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Bespoke Immigrants in *Nisei* Murayama, Accented Kim, and Mama Tan

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Abstract

Bespoke immigrants are immigrant characters made-to-order for the master narrative of Asian American literature, particularly in the genre of bildungsroman featuring ethnic protagonists coming of age vis-à-vis their immigrant parents and the parent nation of America. These bespoke immigrants are emplotted to bring about the denouement as the protagonists come into their own. By virtue of such blood ties, a great number of Asian American writers have taken poetic license in representing immigrant characters as types, even stereotypes, long familiar to their Anglophone readers. Such portrayal reveals how white or whitewashed these American writers of Asian descent are, casting the white gaze onto immigrants who look like themselves. These immigrant prototypes harbor a schizophrenic split between the ancestral land and tongue versus the Promised Land and English. Morphing from alien clowns with baby English and farcical mannerisms to spiritual morphine supercharging ethnic quests of identity, immigrant characters serve as the foil in bildungsroman on maturing, mainstreaming, and Americanizing. Such poetic license, such self-serving discursive liberty, borders on "immigrant license," or license to replicate creatures-characters. This is tantamount to the license to kill them, who would have otherwise been round, organic, and unto themselves, evidenced in Milton Murayama, Richard Kim, and Amy Tan.

Keywords: Bespoke Immigrants, Immigrant License, Milton Murayama, Richard Kim, Amy Tan

Bespoke Immigrants in *Nisei* Murayama, Accented Kim, and Mama Tan

By "immigrants," I mean the majority of foreigners in the US on student visa, work permit, and permanent residence, some of whom would eventually be naturalized and acquire American citizenship. Tourists and illegal migrants are not, by definition, immigrants. Refugees and asylum seekers, on the other hand, are forced to flee their home country and settle in the US less by choice than by necessity. An immigrant is thus an adult who enters the United States lawfully for a variety of reasons: college education or advanced studies, business, and visiting family and friends. Upon completion of educational or professional training, an immigrant-to-be may choose to apply for an extended stay, culminating in a green card or citizenship. In Asian American studies, immigrants would constitute the first generation, or *issei* in Japanese American parlance, whereas children of immigrants form the second generation or *nisei*, followed by the third generation or *sansei*, and so forth. The 1.5-generation denotes children and adolescents arriving in the company of their immigrant parents.[1] In the worst-case scenario, some youngsters are "parachuted" alone to American boarding schools for the coveted English proficiency and Western cultural cachet. The title of Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* turns literal when well-heeled yet derelict parents seem to believe that teenagers are independent adults, requiring no parental care other than a gold Visa card. The term "0.5-generation" is coined to lament the gradual fading away of the elderly who have retired in Asia and relocated to the US, frequently to be close to their grown children, who are the first-generation immigrants.[2]

By "bespoke," I mean immigrant characters made-to-order, tailor-made

1 The term 1.5-generation is widely used in ethnic scholarship, applicable to a host of scenarios involving Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, and South Asian subjects in North America and the West.

2 See Ma (2006).

for the master narrative of Asian American literature, particularly in the genre of bildungsroman featuring ethnic protagonists coming of age vis-à-vis their immigrant parents and the parent nation of America. These bespoke immigrants are emplotted to bring about the denouement as the protagonists come into their own. By virtue of such blood ties, a great number of Asian American writers have taken poetic license, without much critical pushback, in representing immigrant characters as types, even stereotypes, long familiar to their Anglophone readers. Bespoke immigrants are custom-made for Anglophone customers with a sensibility still reeking of Orientalist misconceptions. This style of portrayal reveals how white, off-white, or whitewashed these American writers of Asian descent are, casting the white gaze onto immigrants who look like themselves. On the shoulders of such stock immigrant characters, Asian American individuals stand tall on the page. These immigrant prototypes harbor a schizophrenic split between the ancestral land and tongue versus the Promised Land and English. Morphing from alien clowns with baby English and farcical mannerisms to spiritual morphine supercharging ethnic quests of identity, immigrant characters, oftentimes parents, serve as the foil in bildungsroman on maturing, mainstreaming, and Americanizing. It would be more appropriate to term such poetic license, such self-serving discursive liberty, "immigrant license," or license to replicate creatures-characters if need be. This is tantamount to the license to kill them, who would have otherwise been round, organic, and unto themselves.

This "J'accuse" may sound harsh, grating to some Asian American ears, no different from what the stereotypical immigrant parents, allegedly, have done to Asian Americans on paper and onscreen. Nevertheless, this immigrant reaction stems from what has been done discursively to immigrant characters in the first place throughout the Asian American literary canon from the 1974 *Aiiieeeee!* anthology coedited by Frank Chin et al. to the present. The marginalizing and stereotyping necessitate a revolt of the immigrant parents against the sin of their American children. As Asian American writers de facto sire their immigrant characters, such "poor parenting" instigates an uprising that would upend Japanese American author Milton Murayama's advice in *All I Asking*

for Is My Body: "The parents should owe the children, not the children the parents" (Murayama, 1988, p. 45). The silenced first generation now raises its tentative hand in dissent over the second generation's "immigrant license" to beget bespoke immigrants, who suffer, to a person, a shared bipolar syndrome. Taking a page from Murayama's playbook, the immigrant vows to "disown you [mama] and papa," the Anglophone Maker (Murayama, 1988, p. 92). As rare as they come, immigrant writers such as Richard E. Kim writes exquisitely, accentlessly, which accents self-Anglicization. Self-Orientalization via immigrant Mamas reaches a fever pitch in Amy Tan, much to the delight of Anglophone fans.

Three classics specializing, respectively, on pidgin, immigrant, and ethnic voices converge to illustrate bespoke immigrants in Asian American fiction. The critical lacuna on the stereotypical misrepresentation of immigrant characters energizes this immigrant talking back. A tautological, chicken-or-egg blame game is bound to transpire: A number of Asian Americans threatened by the notion of bespoke immigrants would lash back, accusing the author of stereotyping which he had accused Asian Americans of committing. Beware of the power differentials, though! This argument consists of a majority of one, a foreign body trying to dodge the long arm and the "organic whole" of Asian American hegemony in terms of immigrant duality. The pursuit of discursive justice and equity, however convoluted and stymied, proceeds apace.

1 Eat Pies, Eat Shit in Milton Murayama

The vulgar slang of "eat shit" befits the unsavory theme of Milton Murayama's *All I Asking for Is My Body*, written partially in Japanese Hawaiian pidgin English to reflect the patois of the plantation laborer family, the Oyamas. The autobiographical fiction's title, in and of itself, already unsettles self-agency when the body is not one's own, long noted by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1993, pp. 160-162). Denied that most basic of subjectivity, one is dehumanized, reified into an object

in someone's or something's possession. Incrementally throughout the three-part narrative, self-disgust mounts over a body so "used up", so wasted as to feel like trash or body waste (Murayama, 1988, p. 77). In Part I, "I'll Crack Your Head *Kotsun*," originally published in *Arizona Quarterly* in 1959 and revised for the 1968 collection *The Spell of Hawaii*, the perfectly normal human activity of partaking food, particularly the all-American "corned beef," "pie," and "ice cream," symbolizes Americanization that the child narrator Kiyo (short for Kiyoshi) Oyama desires, as fraught as it might be (Murayama, 1988, p. 5). Sau-ling Wong (1993, pp. 44) calls them "treats" in the category of "Extravagance". Instead of sharing Don McLean's "American Pie", Kiyo feeds on, unwittingly, the crumbs dropped from the white master's table. The delusionary joy of food leaves a bad taste, so to speak, in Part II, "The Substitute," when the life of *Obaban* (Granny or the "grandfather's older sister" [Murayama, 1988, p. 17]) is taken in place of the mother character, as though one is chewed up and spit out to make room for a choicier morsel. Indeed, chew and spit conjure up Murayama's curse words, "eat spit," bandied about in a subsequent squabble, possibly to trade "shit," a repulsive scatological figure of speech, for "spit," a more acceptable body secretion (Murayama, 1988, pp. 60, 77). If Part II stresses how life or fate swallows indiscriminately one human over another, then Part III, the eponymous "All I Asking for Is My Body," zooms in on the human realm of traditional Japanese indebtedness and the ensuing material and psychological exploitation, so much so that one generation consumes the next, akin to Cronus devouring his sons, except Zeus, who matures to "eat back." In the second-generation or nisei Murayama's memoir-fiction, the young American protagonist dreaming of eating pies matures into the "perennial alien" made to eat shit.

Part III's endocannibalistic metaphors within the Oyama family may sound "Greek" to modern readers born, luckily, far away from the sugar plantation's "Pig Pen Avenue," but such tropes are universal, ranging from mythology to realpolitik. Symbolic cannibalistic consumption, all-in-the-family, may come indirectly, unintentionally: Baby Boomers' "good life" gobbles up the earth's energy, clean air and water, handing to their Gen X and Millennial children leftovers of a fouled and soiled

earth; Our Founding Fathers' Second Amendment ensures their American descendants cowering under the highest rate of gun violence and deaths among the developed nations. In Murayama, endocannibalism falls well within the lived experiences of the "piglets" of Kiyo and his elder brother Tosh (short for Toshio), the "number one son," slowly being bled dry by family debts, dictates of filial piety, and capitalist exploitation of labor.

Describing the Oyama home, "the last house on 'Pig Pen Avenue' and next to the pigpen and [camp latrine] ditch," Kiyo notes. "When the warm Kona wind blew from the south, our house smelled like both an outhouse and a pigpen." In the same breath, literally, Kiyo follows up with: "Worse yet, the family debt was now $6,000" (Murayama, 1988, p. 29). The Oyamas are caught between the fetid Kona wind from the south and the filial "Japan wind" from the north. The rhetorical "jump cut" from feces to filthy lucre is no accident. The stink in the nose pales in comparison to the stink in the family name. Kiyo and Tosh manage to escape, albeit temporarily, from the odorous pigsty through boxing, sex, and romance. But the latter stench haunts them for generations: the Oyamas carry the black hole of debts wherever they go. A furious Tosh accuses his parents, pregnant with the seventh child, of raising "Oyama's pigs," who would have been sold in Japan: those "good-for-nothing girl pigs . . . into prostitution . . . You'd call it filial piety! It's filial bullshit!" (Murayama, 1988, p. 92). It is but a small step from Tosh's fury to the subheading's slang of "eat shit," for pigs, like dogs, are rumored to eat their own and others' droppings.

From its genesis of a 1959 short story to the publication of the tripartite narrative three decades later, the perspective has progressed from a child's point of view and visceral memories to an adult's mind. The child's vivid sensations in Part I are driven by basic wants, so fragmentary and prohibited that they lead to no firm grasp of the happenings. By contrast, the teenager in Part II and the young man in Part III assume the role of agents of change. The teenage narrator of Part II not only discerns hidden forces plaguing the immigrant community in general and the Oyamas in particular, but he also sets in motion the "swap" to save

his mother. The young man in Part III opens by mapping the pyramidal plantation structure where the bosses on top "shit" on everyone else, a built-in socioeconomic injustice at the heart of capitalism and colonialism. Part III elaborates in conclusion when it dawns on the narrator that the camp

> was planned and built around its sewage system. The half dozen rows of underground concrete ditches, two feet wide and three feet deep, ran from the higher slope of the camp into the concrete irrigation ditch on the lower perimeter of camp . . . Mr. Nelson was top shit on the highest slope, then there were the Portuguese, Spanish, and *nisei lunas* [straw bosses] with their indoor toilets which flushed into the same ditches, then Japanese Camp, and Filipino Camp.
>
> (Murayama, 1988, p. 96)

To chart the subterranean sanitation system in such precision of width and depth signifies the capitalist appropriation of labor equally camouflaged by company policies, Japanese traditions, and communal togetherness.

This island paradise's pyramid parallels another island's—Japan's—time-honored patriarchal hierarchy whereby the virtue of filial piety justifies lifelong indebtedness to the elders. Generations of the Oyamas lapse into indentured servitude to pay ever mounting family and plantation debts, a vicious cycle seized only in the wish-fulfilling happy ending. Joining up in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Kiyo makes a killing in a crap game among the boot camp recruits, whose ethnicity remains unidentified except Bob Kaita, "a real talkative kid . . . five feet tall and looked fifteen" (Murayama, 1988, p. 103). Given the "all-nisei regiment with volunteers from the mainland and be allowed to fight in Europe," Kiyo's rolls of the dice, apparently, take from fellow nisei of what would have culminated into the storied 442nd Infantry Regiment to fill the hole of $6,000 (Murayama, 1988, p. 97). Whereas the plantation boss Mr. Nelson shits on non-whites, and the Promised Land Boss Roosevelt, with a stroke of his pen on Executive Order 9066,

interns Japanese Americans rather than German and Italian—read: white—Americans along the West Coast, Kiyo leeches his own kind in order to replenish his family with the blood money. Contrary to the white mastery over non-whites, Murayama fictionalizes endocannibalism of minorities feeding on the weak amongst themselves, albeit the eater and the eaten alternate their roles ceaselessly. The life savings of Kiyo's father was taken by his grandfather, only to lose it all in the Japanese Earthquake of 1923. In turn, Kiyo's father expects decades-long sacrifice from his sons to repay the debts the grandfather and he have incurred. In retaliation, Murayama launders dirty family secrets of unseemly immigrants claiming "parental rights" to Kiyo's and Tosh's bodies. In so doing, poetic license, or "immigrant license," to be exact, seems to countenance Murayama's representation of immigrant bodies.

"Eat pies, eat shit" not only captures the cyclical digestive and bowel movement inside each of the Oyama family members, but it also projects out on to the body politic of America and Japan, and to the context of reading Murayama today. The name of the game, "craps," suggests a zero-sum game. If one eats what one kills, the winner craps—defecates—on the losers, who feel like crap, having been devoured, sucked dry, and dumped like body waste of the winner. In visualizing the two nauseous figures of speech, it is impossible to distinguish, affectively, between the losers being pooped on versus being pooped out, or the losers being abused versus being used "internally." In contrast to dreams rose-tinting reality, excrement has a way of despoiling anything it touches. In contrast to work at a boot camp, the crap game is a play that threatens to wipe out all thoughts of the deadly serious mission of acquiring combat skills. Gamers play to kill time, to numb themselves to the work at hand: preparing to kill or to be killed on the European theater of war.

Psychologically, nisei recruits play to put out of their minds their own folks back in internment camps designated for "enemy aliens." Repressed as well is the looming suspicion of the American people over the loyalty of the all-nisei 442nd Infantry Regiment. From the unit's inception, such unwarranted distrust had steered it away from the Pacific

theater where they would have engaged the Imperial Japanese soldiers. America feared that nisei would not have been able to pull the trigger against their "look-alikes," which somehow did not apply to German and Italian Americans sent to fight the Nazis and Mussolini's fascists. The most decorated of any unit of its size, the 442nd's motto, "Go for Broke," bespeaks nisei's gamble of risking their lives to prove patriotism to a nation that had incarcerated Japanese Americans en masse for the crime of skin color. While the majority of the mainstream society believe that Asian faces and names betray un-Americanness, the Americanism of the informal "go for broke" is beyond the command of most foreign speakers suckled on textbook English, if that. Only native speakers like nisei would have come up with the term. True to the motto, Kiyo indeed goes for broke in his last bet: "Here's 200 more. All or nothing" (Murayama, 1988, p. 102). An even number "2" is perverted into a single choice out of either-or, win-lose, me-you. Murayama imagines a triumphant happy ending—Kiyo the winner takes all—to a game rigged against "perennial aliens" from the Chinese Exclusion Act to Trumpian "CHINESE" virus and to anti-Asian hate crimes. The sole exit lies in exploiting one's own—nisei—and excluding one's own kind by taking the liberty of immigrant license. Murayama rigs his narrative endgame to perpetuate an American bildungsroman of liberation from the immigrant family. His psychological emancipation is initiated, for instance, by a series of fiascos in the boxing ring, which displace familial struggles: "I've been fighting myself all along. . . It wasn't only me, I was fighting mother and all her overworry which had rubbed off on me" (Murayama, 1988, p. 72).

The dice of the crap game used to symbolize Japanese immigrant bodies cast out over the Pacific Ocean by themselves and by forces far greater than they could have imagined. The dice is now rolled by Murayama on the authority of immigrant license for Anglophone readers. Per immigrant license, Murayama feels entitled to represent immigrants by not representing them, by speaking for or over them. The tension within his title, *All I Asking for Is My Body*, accrues from the unnamed addressee who controls Tosh's and Kiyo's lives. Such unidentified "body snatchers," inferred from the brothers' unceasing struggle to break free, are

the immigrant parents, not to mention the grandfather whom Tosh calls a "thief" outright (Murayama, 1988, p. 30). Kiyo's immigrant parents lapse from the tyrannical fisherman father and the protective mother to the "blood-sucking" patriarch scared of Tosh and a controlling, nagging mother. This immigrant polarization between Part I and Part III fits the paradigm of Asian America's bespoke immigrants. This paradigm goes back a long way, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's bifurcating of her mother character Brave Orchid into the brazen "barefoot doctor" in China of the opening chapters in *The Woman Warrior* as opposed to the befuddled, farcical laundress in the United States of the concluding chapters. The mother's fall is as predictable as the crossing of the ocean where the younger, braver self has drowned, in a manner of speaking, or in the manner of Asian America speaking.

Accordingly, the stern father of few words gives the command that Kiyo stay away from Makot, whose generosity of treating others to movies and to "corned beef and onions and Campbell soup . . . pie, ice cream, and chow fun" comes from Makot's mother, a Japanese prostitute servicing the Filipino Camp (Murayama, 1988, p. 5). The fear of contamination by a woman of loose morals in their midst duplicates America's paranoia over Americans of Japanese descent, allegedly with divided loyalty post-Pearl Harbor and destined for mass incarceration. An incorrigible Kiyo is threatened with the father's "I'll Crack Your Head *Kotsun*." Aiming to menace, to force compliance, this rare utterance is the tip of the immigrant iceberg of obligation and obedience weighing down on the American-born children. Although the father ages and avoids the explosive Tosh after having been felled by "a left hook" to his "solar plexus," the mother carries on with her tongue-lashing (Murayama, 1988, p. 44).

As the parents rely on the children translating for them, Murayama smuggles in, arguably, a sleight of hand in staging this minimal immigrant voice. The father's threat in Part I's title was undoubtedly issued in the Japanese language, only the last onomatopoeic sound Romanized and preserved in the original. Regrettably without adequate Japanese, I could have imagined a Chinese father swearing in Chinese: *Rangni na-*

odai kaihua, Kaca! (讓你腦袋開花，卡嚓! Make/pop your head bloom/open, *Kaca/Katsa*!). As unwieldly as the three slashes may seem, the dual renditions balance faithfulness to the original and idiomatic expression, including the onomatopoeic sound for breakage in pinyin first and then in the more intuitive "ts." In comparison to pinyin's "c," which would, in all likelihood, come out as another "k," leading to the nonsensical "*kaka*," "ts" is more inferable from apostrophic contractions of "that's" and "it's," or from plurals of "cats" and "shirts." An accomplished stylist, Murayama could have made the immigrant parents into, linguistically, performatively, "somebody, instead of a bum," instead of dummies parroting Standard English or pidgin, to paraphrase another failed boxer played by Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954). Murayama may have written from his heart, from his perch as an American-born Japanese, by way of his mother tongue of English without, alas, an in-depth grasp of the mother's and father's tongue of Japanese. The off-kilter, one-sided portrayal of immigrant characters unfolds as a pantomime in a silent movie, to be dubbed, minimally, in English by Murayama for the bemusement of American readers equally indifferent to the mother's tongue or to the mother.

The romanization of "*Kotsun*" signals the narrative alchemizing of a lived experience in Japanese into a reading experience in English, where even the rare sightings of Japanese words, italics notwithstanding, are Anglicized in pronounceable, intelligible alphabet. What would have been Japanese ideograms, equivalent to my parenthetical Chinese scripts earlier, are "substituted," to borrow Murayama's favorite trope in Part II, by English letters. A consummate polyglot, the author could have endowed us with far more Japanese inflections with regard to immigrant voices. Rather, Murayama chooses to write about immigrants in shorthand, as it were. When Kiyo details four languages the Oyama household deploys, "good English in school, pidgin English among ourselves, good or pidgin Japanese to our parents and the other old folks," the latter two are rarely, if ever, transcribed in good faith. Despite the claim of Tosh speaking "in pidgin Japanese," he in fact speaks in pidgin English or slang: "Mama, you better tell Kyo not to go outside the breakers. By-'n'-by he drown. By-'n'-by the shark eat um up" (Muraya-

ma, 1988, p. 5). If Tosh's pidgin Japanese comes dressed in pidgin English, then the Oyamas' "good Japanese" has never quite made it on to the stage. The Japanese language used by the Oyama parents and the immigrant community at large is excluded from Murayama's stylistic heteroglossia, except occasional code-switching from the children's perspective.

One translingual case in point occurs early in Part I when Tosh warns Kiyo against Makot's company: "Go tell that *kodomo taisho* to go play with guys his own age, not small shrimps like you. You know why he doan play with us? Because he scared, thass why. He too *wahine*. We bust um up" (Murayama, 1988, p. 4). Switching among Japanese, idiomatic and dialectal English, and Hawaiian, Murayama feels so at ease, so in his own skin, that he does not bother to gloss the satirical *kodomo taisho* until the next page: "General of the kids" (Murayama, 1988, p. 5). Tosh integrates Americanism of "small shrimps" as well as eye dialect spelling of "doan" for "don't" and "thass" for "that's." Tosh's pidgin routinely skips verbs as in "he scared" and "He too *wahine*," the latter with the local color of the Hawaiian word "*wahine*" for a "sissy" boy. The violent metaphor of "bust um up" not only echoes the title's skull-cracking, but it nativizes the Japanese onomatopoeia "*Kotsun*" into American slang. The masculinist microaggression seems to run in the family, from the father to the number one son.

Another translingual confusion derives from grammatical consistency of the English language vis-à-vis Japanese synthesis of positives and negatives. As the left-leaning, "Communist" teacher Snook disapproves of the generational bondage immanent within filial piety, Murayama succinctly dramatizes the difference in the two languages and ways of thinking (Murayama, 1988, p. 36). Snook inquires of his pupils in class concerning parental and plantation authorities:

> "So you have no beliefs beyond obeying your immediate superiors?"
> "Yes."
> "Yes, you do?"

"Yes, I don't."

(Murayama, 1988, p. 35)

Snook expects an answer in English to be in agreement in and of itself, namely, the interjection of "Yes" to be followed by an explanation in the positive. On the contrary, his young Japanese pupils hold two opposite thoughts together in their sentence and in their minds. Their "Yes" agrees with Snook's rhetorical question, which in English should have been a "No." Barely a few years into their schooling in English and still fettered to the home and community language of Japanese, Snook's pupils are yet to think in the straight line of English, which would happen in years to come, as they shed the winding, circuitous ways of their elders. The Anglophone consistency of either two positives or two negatives in one sentence would one day supplant the Japanophone symmetry of one positive and one negative. The conjoining of positive and negative surfaces again when the mother, in disbelief over the broadcast on the attack on Pearl Harbor, asks: "Are you sure it's not a mistake?" Tosh replies in duality: "Yes, it's not a mistake" (Murayama, 1988, p. 78). Tosh's answer would have confused English speakers, but it is the only way to communicate the fact to the mother.

Before the scene of the bewildered mother, Kiyo is informed of the attack by his five-year-old sister Tsuneko hurrying to him with "flushed" cheeks, who breathlessly blurts out: "Kiyo-chan Wall! Wall!" Caught off-guard, Kiyo "thought somebody in the family had died." Indeed, the large collective family of Japaneseness has been summarily severed by the stealth attack. A brief dialogue follows:

"Wall!"

"*Nani*?" (What?) I said in Japanese.

"*Senso*" (War) she said.

(Murayama, 1988, p. 78)

The proverbial transposition from "r" in "war" to "l" in "wall" is surely something Tsuneko would outgrow once the Great Leveler of English-only schooling works on her a year hence. But Tsuneko's slip of the tongue in fact speaks the truth of "Build the Wall," which but veils

the drive to "Wage the War." The physical wall in which the Oyamas inhabit, be it the plantation, internment, or military boot camp, segregates them as potential or imagined adversaries. The invisible wall of filial piety domesticates the Oyama children, until they Americanize themselves. The linguistic wall of Japanese is scaled and left behind by Murayama in the mainstreaming of language and mindset from Part I to Part III. In closing, the immigrant parents have aged, faded away, the Japaneseness they once embodied retired from the narrative after having served its function in the genre of ethnic bildungsroman.

As brilliant as these translingual moments are, they appear too little too late. Ironically, they are made possible by the ghettoization of Hawaii's Japanese labor camps and the all-nisei 442nd Infantry Regiment. Such linguistic bubbles are popped in the lone immigrant character of Richard E. Kim's memoir fiction keen on demonstrating his mastery of the master tongue and in Amy Tan's Joy Luck Club of Chinese "Mamas" playing mahjong to enlighten not only their American-born daughters but their American readers and moviegoers.

2 Lost Korean Names Found in English by Richard E. Kim

Seldom do readers witness immigrant writers speaking up in English; Richard E. Kim's *Lost Names: Scenes from a Korean Boyhood* is a rare find. Kim is surprisingly ignored by Elaine H. Kim (1982) in her seminal survey *Asian American Literature*, possibly on account of the fictional universe of Korea rather than America. Sandwiched between the second-generation Milton Murayama and Amy Tan, between wartime paranoia in Hawaii and the late twentieth-century multicultural chic are immigrant voices of Kim and, earlier still, H. T. Tsing in *The Hanging on Union Square* and Younghill Kang in *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee*. Beyond these few writers, many a text purportedly on immigrants throughout the twentieth century until this day has been authored by the second generation "licensed" to create and to cremate aging generations and fading memories. That Kang would resort to "Oriental," an archaic term decidedly retired by Edward Said's sem-

inal text of postcolonialism, *Orientalism*, suggests immigrant selfhood severely inflected and compromised by mainstream ideology. To riff on the loaded title, Kang is a self-Orientalizing Yankee wannabe, going West to become the West. Tsing's style of fragmentation, on the other hand, veils the new arrival's linguistic infelicities, an immigrant survival strategy of leveraging liabilities into assets. These stylistic characteristics resemble accents marbling immigrant voices, explored in the genre of films by Hamid Naficy in *An Accented Cinema*. One major difference exists: whereas Naficy's "accent" is principally metaphorical since "postcolonial, Third World filmmakers" would cast actors with no discernible accent in their respective tongues, my exegesis on Murayama, Kim, and Tan deploys "accent" literally, as immigrant characters are wont to do with English, their second language (Naficy, 2001, p. 3). Specifically in the hands of native-born, English-only Amy Tan and the Anglophone Kevin Kwan of *Crazy Rich Asians* fame, the novelists tap into a lost land —China— never countenanced as lived experiences. Only occasionally do they dabble in the lost ancestral tongue in faulty romanization, muddling along in ways that few of their Anglophone readers would detect. Genuinely from elsewhere is Kim, arriving in the United States at the age of twenty-three as an international student first and then as a naturalized American citizen.

To read into Kim's authorial intention of flashback to the sin of and trauma under Japanese colonialism entails reading backwards, starting from "Author's Note" at the end of the autobiographical fiction. In "Author's Note" penned in 1997, Kim raises two issues that evidently so vexed the author for nearly three decades that they require an addendum: the translated titles in Korean and in Japanese; the genre of fiction or memoir. The multilingual author reflects on the translations:

> [T]he title word *lost* was translated in both [Korean and Japanese] as "violently, forcibly taken away." The Korean version implied that "someone took my name away violently," whereas the Japanese one suggested—passively it seemed to me—that "I had my name violently taken way." Neither rendition pleased me. If anything, I had wanted *lost* to mean, simply, *lost*. To be sure,

> an adjective derived from a past tense verb in English is often difficult to translate into Korean and Japanese.
>
> (Kim, 1998, p. 197)

One would assume that the trilingual titles on the book cover of the University of California Press edition published one year after "Author's Note" are the revised titles in translation "without the haunting shadows of victims and victimizers" (Kim, 1998, p. 197). Kim's recollection of boyhood unfolds not only in Wordsworthian tranquility but also in a foreign language, which leads to the natural corollary that English ensures tranquility by way of estrangement. The title's "lost" is found to be most apt, hailing from a foreign language with verb conjugations non-existent in the language either of the colonized or of the colonizer. As few readers are as trilingual as Kim is, one feels obliged to take Kim's word for it, namely, the English language proves to best capture a sentiment and a state of being once experienced in Korean and Japanese. Nonetheless, the colonized condition is one of being victimized; the colonizer condition is one of perpetrating victimization. To pretend writing in English exorcizes the haunting victimhood from either side points to Kim's ambiguous motive of writing in the first place.

The subtitle of *Scenes from a Korean Boyhood* evinces the same kind of distancing as does the titular adjective "lost," oblivious to who lost what to whom. Kim's objective conjures up William Wordsworth's "Spots of Time" and Marcel Proust's madeleine moment, both childhood memories visiting upon the adult artist. Whereas the static scenes from the past decry abominable sins of colonization, they arrive cleaved from historical victimhood, as though they were art for art's sake, sedimented in the image that is the author's personal favorite: "the boy-narrator . . . gazing up at the dark heavens whirling with millions of stars" (Kim, 1998, p. 197). Resonating with Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, the aspiration projected upward is practically the "last word," cited in "Author's Note" at the end of the novel. Perplexingly, the adult author gazes back at the boy gazing upward, a strategy of deflection of personal longing to be among the stars. The artifice forced upon memories suggests Kim's desire to acquire through words the celestial status of a fiction writer, an

artist alchemizing life's trauma into golden art. The abstracting and distilling stem from an instinctive recoil from the lower rung of chroniclers and memoirists in the hierarchy of literature. This betrays the drive for revenge against the Japanese by means of writing: "Vengeance is Yours [God's]," while "Memories are Mine" (Kim, 1998, p. 135). The parallel structure echoes the deflected gaze, eventually boomeranging back to authorial intentions. As such, Kim appears to buy into not only Christianity but also another Western white privilege of romanticism that valorizes poets as Shelley's (1821, p. 1087) "unacknowledged legislators of the world". Confucius, for example, describes his mission as *shu'er buzuo* (述而不作explicate, not create). Confucius may be an extreme, but so is Western white privilege of dissociating "white" texts from the conditions under which they are produced, the author's non-whiteness looming large in this case.

"Author's Note" proceeds to the second issue of the genre. Kim sees *Lost Names* as a work of fiction proven by "its literary techniques," while "most readers seem to view it as an autobiography, a memoir" (Kim, 1998, p. 197). An extension of the dissatisfaction over translated titles, Kim dismisses the generic dispute through a flourish of one-upmanship: "all the characters and events described in this book are real, but everything else is fiction . . ." (Kim, 1998, p. 198). This marks the second coming of the ellipses in the short "Author's Note," for the dots of omission have occurred soon after the boy looking at "millions of stars." The obfuscation over "everything else" refuses to spell out what exactly the sweeping gesture includes. This sleight of hand merely reprises the romantic effusion of ellipses, signs of the inexpressible beyond the power of speech. Does Kim mean that the bones, the hardware—"characters and events"—are real, while the software, the connecting tissues, or the flesh over the bones are made-up? Cast in cinematographic terms, *Lost Names* dangles between a real boyhood from a documentary as opposed to a boyhood in reels, scene after scene from, say, an art house movie.

Insofar as Kim's "literary techniques" are concerned, they do not so much define his work of fiction as its flaws that lend themselves to an

autobiographical reading. All the main characters come without specific names: the protagonist from one year of age to thirteen; the righteous father unyielding despite Japanese persecution; the loving mother whose bravery and perspicuity do not pale in comparison to her husband; the doting grandparents. Namelessness denotes all or nothing— either universal characteristics or no characteristics. The nameless cast, inevitably, encourages a synchronization of the author's life and the narrator's. Major events of the two do match: the child Richard E. Kim crossed into Manchuria with his parents; the schoolboy returned to Korea under Japanese colonization. Throughout the novel, however, readers have no knowledge of the Korean names of the characters. To say that they have lost their Korean names begs the question of what they are in the first place. Even in the autobiographical scenario whereby the protagonist bears the author's name, which Kim has flippantly disavowed, what precisely is the protagonist's name in Korean, the firstborn that is "bumped off" by the Christian name—pun intended—Richard? Is this a Freudian slip that the original name in Korean, nominally treasured, is categorically substituted by the moniker of Richard? What does the middle initial "E" stand for—the Korean first name under erasure? Subconsciously, the adult artist named Richard looks down at a nameless boy looking up at "millions of stars," each star a hole in the dark sky of Japanese colonization in childhood and of immigrant self-Anglicization in adulthood.

Ironically, the absence of names is violated but once when the father is forced by colonial policy to take on the Japanese surname, Iwamoto. The young protagonist queries the meaning of the new surname. "Foundation of Rock," answers the father. "Shielding my face from the bitter-cold snow with his hand. '. . . on this rock I will build my church. . .'" (Kim, 1998, p. 106). What the father shields from the boy, what the adult novelist blinds the reader to, is not only white snow but self-whitewashing in the crypto-Christian subversion of the Japanese Empire. To usurp one form of political and military imperial subjugation, Kim borrows from another form, namely, the foreign influence of the Bible from missionaries and their soft power—a Christian "placebo" for Japanese ills. To contest one colonizer-patriarch, the colonized gravitates to another

colonizer-patriarch, as the Taiwanese leapfrog over their immediate fathers, the Chinese mainlanders of the Nationalist Party (KMT) since 1945, to their distant fathers, the Japanese colonization of Taiwan, 1895-1945. Flanked by ellipses, the apocalyptic resolve for church-building by splitting rock masks an immigrant's art-making. The ellipses repress the Korean experiences intertwined with the Japanese language and culture as well as the Manchurian or Chinese context, all flipped into English for the sake of church congregants, so to speak, all Anglophone and Christian by default.

This maneuver is readily apparent in code-switching that is in name only, since the novel transpires entirely in English, without even the "usual suspects" of loved ones and beloved things fondly recalled in the heritage language by which they have been known since childhood, such as "mother" rendered as "Mah" in Chinese, "Okasan" in Japanese, or "Omma" in Korean. Despite repeated markers of switches between the Korean language close to the heart of the colonized and the Japanese language symbolizing violence, the novel is monolingual, English-only. Hence, in English, Kim details how the Japanese oppression befalls the family in their haste to cross the Tumen River from Korea to Manchuria, stopped by the Japanese Thought Police, leaving the father's "nostrils . . . stuffed with tissue paper or cotton that is darkened . . . welts on his left cheek" (Kim, 1998, p. 13). The father-son legacy of abuse is compounded by the Japanese tongue when the son, returning to Korea without any knowledge of Japanese, meets his first brutal corporal punishment in school for the transgression of bellowing out the foreign song "Danny Boy." The Japanese teacher slaps and pounces on the boy in part for failing to comply with his commands, because the boy simply has no idea what is asked of him. The disjunction of the two languages continues even among Koreans themselves. Frequenting a bookstore run by his father's confidant, the father and the owner exchange in Korean, joined by the protagonist's teacher. Out of habit from school, the protagonist answers the teacher in Japanese, only to be urged to speak in Korean, seconded by his father (Kim, 1998, p. 76).

Notwithstanding the appearance of multilingualism, Kim is in league

with Anglophone readers, rarely taxing their patience with a foreign word or two, taking care to render a story of brutality in a faraway land in idiomatic English. English serves to abstract, to insulate the boyhood trauma in the same way the titular "lost" is favored due to the detachment, the cover, an adjective in English provides, preferable to the raw affects of victimhood in Korean or of victimizing in Japanese. In the opening chapters, that sense of detachment is further magnified by the protagonist's youth. The author and the reader come to share confidences over the young boy unable to comprehend his surroundings, so much so that the father seems an enigmatic "riddle" to the son (Kim, 1998, p. 114). The boy matures in the book after a long baptism of fire of beating and abuse. Flogged in public, the boy enters a "self-induced, masochistic euphoria" in the voice of Christ on the crucifix: "They know not what they do" (Kim, 1998, p. 134). This hearkens back to the pattern of counterbalancing Japanese atrocities, such as being "rechristened" Iwamoto, with Christian apotheosis.

A class leader owing in part to his elite, land-owning family background, the teenage protagonist takes the initiative of sabotaging the Japanese rule amidst a propaganda school play and the war effort of rubber ball collection. On the advice of his grandmother, the protagonist punctures all the rubber balls before handing them over, symbolically deflating the Empire desperate for rubber, metal, and other matériel. The thirteen-year-old's confidence is reflected in his ease of language when he defies the Japanese teacher in charge of student-laborers toiling over a runway for kamikaze pilots who would never arrive: "I'll just tell him off if he makes a fuss about it" (Kim, 1998, p. 153). Unbeknownst to Kim, the boy's sure-footedness is tripped by his speaking in the master tongue, in the idiomatic English of "tell him off," "make a fuss." Such conversational English falls into the same paradigm of pitting Christianity against Japanese policy of purging Korean names and identities. The protagonist in the concluding chapters grows in stature as he strategizes the takeover of the Japanese police station and infrastructure after the Japanese Emperor's radio broadcast of the unconditional surrender.

As admirable as this non-native speaker's tour de force is, *Lost Names*

suffers from certain flaws from beginning to end. The opening chapter details the parents crossing the Tumen River into Manchuria on a snowy night. The one-year-old baby in the mother's arms, apparently, stands as a witness to the saga. An immigrant's urge to testify to the family travails jars against the incredulous perspective of an infant. This fraught inception is matched by the fraught conclusion. After the peaceful transition of power from Japanese authorities to the Korean townspeople led by the father, on the counsel of the thirteen-year-old, Kim gives vent to traditional Asian mansplaining. The Western "habit" of "literary techniques" that prove the credential of his fiction coexists with the Asian "habit" of patriarchal pontificating on the moral high ground. Lecturing his son on generational responsibility, the father lays the blame squarely on the grandfather's generation for having failed to implement reforms that would have prevented the Japanese onslaught. The father's peers have also become paralyzed in the subsequent shift of power (Kim, 1998, pp. 185-186). Asian sermonizing, along with Western literary craftmanship, materializes in English and in English only. Nevertheless, Kim and other immigrant writers may have secreted Asianness in an invisible ink, as it were. How to "heat" the alphabet on paper and the frames on film stocks to reveal the palimpsest of non-English messages, or the non-Western, non-Orientalist soul? Or does this soul-searching run the risk of burning, disfiguring immigrants, who resemble figures of speech anyway in many Asian American novels, Amy Tan's, for one?

3 Mahjong Mamas Played by Amy Tan

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* arrived at an opportune time, elevating the novelist as the heir apparent to Maxine Hong Kingston with her classic on ethnic consciousness, *The Woman Warrior*. Better suited for the era of "managed" multiculturalism than Kingston's civil rights contestation, Tan softens the burgeoning genre of Asian American novel with melodrama, ethnic root-searching, and a touch of, pardon the expression, "chick flick." So winsome, which means both crowd-pleasing and tear-jerking, is Tan's vision of mother-daughter relationships that the filmmaker Wayne Wang adapts it into a 1993 feature film with an

almost all-Asian cast, only the second time in Hollywood's history in the wake of *The Flower Drum Song*. The all-Asian cast of actors of Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese-French mixed-race origin eerily validates the stereotype of "they [Asians] all look alike." Tan's novel and Wang's film are threaded together herein, as they are closely related, with the latter more widely viewed than the former. While this section focuses mainly on Tan, the half a dozen or so references to Wang's film are explicitly identified throughout. A prolific writer, Tan follows her hors d'oeuvre with *The Kitchen God's Wife*, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, and more equally Orientalist fare specializing in exotic foods and/as bodies, evident from the book titles alone. Across her monolingual corpus, Tan sprinkles touches of exoticism in Romanized words, spelled in an obsolete system of transliteration based on a mix of dialectal or imaginary pronunciations, oftentimes taken out of context, mystifying native speakers of Mandarin.

Tan casts her debut in the trope of a mahjong club from wartime China to *fin de siècle* San Francisco, a trite trope also favored by Jon M. Chu's 2018 rom com adapting Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*. The mother character Suyuan Woo first conceived of the club among women enduring hardships in Chungking, China, during the anti-Japanese war, mainly to repress the painful condition. This club is revived by immigrant mothers on the West Coast to alleviate the haunting trauma that is China and the ongoing trial of diaspora, particularly the uneasy ties with their American-born daughters. While Suyuan organized the mahjong club, her daughter Jing-mei "June" Woo initiates the book by substituting her mother who died. While Jing-mei sits, as the voiceover of Wayne Wang's film has it, in the east that heads the game, Amy Tan is the mastermind playing the four mother-daughter pairs and the huge supporting cast to serve the white clientele, otherwise known as "Sugar Sisterhood," in Sau-ling Wong's sarcastic pun of an article title.[3] Intricate tensions exist not only in the mahjong table on the page but, off the page, a triangular love-hate relationship binds together immigrant mothers' alien stories, Asian American daughters symbolized by

3 See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1995).

the raconteur, and the American readers.[4] Simply put, an alien, Asian American, and American triangle maps out the Amy Tan fad.

In keeping with the mahjong game of four players, the novel comprises four parts, each part devoted to one single mother or daughter. The mothers occupy the first and fourth part, while the daughters speak in the middle two parts. Spread out quite thin among eight main speakers in sixteen segments, the 4 x 4 form is designed to accommodate the short stories previously published in six journals. Each part opens with a fable-like epigraph, setting the tone of fairy tales, which characterizes the mothers' Chinese stories of a faraway land once upon a time rather than the daughters' American reality through girlhood tribulations, identity crises, career and marital problems. Yawning across generations is the contrast of Chinese mothers' parables and American daughters' realism, a contrast as stark as night and day. Of "chick flick" fame, the novel also straddles the Chinese Other and the American Self, with whom Anglophone mainstream readers identify. That the American daughters are all ethnic whets white consumers' appetite in "Going Chinese" for their choice multicultural escapades. The metaphor of white escapism via roleplaying ethnic applies to both eating Chinese and touring Chinatown. Amy Tan acts as a Chinatown tour guide, casting the white gaze, slumming through Little China.

The first epigraph to Part I, "Feathers from a Thousand *Li* Away," bares Tan's immigrant license unabashedly; the epigraph is the microcosm of the entire story. These epigraphs are italicized to signal the mothers speaking in a foreign tongue, understood to have been translated into English for Anglophone readers:

> *The old woman remembered a swan she had bought many years ago in Shanghai for a foolish sum. This bird, boasted the market vendor, was once a duck that stretched its neck in hopes of becoming a goose, and now look!—it is too beautiful to eat.*
>
> (Tan, 1989, p. 17)

4 See Chapter 1, "Native Informants and Ethnographic Feminism in Asian American Texts," in Ma (1998).

Along with the italics, both the subheading's "thousand *li* away" in place of the idiomatic "miles" and the spatial marker of Shanghai highlight the otherworldliness of the parable, not to mention the notorious "wet market" post-Covid. Narrated in simple sentences of a children's story, the allegory opens with the transformation from the duck to the goose to the swan, embellishing a fantastical register. Yet the three chosen animals debunk any alleged Chineseness, since they are darlings of Western, not Chinese, imaginary. While Peking Duck is a heavenly dish, "Duck, Duck, Goose" is a traditional children's game in American preschool and elementary school, morphing into the internet search engine DuckDuckGo. "Swans," by far, reign in Euro-American rather than Chinese mythology. No equivalent exists in China to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," and the genesis of Zeus and Leda in Greek mythology passed down through Homer, Virgil, Ovid, among others. Swans appear to grace Chinese popular culture but once in the proverb "A toad lusting for a piece of a swan's flesh," suggesting an ugly man chasing after a beauty. Nor are swans ever sold as foodstuffs in China or elsewhere. The incredulity elevates the fable into a higher plane of discourse less factual than poetic. Therein lies the poetic or immigrant license to corral Tan fans into a dream called the Orient.

Apotheosized discursively, the swan takes on the role of a magical familiar to the woman emigrating, who

> *cooed to the swan: "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow!"*
>
> (Tan, 1989, p. 17)

The refrain of the future tense in "*will have*," "*will say*," and the like approximates the future perfect tense, signaling less expectation of what would transpire than prognostication for events destined to transpire "over there." Hence, the signature style of immigrant license manifests

itself: the fusion of simple, even stilted and mangled, English with a prophetic vision so confusing that it evokes "the Uncanny" in Sigmund Freud and "the Fantastic" in Tzvetan Todorov. Immigrant pidgin turns out to telegraph clipped, telepathic acumen; faulty English, by Orientalist default, foreshadows foresight.

Immigrant license, however, unwittingly deconstructs itself. The daughter who speaks "*only perfect American English*" and "*too full to swallow any sorrow*," with the exclusivity implied in "*only*" and "*full*," becomes in part the source of heartache for the mother who speaks imperfect English, which fails to exorcize sorrow. Both of the mother's resolves are in fact self-projections onto her daughter. Subconsciously, the mother's wishes involve major functions of the mouth swallowing and speaking, in and out of the body, absorbing external stimulations and articulating inner thoughts. To speak out means not to have to take in grievances and injustice. By contrast, *chiku*, or "eating bitterness," the Chinese equivalent to Tan's maudlin "swallowing sorrow," presupposes repression, the opposite to expressing oneself. This wishful display of her Chinese clairvoyance belies its own demise since it awaits to be delivered "*year after year . . . in perfect American English*" (Tan, 1989, p. 17). In the same vein as the Western metaphor of swans, or what is practically the future perfect tense in Proto-Indo-European verb conjugations, the epigraph reflects, incontrovertibly, an immersion in the Anglophone tradition, shoved down an immigrant mother's throat. Just as the first epigraph evinces in English the illusion of Chineseness, so too the whole book resorts to the genre of Orientalist romances. Whereas Jing-mei confesses that "I never thought my mother's Kweilin story was anything but a Chinese fairy tale," the reader would have never thought that Tan's Chinese story was anything but an American fairy tale (Tan, 1989, p. 25).

The epigraph proceeds to the formulaic diasporic fall when "*the immigration officials pulled her swan away from her, leaving the old woman fluttering her arms and with only one swan feather for a memory*" (Tan, 1989, p. 17). As though flapping her wings in a desperate attempt to take to the air, the mother is the remains, the vestiges, of her swan dream—a

single feather as an object of beauty and of pity. The image of a swan feather inspires Wayne Wang's opening credits as the voiceover on the swan is visualized by Chinese ink wash painting. A brushstroke diagonally across leaves ink water spreading on the rice paper of a frame to formulate the veins extending from the central shaft of the feather. Jing-mei's voiceover also reprises that the feather "*may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions*" (p. 17). Tan's "feel-good" intentions aim to please mainstream readers anear at the expense of immigrants afar, erstwhile swans now quacking and walking like ducks, except when they revert back to the future perfect tense of a psych(ot)ic.

A case in point, Ying-ying St. Clair's "yin eyes," to borrow Tan's coinage from *The Hundred Secret Senses*, "know a thing before it happens. She [Ying-ying's daughter Lena] will hear the vase and table crashing to the floor. She will come up the stairs and into my room. Her eyes will see nothing in the darkness, where I am waiting between the trees" (Tan, 1989, p. 252). Delivered with the same crescendo of heart-wrenching soundtrack accompanying the swan voiceover, as though chanting in a trance to summon the spirit, Ying-ying well-nigh commands her weakling daughter Lena to ascend to the guest room, away from a house as "lopsided," in the words of Wayne Wang's film, as the table and the marriage the husband handcrafted. Ying-ying casts a spell on Lena, from one broken woman to another, bound by Tan's New Age primitivism of blood and intuition. While the West evolves to be rational, enlightened, and evidence-based, the East devolves back to instinct and affect, replete with irrational and inscrutable urges. Tan recycles Orientalist stereotypes that project the West's longing and loathing onto its doppelganger, the East. Thus, in an archaic tribal kinship, the mother and the daughter click extrasensorily, climaxing in "waiting between the trees," a turn of nonsensical purple prose. Ying-ying the traumatized woman turned token Goddess waiting "in the darkness" evokes medieval alchemy's "black sun," illuminating by way of a conundrum: the shadow of a mother in a room with no trees.[5] The answer to that Zen-alchemical riddle is the fetish of immigrants, who are here and

5 See Chapter 8, "The Black Sun," in Marlan (2021).

not here, who are there and not there, simultaneously all-powerful and powerless, prophetic and pathetic.

All four mothers embody that paradox, the first half of which hails from trauma that is China, the second half turned American triumphalism in liberating their daughters. Pain morphs into the eponymous joy and luck. As *The Joy Luck Club* anchors squarely in the American-born daughters' visceral lives, the first half narrated in the mothers' pidgin English, long gone in China and repressed in America, functions to buoy the second half in the daughters' fluent, colloquial English, ongoing here and now. The mothers' China fables lay the foundation for the rise of the American daughters' bildungsroman, coming of age, and maturing into motherhood themselves. By definition, parables, like children's stories, are universal and symbolic, absent characterization and modern psychology. The four mothers' suffering, so remote and archaic, thus blends into one Chineseness. On the contrary, each of the American daughters undergoes individual experiences totally relatable to non-Asian Americans. Schematically, the mothers suffer China to emancipate America. In terms of reception, readers suffer China to embrace ethnic America.

The far-near, other-self, mother-daughter dynamics play out four times. Suyuan lost her twin babies, who are to be found by Jing-mei the substitute mother in her homecoming. Rubbing her neck scar inflicted the night of her mother's expulsion in the wake of a rape, An-mei emboldens her daughter Rose to reclaim her beloved house in Amy Tan and her entire marriage in Wayne Wang. Having been sold in an arranged marriage, Lindo passes on her aggressiveness to Waverly, the one-time chess child prodigy of San Francisco Chinatown. Conceivably, both Lindo and Waverly stand as role models for Amy Chua's infamous child-rearing "handbook" *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother.* Ying-ying St. Clair was "*Kai gwa*," literally, cut "open the watermelon," or deflowered by an evil Chinese husband (Tan, 1989, p. 244). Ying-ying's shattering of the vase has been shown to release Lena from her dependency on the egotistic, domineering husband Harold Livotny. Wang casts Michael Paul Chan in the role of Livotny, apparently white not only from the surname

but also from the label of "Rice Husband," invoking rice fever or yellow fever for white fetishization of docile, passive, and hyperfeminine Asian women, of which category Lena surely counts as one. Through Chan and through Lena's current Asian boyfriend in the film's closing moments, Wang deliberately reduces the daughters' white partners rife in Tan's fiction, including Ying-ying's Clifford St. Clair, to present an ostensibly all-Asian cast. Marrying out has long been a subconscious calculus in whitewashing the gene pool of "perennial aliens." Preceded by fair-skinned Blacks in Nella Larsen, only mixed-race Asian Americans enjoy the luxury—and perhaps guilt—of passing for white.

Out of the four pairs, Suyuan and Jing-mei are privileged. Not only do they open and end the novel, but Jing-mei is the only character with both Chinese and English names. Named after the month in the middle of a year, "June" balances Chinese mothers and American daughters. Her return to China on behalf of her deceased mother is made possible by the other three survivors of the mahjong club locating and writing to Jing-mei's twin sisters. Auntie Lindo wrote to the sisters in Chinese, of course, since none of the daughters professes a proficiency in the heritage language better than Waverly, who makes light of her own "unintentional mistake" of mixing Lindo's and her own ancestral city "Taiyuan" in China with the country "Taiwan" (Tan, 1989, pp. 182-183). Symbolically, Jing-mei transports all the mothers' well wishes for the daughters' homecoming to the mother/land.

Indeed, Tan's China dream culminates in the melodramatic refrains of, as advertised on the back-cover blurb to the Ivy Book edition of *The Joy Luck Club*, "As soon as my [Amy Tan's] feet touched China, I became Chinese," a hyperbole on Tan's 1987 visit to China. Given Tan's self-awareness in fashioning the Freudian or Waverly-ian slip, one is surprised by the blurb's affectation of affect, a low of bathos to promote sales. Such sentiments, nevertheless, proliferate throughout the Tan oeuvre, evidenced by the bang, not the whimper, intended to conclude her debut: "And now [in China] I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go" (Tan, 1989, p. 288). To "be let go" means "it"

resides within all along. Repeating four times the undefined "it"—the said Chinese core of Jing-mei—makes a lie almost credible. The preference for descent or bloodline in abstraction over consent to specific identity politics, for family and race over individual agency, is downright anti-democratic and un-American.[6] If such a denouement born out of repetition borders on willful superstition, at least a suspension of disbelief, Tan has already groomed her readers by cleansing Jing-mei, who "wear[s] no makeup . . . my face is plain" (Tan, 1989, p. 272), a ritual any middle-class female and male, professional office worker or not, would understand. The fallacy of conversion strikes a chord with modern readers also because it dabbles in "scientific" terminology; being among Chinese is said to "activat[e] my genes" (Tan, 1989, p. 278).[7] These genes are as amorphous as "it" for the Chinese interior of Jing-mei, entirely beyond the reach of English and human comprehension. Therein lies the lie of miracle over immigrant license pivoting on "it," the immigrant, at once a mummy and a Mommy, an inanimate object and an animating anima.

This finale circles back to Wayne Wang's opening credits of a brushstroke across the frame. Akin to mahjong players played by Tan, Wang's computer-generated image of Chineseness morphs from a swan feather to the young mother Suyuan's wartime *taonan* (flight from disaster) with her twin daughters amongst refugees through "Kweilin" or southwestern China's landscape of jagged limestone peaks, a favorite in traditional ink painting and modern tourism. The splicing of refugee abjection and chinoiserie aesthetic resonates with the immigrant license that authorizes the ambiguity of René Girard's sacré, denoting both the

6 See Sollors (1986).

7 Such notion of an essentialized ethnic core is so widely shared that the Chinese Canadian writer Paul Yee commits the same fallacy as Amy Tan's in his collection of Chinese North American ghost stories, *Dead Man's Gold and Other Stories*. As Yee's North American-born character Blossom journeys back to China, she is bemused that although she "had never set foot in China before, yet somehow the bend of the river, the leafy spread of the chestnut tree, the curve of the stone bridge all seemed familiar" (Yee, 2002, p. 48), probably on account of internalized sights and sounds from Anglophone films and books. The romantic implication, however, is that the bonding derives from innate kinship, ancestral memory, or, simply, blood. To debunk that fallacy, one only needs to note that Yee's haunting ghost stories of Chinese laborers persecuted by racists and racist laws are entitled with the Americanism of "Dead Man's Gold" from the Gold Rush and the Western genre! Ironically, what seems to be most Chinese is not only "invented," as Yee confesses in "Note to the Reader," but Yee does so in a most idiomatic of American expressions (Yee, 2002, 112).

accursed and the blessed, both the nauseating and the entrancing.[8] An exhausted Suyuan in total despair was forced to abandon the twin babies by the trail across a breath-taking landscape. While brutality marks traces of any refugee memory, beauty is an afterthought, "the spoonful of sugar" to make it "go down" for children of refugees and non-refugees.

The matrilineage of a swan feather plucking at the heartstrings comes bundled with scenes of horror, sins of China, from which modern spectators recoil. A two-in-one package of aesthetics and abomination, the latter buttonholes the reader in the cringe-worthy episode of An-mei Hsu's mother cutting a piece of her flesh to cook in the medicinal brew in hope of resuscitating the bedridden Popo, or the maternal grandmother. This sacrifice in accordance with filial piety is made to restore Popo, who kicked out her raped daughter in the first place. "She put this knife on the softest part of her arm . . . And then my mother cut a piece of meat from her arm." This bizarre self-mutilation is justified by the logic of "This is how a daughter honors her mother. It is *shou* so deep that it is in your bones" (Tan, 1989, p. 48). Once again, note the tripling of the vague "this" or "it." Should this Oriental logic sound illogical, stereotypes of "honors," "*shou,*" and the body memory in Chinese "bones" depict, after all, a parallel universe of primitivism and spiritualism, one so disorienting that even a foreign word "*shou*" is taken at face value—an inexplicable mystery—with no need for gloss. Insofar as the exotic value is concerned, *shou* decidedly shoos away its mundane translation of "codes of conduct." Should generations of females confuse, from Popo to An-mei Hsu's mother to An-mei to Rose, the Chinese mother and grandmother and Popo roll into one collectively for the sole purpose of juxtaposing with the American daughter Rose Hsu Jordan and with, not surprisingly, the American reader. A playground see-saw, if you will, with the total dead weight of Chinese mothers on one end sending American daughters, Tan included, to the sky! It beggars the imagination as to why anyone would be moved by such gratuitous sadomasochism as well as by antiquated, retrograde clichés of Oriental "human sacrifice" in the name of filial piety. In Wang's visualization, the potential

8 See Girard (1977).

transgressiveness is edited not so much as a scene of meat-slicing as one of bloodletting, shot, mercifully, from behind the forearm, with a quick tilt downward to the bowl, from which the bedridden Popo drinks—to no avail. The Chinese Other's trauma and death open up the American Self's tearful Joy Luck Club.

Bespoke immigrants populate Murayama, Kim, and Tan from the 1950s to the 1990s. The psychological need for a genesis of Asian American identity leads writers to reach across time and space. The span over ethnic backgrounds of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese coexists with the span over socioeconomic backgrounds of working- and professional class. Their novels zoom in on the coming of age of ethnic protagonists, maturing, finding their own voices. The relative linguistic and cultural heteroglossia in Murayama flattens into Tan's monolingual Americanization and upward mobility. Ironically, whereas the Oyamas on the bottom of the society retain somewhat the language and culture of Japan, deemed a burden by the young, the ethnic rise to tax attorneys, interior designers, and socialites in Tan entails, to a large extent, shedding Chineseness other than Orientalist stereotypes, including the sleeper cell of ancestral genes triggered by Chinese soil. As Lisa Lowe observes in *Immigrant Acts* (1996), Tan's novel maps the generational "antagonisms" onto the struggle between "nativism and assimilation," ethnic versus white essentialism (Tan, 1989, pp. 79-80). Seemingly an immigrant outlier, Kim's Korean boyhood comes dubbed in impeccable English to demonstrate acculturation. Via immigrant license in representation, Asian America bears fruit once the immigrant other, about to bloom in good time, is tailor-made to wither prematurely. Asian America comes to fruition before the "designated" buds even open, whereby immigrant parent characters are pitched—both discarded and promoted—like discursive stillbirths, buds of aged morbidity infantilized by baby English and childish *shou*, each pregnant with a world of not possibilities, but actualities. Representational justice to redress Asian Americans' immigrant license awaits the chorus of immigrant voices, few and far between so far, in the twenty-first century.

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