting board, leafing through font books. The letters themselves still interested me, as abstract entities. I could still discuss what typeface would be appropriate for what kind of ad, and I could discern the shapes and textures of things, when a paragraph seemed too long or dense, for instance, but if I read a sentence I couldn’t remember a word of it ten seconds later. Then it got so I couldn’t understand text at all unless I read it slowly out loud, and even that didn’t always work. The letters started getting smaller and smaller, although the pica rule said otherwise.

A similar thing happened when I went back to Connecticut and tried to drive. I faked it for a while, but you can’t fake a sense of timing. Ma put her foot

down after the front fender of the Honda got swiped as I was trying to make a left-hand turn into oncoming traffic.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Why are you sorry?” the MH [mental health worker] asked.

“I’m sorry I can’t carry on a conversation.”

“This isn’t a cocktail party. You don’t have to be entertaining.”

Where do you go to college? I wanted to ask her. Do you have a boyfriend?  
What makes *you* so normal? (9-10)

This passage exposes the deterioration of Sally’s ability to function in the world, and her inability to narrate her own life, just as she is as yet unable to narrate the sexual abuse. Furthermore, her consciousness is fleeting, she is easily distracted, and she is unable to speak what she thinks. Although she was once apparently able to hold a successful job, Sally is suddenly unable to read, write, or even focus on the person speaking to her. Her mind flits from one moment to the next as she narrates the successive losses of “normal” and social behaviors. While wholly aware of the losses, Sally shows no sign in her narration that she understands *why* she is suddenly unable to function as she used to in the world. In fact, Sally refers to her situation as simply being “sick”: “Since I’d been sick, a minute could feel like a day, or I’d blink my eyes and suddenly see that three hours had passed” (10). Indeed, Sally’s crisis seems to be a crisis simply of *living*: speaking, thinking, being *in time*. Similarly, Cathy Caruth notes that for many survivors of trauma, the crisis at hand is “the ongoing experience of having survived” and “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” (Unclaimed Experience, 7). Here, at the beginning of her narration, at the beginning of



the novel, Chao emphasizes Sally's inability to embark on a journey *to live* and to *fully remember* the sexual trauma she has experienced.

Small hints continue to filter through in this book that begs for second and third readings to recognize the clues within the narrative to Sally's traumatic past. These hints are important for what they reveal about how the sexual trauma still haunts Sally's life because she has not yet narrated it. Kirmayer writes of these types of clues that might haunt an incest victim: "For the survivor of childhood abuse, the response to overwhelming trauma is a form of mental escape by resolute partition of memory, self, and experience. There is no narrative of trauma then, no memory – only speaking in signs." (Kirmayer 175) This first sign occurs when Sally tells us about the objects (sharp objects, shoelaces, pencils, anything that might pose a threat) that are confiscated from her at the hospital. Suddenly a memory intrudes: "In Mandarin, my Uncle Richard told me, there is a special category for long, skinny things like pencils, chopsticks, hair. All numbers modifying these nouns must end in *zhi*" (7). Although Sally has not yet narrated the sexual abuse she suffered, or the phallic stick that the Monkey King carries, this memory jolts the reader for its sudden intrusion into the narration. Furthermore, these clearly phallic symbols are connected in her memory to her Chinese heritage, a fact that cannot go unnoticed, especially after readers receive the incest narration halfway through the novel. For Sally, the incest narration can only come to her little by little; it builds up through the text until the moment when she (spurred by the smells of the Chinese medicine woman's shop) is completely brought back to a night of abuse. Up until this point, only the Prologue mentioned Sally's Chinese heritage. These silences in the text

about her Chinese heritage mirror not only the overt narrative silences of her sexual abuse through the first half of the novel, but also the way that Sally herself attempts to bury her memories of the sexual abuse.

The second clue in the text to Sally's trauma is her sudden plunge into a dream: "I could hardly keep my eyes open – what had they given me? – and then I was dreaming that it was dark November and I was a child lying on my bed on Coram Drive, looking out at the dusk beyond the white-curtained windows. It was a dream I'd been having a lot lately" (12). Although seemingly benign, the dream is really quite frightening in the way it suddenly takes hold of her, and especially frightening in its repetition. Caruth writes about this repetition that takes hold of the trauma victim: "Trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (*Unclaimed Experience*, 91). A reader might wonder why she dreams of her bed and lying at dusk, and about the importance of "Coram Drive." Later in the novel, it is revealed that the abuse occurred at her parents' house on Coram Drive, a Connecticut house they lived in for a few years before moving down the street to a bigger house where Sally was not abused because she was sent away to boarding school. Thus, through these signs, her trauma returns to her consciousness and demands telling despite its "belatedness" and "incomprehensibility" (*Unclaimed Experience*, 91).

The third clue of the connection of past trauma to her Chinese heritage occurs at the end of the first chapter when Sally discovers her grandmother's hairpin in her

suitcase. The MH had overlooked the hairpin – a dangerous object, and “zhi” item – that should have been confiscated:

My Nai-nai’s hairpin. Over a hundred years old, all the way from Shanghai, given to me for my ninth birthday. You would have thought the phoenix head would have been worn down by now, I’d handled it so much, but I could still trace the bulging eyes, the curve of the beak, as well as the wicked sharp point it slimmed into at the other end. My grandmother had once stabbed someone with it, one of her suitors who had gotten too frisky. I could picture his amazement as she jerked it out of her hair, which loosened in a gleaming, liquid black fall over her shoulders – for a split second he probably thought he’d gotten lucky – and then the mortal pain as she jabbed it in between his ribs.

After Sally carefully rerolls the pin into its velvet enclosure and slips it back into her suitcase, she whispers in the dark to her Nai-Nai: “Keep me safe,” yet her past will not let her believe that safety is ever a possibility: “But even as I said it I knew: nothing in this world is safe” (18). The hairpin, symbolic for its phoenix head that connotes rebirth and renewal, is a comfort to Sally because it represents the course of action she wishes she could have taken during her father’s rape of her. For Sally, Nai-nai represents strength and cunning in successfully thwarting her attacker. At this point in the narrative (the end of the first chapter), readers can have little doubt that Sally is reeling from past sexual abuse despite the narrative’s silence about the actual events. Furthermore, just as the memory of “zhi” objects pointed the reader toward trauma being connected to Sally’s ethnic heritage, so does this memory of Nai-nai and her hairpin bring us to the conclusion that Sally’s trauma is rooted in her domestic family life.

These three signs of Sally’s past abuse are particularly important for what they reveal about Sally’s unconscious memory of her abuse. Her abuse is connected

inextricably through these three memories to home, family, and ethnic heritage. Despite her obvious attempts to escape her life and her memories, most notably through her suicide attempt, her memories push to the surface like the phoenix that rises inextricably from the ashes: “Memory operates regardless of consciousness. Memories do not disappear when people fall asleep, a quintessential state (or process) in which individuals are viewed as not being conscious; the memories are simply not in one’s conscious awareness. Indeed, memories are useful regardless of whether people can access them consciously or not” (Howe 143).

The narrative reviews the several months that led up to Sally’s suicide, and further explores the idea that Sally’s “body remembers the abuse her mind has tried to forget” (Grice, “Mending,” 85). Living in a very sparsely decorated apartment following her divorce, Sally tells us “I was cracking up and I knew it and I couldn’t stop it” (20). She has forewarned us at the beginning of the chapter: “You should understand this: I am not the kind of person anyone ever expected to go crazy” (19); however, she begins a descent into a fragmented and incoherent life filled with ghosts and hallucinations:

It got worse. I couldn’t tell anyone what I was seeing then. For one thing, my father was everywhere, a shock of white hair in the periphery of my vision, and then I’d turn and it would be a stranger, even a woman, or worse, nothing at all. Footsteps up the stairs at night, although I lived on the top floor and there shouldn’t have been any.

I took the bus to Chinatown and wandered around scrutinizing every single old man on the stoops, hoping this would break the spell. They mostly spoke Cantonese. Daddy’s language had been a pure, educated Mandarin. Walking those teeming sidewalks, I felt totally alien although the tourists thought I was part of the scenery. (20)

Sally seems wholly alienated from the world around her. Even her home is not safe from the intrusive thoughts of her father's creaking steps on the stairs before he would come into her room at night to rape her. Her return to Chinatown is reminiscent of the many parallels in the first chapter between the incest and Sally's Chinese heritage.

Sally's descent into depression is precipitated by the memories of abuse that lie just beneath the surface of her consciousness. Although the novel does not discuss the reason why Sally's life has suddenly been disrupted by the trauma (i.e. *why* has she managed until this point in her life), readers witness the devastating effects of the trauma. Baleav writes about this time of coming to awareness: "The protagonist is forced to reorganize perceptions of reality and explore how the event changed previous conceptions of self" (162). Thus, the fragmentation of the self that readers see in Sally will presumably be followed by a more coherent self. How, and more importantly, *why*, does Sally move from a woman hiding in a dark apartment to a woman who sees "exquisite" life at the end of the novel?

The answer to the previous question lies in an exploration of how Sally works through her traumatic memories. Chao's novel does not provide access to Sally's telling of the abuse until halfway through the novel. The narrative informs the reader that Sally describes the abuse to others three times: first to her therapist, second to her hospital therapy group, and third to her mother and sister. All of these episodes occur during the temporal narration of the novel (a span of a few months), yet the reader is never privy to those conversations as they occur. In this novel, we only know of the abuse through

flashbacks, the most significant of which occurs halfway through the novel and only after Sally has participated in each of the three narrations mentioned above.

Early in the novel, Sally searches among the faces of New York's Chinatown for any face that might break the continual spell of seeing her father's ghost and creating imaginative scenarios of him. She remembers her mother talking about what kind of man she should marry someday:

Chinese man the best to marry, Ma would tell Marty and me. Like American, basically tenderhearted.

Except Daddy. I had killed him in my head long before he actually died. What he had done to me was horrific. Still, I'd recovered. I'd even gotten married. So what was the problem? Why was he plaguing me now?

USELESS GIRL. WALKING PIECE OF MEAT

This passage shows that Sally already "knows" about the abuse; the memories simply lie just beneath edge of consciousness, and just outside the narrative. In this passage, again, a narrative piece of Sally's abuse is triggered by something having to do with her Chinese heritage. We see the simultaneous narration of race and rape, just as we did in the Prologue and first chapter when hints of the abuse started to surface through details such as her father's white nightshirt.<sup>82</sup> The narrative intimately connects domesticity (married life), body, ethnicity, and rape in one short section designed to make the reader aware of Sally's *bodily* and visceral awareness of the rape: She is a "PIECE OF MEAT" in capital letters in the text. Shame and an inherent feeling of being "bad" lies at the heart of her relation to her body: "By developing a contaminated, stigmatized identity, the child

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<sup>82</sup> See discussion later in this chapter of Sally's first flashback of the sexual abuse, in which her father walks away wearing his white nightshirt.

victim takes the evil of the abuser into herself” (Herman 105). In this way, Sally’s abuse caused her to view herself as inherently flawed, always at fault, and completely worthless.

Sally punishes her body, the “useless girl” that she feels is inside of her, through self-mutilation or cutting. Kali Tal writes about this subjection of the body: “Fathers are powerful and their decision to sexualize their relationship with their children is not without consequences [...]. When you sexualize a child to fulfill your adult, male needs, you are socializing her to subjection” (World of Hurt 166). Tal argues that incest places the victim in the position of “other” to her family. I would argue that the incest also puts a person in the position of “other” to her *own body*. Sally has been tortured through her own body, and now that same body remembers the abuse she suffered. Her response is to methodically cut her arms during her adolescent years through adulthood. Helena Grice writes that Sally’s self-image is “linked to the body: she chastises herself through bodily mutilation. The pain that this causes seems to provide her with a sense of bodily relief from her guilt and the burden of her memories” (“Mending,” 85). Although Sally appears to have been successful in her life (school, marriage, career), she has kept the secret of cutting during this entire time. Sally cuts in order to punish herself and to feel something other than the memories of the abuse. McNaron and Morgan explain the importance of expressing one’s abuse in order to move past it: “Incest is an early and very effective behavioral training in powerlessness and subservience. By beginning to speak about it, we begin to threaten its continued unacknowledged presence” (14). Kali Tal pushes this idea of voicing abuse further to the notion of writing: “The writing and

rewriting process allows women to manipulate imagery and generate metaphors for their suffering” (172). Sally’s first person fictional narration is a de facto act of writing, but so is her cutting. By cutting, Sally makes plain and visible the abuse she knows and remembers.

There are two specific incidents of cutting in the novel; first, when Sally is staying with her mother, and second, when she has commenced a sexual affair with Mel (a former fellow patient at the hospital). Sally’s move to her mother’s house is precipitated by her descent into depression and loss of her ability to do her job as a graphic designer. She intends to stay with her mother for only one month, but ends up staying for two months. Attempting to avoid a visit with a neighbor (Lally Escobar), Sally hides in her mother’s basement. As she imagines that she might slow her breathing down “like the yogis in India” or even “past suspended animation” so that she would die, Sally works away at the flesh of her arm:

I reached down between the rolled-up rugs and felt for Ma’s sewing shears. It wasn’t the easiest thing to do in the dark, but I knew where there was virgin skin, up near the crook of my elbow. The feeling came. Not as sharp as it would have been if it hadn’t been so cold, and it didn’t last nearly long enough. There was one window high up in a corner that let in a bit of daylight, and I made myself concentrate on that. My cut began to throb. I pressed a corner of the blanket against it.

PIECE OF MEAT. (28-29)

Trauma sufferers seem to “relive” a trauma event, as if it is occurring in the present. Caruth writes about this seeming improbability of locating, placing, or keeping a traumatic event in the past because trauma itself is “a crisis of experience and temporality” (qtd. in Beadling 710). Furthermore, these episodes of cutting are Sally’s



way of not only re-enacting the trauma, but of punishing herself for having the memories to begin with. Her cutting is a form of speech, but it cannot be a productive form of speech because it remains hidden, both as an act (in the basement) and to witnesses (under her clothes). In the passage above, Sally reverts again to calling herself a “piece of meat.” These cutting incidents, and the refrain “piece of meat,” point to a re-traumatization with each memory associated even vaguely with her father.

The second cutting incident occurs after a sexual encounter with Mel, when Sally wakes in the middle of the night to draw, and is directly connected in the narrative to the incest. When Mel finds her drawing at the table, she is bearing down so hard as to make holes in the paper. Although Mel finds her work impressive, Sally begins to tear it up. After Mel returns to bed, Sally remains at the kitchen table and begins to cut herself with a paint scraper: “I had my Swiss Army knife with me, but it was back in the bedroom with Mel. There was a paint scraper lying in the bottom of one of the rowboats, and I retrieved it, wiped the blade off on my shirt, and tested it on the inside of my wrist, where the impressions of Mel’s nails were still printed from last night like sickle moons. Then I moved higher until I found an open spot, closed my eyes, and flicked” (234-35). The next morning when Mel notices the bloodied marks on her arm, he exclaims: “I think you’re mixing me up with someone, Sally” (235). Sally offers up her father as the answer to Mel’s prodding, but quickly changes the subject so that they won’t have to talk about it.<sup>83</sup> However, Sally tells her therapist that she thought of her father when she was

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<sup>83</sup> Mel already knows about the incest because he was in Sally’s hospital group

having sex with Mel, but never thought of her father when she had sex with her ex-husband, Carey: “I think I was just numb with Carey. And he didn’t know about Monkey King. He didn’t even know where the scars came from. I told him I’d had an accident on a picket fence” (259). This reveals not only the distrust and detachment between Sally and her ex-husband, but also the irony that Carey would believe she cut herself on a picket fence. Literally, a picket fence would not cut her arm the way a razor might. Metaphorically, however, Sally indeed was injured by what a picket fence stands for, by what it symbolizes. The picket fence and the idyllic, domestic home-life that it connotes has been part of the source of Sally’s injury and trauma because she was violated as a five-year-old child in what should have a safe-haven: her own bedroom in a Connecticut suburb..

### **Domestic Spheres and Incest**

In the second part of the novel (specifically Chapter 8), Chao utilizes the Chinese immigrant pasts of Sally’s parents to reveal a family history, or genealogy, of negative relation to domestic spaces. This anti-domestic history is key because it sets up Sally’s own troubled relation to domestic spaces after her father rapes her in their Connecticut house. To define domesticity, I use a helpful quote from Kathleen Ann McHugh’s book *American Domesticity*: “Domesticity refers to home, family, maternity, warmth, hearth, to the creation of a private place where we can be who we really are, to a set of experiences, possessions, and sentiments that are highly symbolically valued in our culture” (6). Just as the domestic life and women’s relation to domesticity are a key

thread of the American literary tradition, and ground Chao's novel within the traditional American literary canon, so does the "genealogy" of her parents' immigration also connect her sexual trauma to her Chineseness and Chinese home life.

The first sentence of Chapter 8, reads: "My mother grew up in a wealthy Shanghai family" (91). Although provisionally setting the narrative in China, this opening sentence leads us into a chapter without a definite location. Indeed, almost the entire body of the chapter is devoted to listing the various places that Sally's mother might have called "home" while she grew up in China. These "vignettes" of Sally's mother moving from place to place are antithetical to the ideas of "home," "house," or "domestic." This genealogy of movement in pseudo-home spaces is immediately followed by a similar series of vignettes that highlight her father moving from place to place within China and America, yet never having a "home" location that is definite and his own. Ironically, the chapter then ends with a vision of Sally in a warm, happy, domestic situation: living with her aunt and uncle in California during summers until the age of five.<sup>84</sup> Sally remembers the idyllic last summer with an innocence and peace not found elsewhere in the novel: "I remember all the days of that last summer in California as being sunny, every room in the bungalow filled with golden light, so that during nap time, even with the shades down, I could never sleep. I'd lie there making up plays with my stuffed animals while my sister snored her purring snore in the next bed" (99). This is the only warm, domestic, textual image of Sally (or any character) in the novel.

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<sup>84</sup> Note that age five is the age when the abuse begins, and when Sally stops visiting her aunt and uncle for summers.

Juxtaposed with her parents' genealogy of movement around the periphery of typical domestic spaces, and combined with an immediate narrative launch (in chapter ten) into Sally's memories of the incest, this singular, positive image of home life highlights the importance of what Sally loses due to her father's abuse of her.

Chao neatly tucks Sally's first narrated flashbacks of the incest into the very middle of the novel, among other quick vignettes of memories of Sally's childhood.

Sally narrates:

Some memory you keep underneath, so you can get on with your life.  
It doesn't work. What happens is that you end up moving from dream to dream.

*But you, you have your father's blood.*

He walks away into the night, his white shirt a flag. As in life, his shoulders are bowed and he travels hunched forward, not looking back.

I want to call out to him but realize that I don't know his language. (116)

This passage is Sally's first narrated flashback to one of the incestuous nighttime assaults. In the flashback, Sally's father appears to be both man and beast, both her father and the Monkey King at the same time. The flashback begins with "But you, you have your father's blood," which reminds Sally of her mother's insistence that she is not only similar to her father, but that the similarity itself is the crux of their personality clashes (rather than the incestuous assaults). This flashback to one of the rapes is notable for what it leaves out: the rape itself. Sally (and Chao) refuses to narrate the unnarratable, and the very thing that readers may be voyeuristically expecting. Instead of the anticipated exotic/erotic flashback, Sally narrates us *away* from her bedroom, and away from her *home*. The paragraph immediately following this first flashback of the incest

takes Sally out of her home and away from her parents: “It’s my ninth birthday. Ma doesn’t get a cake or presents because we’re busy getting ready to go to visit our Nai-nai in San Diego. That is, Marty and I are going while Ma and Daddy spend the summer in Taiwan” (116). This movement away from home, and around home-spaces, is a subtext throughout the novel.

Sally’s movement in the novel echoes her narration of her parents’ dislocations in the novel. The Wang family’s historical relation to a concept of home and domestic life is inherently flawed or corrupt, as shown above. Sally continues this troubled relationship to domestic spaces with her own movement in the novel. Sally stays in many places throughout the novel, but none of them can be properly called her home: a psychiatric facility, her mother’s house, her sparsely decorated apartment in New York City, her Aunt and Uncle’s house in Florida, and the various sites of her sexual liaisons with Mel. Even the novel’s opening scene of Sally in a car driving into a psychiatric facility indicates an in-between status through a body without a grounded location and a mind without a stable position. Seung Ah Oh has written that the trope of domesticity in Asian American novels signals an “archetypal American literary dependence on the trope of domesticity, which crucially associates nation, family, and woman.” (Oh, Seung Ah ix). Furthermore, Oh focuses a discussion of domesticity and home (in Asian American novels) on “Asian/American women’s complicated and complicating position at the site of the home in the doubled context of family and nation” (ix).<sup>85</sup> My focus on domesticity

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does not rely on the “doubled context of family and nation,” but on the idealized view of home and domestic life that includes safety, security, and family. Just as Chao crafts a decidedly un-Asian novel about incest under the very Asian title *Monkey King*, so does she divert our attention away from the common trope of home as homeland or nation. Instead, I argue that Chao subverts the Asian Americanist reading of the extended metaphor of home within this novel. Bypassing the common trope of home as nation, Chao steers away from the typical ethnic reading of this novel: that Sally is dislocated in the world due to her racial status, and is thus homeless. Rather, Sally’s state of homelessness should be construed as a direct result of the scar Sally’s father carves into the meaning of the word “home” when he rapes her.

Trauma fiction “questions the very forms of meaning-making” (Whitehead 82), such as telling, cutting, artwork, and all other forms of coping. According to Whitehead, in trauma fiction, “It becomes difficult to determine exactly what the trauma is in the novel or where it resides” (27). Just as earlier chapters of this project illustrate the difficulty of “meaning-making” about a sexual abuse, so does this chapter illustrate the way that Sally’s disjointed memories are echoed in a disjointed narrative of sexual abuse. In *Monkey King*, the memories of sexual abuse are entangled with the memories of racial

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<sup>85</sup> Oh subscribes to Lowe’s notion of citizen and home: “Lisa Lowe asserts that ‘the American *citizen* has been defined over against the Asian *immigrant*, legally, economically, and culturally,’ and my reading of Asian American women’s literature primarily focuses on the Asian/American women characters’ feeling of awkwardness in their American homes that corresponds to their alienation as female minority subjects of foreign ‘origin’ in America.” (xii)

existence in America through her rape by her Chinese immigrant father who gains power by raping her. In *Monkey King*, readers receive the narration of sexual abuse, however briefly, that is stealthily buried in the narratives of *Obasan* and *Behold the Many*. However, despite *Monkey King*'s seeming breakthroughs in narrating trauma, readers still receive a narrative that, like the others in this study, conflates the natures of racial and sexual traumas. In all of the narratives of this study, the racial wound and the sexual wound compete for narrative space as characters are forced to choose between narrating equally shameful and invisible wounds.

## CONCLUSION

Ghislaine Boulanger writes about the universally “human” process of simultaneously being “voyeurs” and “witnesses” of trauma so that “experiencing an initial state of incoherence might be a necessary condition of the healing process” (21). This study hinges on the idea that both racial and sexual traumas result in psychic wounds that cause states of “incoherence” that literary narratives mirror. Through narrative silences, gaps, burials, interludes, and diversions, the texts in this study mirror the ways that racial and sexual traumas haunt a psyche and elude narration.

Nearly thirty-five years passed between the publication of Yamamoto’s “The High-heeled Shoes: A Memoir” (1948) and “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” (1950) and Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981). An additional fifteen to twenty five years passed until the publications of *Monkey King* (1997), *The Rain Ascends* (2006), and *Behold the Many* (2006). However, Yamamoto’s stories found a national audience and a critical reception only when they were collected and published first in 1988 by a small press (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press) and, most notably, again in 1998 and 2001 by Rutgers University Press. I suggest that the critical moment of the late 80s and especially the late 90s encouraged Rutgers UP to re-publish Yamamoto’s stories. Yamamoto’s stories struck a nerve with confessional American culture in these decades that celebrated the



sharing of personal stories through revealing memoirs, tell-all autobiographies, and exploitive talk shows.

With the publication of such works as Pennebaker's *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Emotions* (1997), the idea of "trauma" came to have cultural, medical, and academic currency in the late decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Pennebaker's book emphasized the value of the "talking cure," the process by which a trauma survivor recounts her trauma in order to heal herself by virtue of having given a narrative to a seemingly incoherent, ineffable trauma. In addition, the psychological notion of the "talking cure" for trauma made possible a context for this study's novels, which are versions of trying to give language to trauma. Talking cure proponents Pennebaker and Judith Herman are widely concerned with the therapeutic setting for disclosing traumas in which patients would reticently narrate their disturbing traumas; however, my study suggests that the characters and narrators in this project are like the therapy patients who don't want to 'own' their frightening narrations of trauma. Just like a trauma survivor who feels she must turn away from the harsh memories of her trauma, the very narratives themselves in this study turn away from narrating trauma through narrative silences, gaps, and burials. For example, in *Behold the Many*, this study illustrated that the narrative itself turns away from the chapter interludes that include ghostly violence, physical abuse, and sexual traumas. Conversely, in *Monkey King*, Sally has been given the culturally approved language to talk about or narrate a trauma, and so the "talking cure" seems to work for her, or at the very least, it is the narrative that provides the most direct narration of sexual trauma.

The racial and sexual traumas narrated within the works of Yamamoto, Kogawa, Yamanaka, and Chao reflect not only the current confessional moment of American culture, but also reflect America's contemporary hunger for trauma stories, especially personal or sexual trauma stories. It is a commonly accepted cultural notion that a person or group can be traumatized and invisibly marked with a psychic wound or scar. In academic circles, the Holocaust tends to serve as the primary example of how trauma affects, defines, marks, and scars persons and groups. The idea of a racial trauma or wound, however, is not a part of common American culture. Rather, notions of a racial wound, of how a racial 'other' is traumatized by a group's history and perception in American culture, are limited mostly to academic circles. The literature of this study illustrates how narratives of sexual traumas and narratives of racial traumas compete for narrative space, and in sense, for narrative legitimacy. Our culture of trauma prioritizes the trauma narrative that is easily accessible, easily relayed, and easily sold (in books and on television), but the traumas in this study show how messy and inarticulable a psychic scar can be, whether that scar is received from a racial or sexual traumatic wound. Furthermore, America's white, Western-centric audience is less likely to relate to a story of racial trauma than a story of sexual trauma. However, even a story of sexual trauma is difficult to 'sell' to an American audience when it is related in its truly fragmented, messy, and nearly inarticulable form (as the literature in this study illustrates). As a result, the trauma narratives of this study oscillate between narrating racial wounds and sexual wounds until the two wounds seem to become conflated or implicated in each other.

Yamamoto, Kogawa, Yamanaka, and Chao provide stories that feature the simultaneous narration of sexual and racial traumas in ways that mirror the workings of trauma in the survivor's mind. The narrative fragments, burials, silences, and diversions in this literature mirror the ways that trauma haunts, disturbs, and discomfits the minds and bodies of victims of racial and sexual trauma.

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