ENTANGLED TESTIMONIES:
TECHNOLOGIES OF SUBJECTICITY IN ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S WRITING

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by
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In the voices we hear, isn’t there an echo of now silent ones? Don’t the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize? If so there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply.
—Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” (390)

All responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language.
—Jacques Derrida, Sovereignties in Question (66)
Foucault writes, “Western man has become a confessing animal” where “one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell” (The History of Sexuality 59). And he argues that it is through this act of “self-examination” that we come to form the “basic certainties of consciousness” (59). Confession, a species of testimony, is a technology of subjectivity that has undergone a particular modern turn constituted as a mode of autonomous self-expression. I contend that this modern turn is analogous with the relatively recent rise of the form of quotation and reported speech. Whether it is about myself, an event, or someone else, testimony always employs some configuration of reported speech, most importantly reported “inner” speech. Consequently, accurate testimony becomes a matter of finding the closest and most approximate calibration to this inner truth. I argue that Asian American women’s writing, particularly when it tries to bear witness to a traumatic history, demands an account of testimony that arises from within a relation of address, rather than from within an individual’s singular experience. From Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s DICTEE, to Yoko Tawada’s Memoirs of a Polar Bear, I read primarily Asian American texts that are transpacific in scope. These texts are narrated by multiple generations of women who must contend with the dislocation of migration and a history of violence. Entangled Testimonies insists that testimony and its relationship to historical redress must necessarily come from the point of view of difference with regard to hybridity, translation, race, and women’s writing. Drawing on the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia, Entangled
*Testimonies* puts forward a theory of testimony that is “entangled, shot through with shared thoughts” and “the alien words of others.” In doing so, it disrupts the Euro-centric concept of the individual and the schema of proof that is at the heart of modern forms of testimony. Testimony emerges not as the monadic expression of discrete, autonomous subjectivity but instead as the entangled and shared expression of a set of social relations. By arguing for more expansive forms of testimony, *Entangled Testimonies* asks: how can the traumas of migration, embedded in a larger history of violence, be reopened?
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mee-Ju Ro is a Korean Canadian born and raised in Toronto, ON. She did her BA at Queen’s University in Kingston, ON. After having completed her doctoral degree in English Literature at Cornell University, she looks forward to another semester of teaching as a Lecturer in the English Department. She is also an aspiring short story writer and recently published her first, “seoriseori,” in an interdisciplinary Canadian literary journal, The New Quarterly (TNQ).
For my mother,
thank you for making enough room in your soul for a small bear
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INTRODUCTION

PART I: The Tale of Arang

Dating back to Korea’s Joseon dynasty, the tale is about its eponymous Arang, the beautiful, young daughter of Miryang’s highest official. She is seduced by her nurse to go for a night walk in the garden where an admirer lies in wait to rape her. After being violently raped, Arang is killed by her rapist. Arang’s dishonored, elderly father hears the circumstances of her untimely death, and he takes his life (some versions have him simply resign or sent away). A newly appointed magistrate arrives, but he is found dead the next morning. A chain of new magistrates, one after another, come to Miryang in the hopes of filling the post, but none survive the first night in his quarters. The restless spirit of Arang appears in the night and the men die of fright. Seasons pass, and a young, honorable magistrate arrives in Miryang. During his first night, Arang appears before him and tells him her woeful tale. He miraculously, some versions attribute it to his noble character, survives the encounter and she reveals to him where her body, yet unburied, lies.

The tale of Arang is much more than a narrative of crime because the testimony itself, perhaps more than any other character, is a central figure. By the same token, her testimony is much more than the narrativization of the crime because her plaint consists, also, in her inability to tell her story: *I had something to say, but each time I tried to open my mouth, the magistrate died of fright, and I could not say what I had come to say.* The tale of Arang is about the difficulty of bearing witness to a history of violence, a difficulty that is compounded by a social structure that cannot hear her testimony. It tells the tale of the destruction of the witness but also the capacity to witness. The impossibility of telling speaks to the lack of discursive idioms with which to effect an act of witness to a history that is profoundly difficult to tell. Her testimony
bears witness to the conditions of its impossibility—an impossibility that affects and burdens different subjects unevenly. What are the conditions of impossibility for testimony that attend traumatized women of colour? And how is this question both a politics and a poetics?

There are many variations of the folktale of Arang, which is not unusual of folktales in general and the oral tradition, but the departures between the different versions are quite remarkable. The tale is therefore not a single one, but a heterogeneous body of inconsistent lore. Of the many versions, there are two that I have found to be the most common. The young magistrate, having heard her story, apprehends the criminal and sentences him to death. In another version, the magistrate has the townspeople come together and Arang, in the form of a white butterfly, alights on the culprit and he is arrested, questioned, and sentenced to death. The tale of Arang is also one such example in a stock of lore that hosts the figure of the ghost woman, wronged in life, who returns to haunt the local official until justice is meted out accordingly. So, even while there are many variations to the Arang tale, it is itself one variation of a very characteristic genre. But, across the variations, the question is, how can Arang’s han\(^1\) be relieved? What is the difference between the versions? The variations attest to a gesture of redress, but which of these is adequate? Asked differently: what was found to be unsatisfactory that it had to return, despite the verdict, to right the wrong, again and again? If it was a matter of the right verdict, the murderer is found, tried, and sentenced to death without variation each and every time. Each version is a return that departs anew in search of an object that cannot be subsumed in justice. So, something remains, even after justice has for all intents and purposes

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\(^1\) A Korean word that is untranslatable. The closest approximation would be a sense of injustice; a persistent knot in your chest that stems from an unresolved grievance. Han, interestingly enough, has no regard for the boundaries between the personal and the communal and often addresses trans-generational and even trans-historical grievances/histories. Additionally, it has no regard for the boundaries between life and death because it can live on past the individual into the afterlife. It is commonly the reason why ghosts are thought to return to haunt the living.
been fulfilled. And yet, the difference *between* them bears witness to the radical difference *within* the tales: Arang’s untold story. Jean-François Lyotard refers to the *perfect* crime: “the perfect crime does not consist in killing the victim or the witnesses […] but rather in obtaining the silence of the witness, the deafness of the judges, and the inconsistency of the testimony” (8).

The plaintiff’s victimization is two-fold: first, the initial offense and then, the structural violence that ensured that her testimony was inadmissible, impossible, but more importantly rendered unidiomatic. In the tale of Arang, whether it is through the able investigative powers of the magistrate or nothing short of a transfiguration, both are narrative supplements for a missing event and a missing testimony. We know that Arang told the magistrate her tale of woe, we know that “she gave an account,” but of what? This report about an account does not reproduce the testimony as such. We have heard nothing but a testimony upon testimony. Only an intimation of reported speech. Even less than hearsay. The tale of Arang is the testament to a missing testimony. We have not heard Arang’s testimony: *I had something to say, but each time I tried to open my mouth, the magistrate died of fright, and I could not say what I had come to say.*

The testimony is not exactly a human testimony –it is and isn’t a human testimony. In a sense, it attempts to be both documentary and performative. The part of Arang’s testimony that is constituted by the narrativization of a traumatic event is given on behalf of her life. However, the part of Arang’s testimony that is constituted by its performance, by acting out again and again the inability to say what she had come to say, arises from an afterlife. What is the status of a ghost’s testimony? Why do we, and the magistrate, have no choice but to believe her? Where does the force of this authority come from? The culprit’s guilt is framed through a dual seal. First, Arang’s testimony cannot prove itself beyond the magistrate’s hallucination until her body
of truth is found. Second, her testimony has an absolute hold over the magistrate under the simple assumption that a ghost cannot lie. Her testimony can only be sealed by the unearthing of her body, and at the same time the exceptional status of her testimony marks the human account as always haunted by the possibility of perjury. The dual seals work together to illustrate a paradigm of justice as proof: 1) the belief that the truth need only be found, 2) the search for the absolute witness whose testimony cannot be false, 3) a powerful arbitrator. We believe that these demands unfold in a particular order: there is a truth, an absolute witness must attest to it, and a just but powerful arbitrator will affirm its truthfulness. The role of the arbitrator appears almost incidental or attendant. In fact, it is the authority of the arbitrator—the power of the magistrate—that is consolidated through the staging of testimony as a metrics of factual truth. In some ways, while Arang may be the titular figure, the legend of Arang, if followed carefully, can be read as the coming-of-age story of a young official: how he comes into his seat of power and into the echelons of patriarchal power through the staging of Arang’s testimony. A flailing patriarchal order uses Arang’s testimony in order to stage its recalibration and renewed consolidation. Arang’s rapist had to be offset by another male figure in order to close the gap opened up by violence, and at the same time, it has instrumentally given space to a controlled catharsis for repressed energies. We marvel at the economy of power. It is this authority that need not “author” the tale at all, because ideological power is at its most powerful when it appears attendant or incidental. Power uses the very plaints brought forward against it in order to both appease disturbance and to reconsolidate its power. But, this is one story. What is the other story that runs counter to this one, that haunts it? It is not difficult, and probably not incorrect, to read the tale as an instance where an old, corrupt system instrumentally effects a purge of its ossified branches and internal contradictions by threshing out its inconsistencies on Arang’s violated
body. A patriarchal social system closes the social gap by reinstating the fantasy of a young, honorable substitute. However, I would argue that the poetics of Arang exceed this single reading. Arang’s testimony figures in a tale, although plotted according to a story arc about revenge and justice, about histories of redress that are told from within a structure of patriarchal violence. There is a remnant that cannot be accounted for in the figure of Arang’s testimony.

Rather than delve into the theoretical armature of the project right away, it might be better to begin with the moment that the question first began to really take a certain shape. I was reading a compiled edition of the Korean comfort women testimonies, the introduction to be exact, and I noticed the painstaking degree to which the editors were insisting on the validity of these testimonies (understandably, since the comfort women movement itself was in response to the Japanese government’s revisionist histories). But, what caught my eye was that the language was couched in terms of precision and cross-examination. The comfort women had been interviewed upward of ten times in order to prevent contradiction, and in the editing process things were evened out or deleted: the parts that didn’t add up, the parts that were not directly related to their experiences in the comfort stations, for example. There were also times when the women confused something that had happened to someone else—sometimes a friend who had not survived the camps—or perhaps something they had heard, with personal experience. These parts were, of course, also deleted. This individuated, documentary model of testimony could not accommodate this other material, including the voice of the dead. Could our current iterations or forms of modern testimony be flattening out the representation possibilities for these women? Especially when that testimony is collective in nature?

I argue that we need to rethink the form of testimony as we know it today. This rethinking is necessary because our current forms stem from a Eurocentric genealogy of
individualism and a schema of proof. My dissertation re-evaluates the purchase of testimonial forms, including autobiography. First, it outlines a history of autobiography as a genre, and traces it back to a Western Christian tradition. In doing so, it also intervenes in a significant controversy in the field of Asian American literary studies by agreeing with Frank Chin, even if it has proven unpopular to do so (not without good reason of course). But I agree, at least, in his assessment of autobiography as a Eurocentric form. I look specifically at how testimony and autobiography has worked and continues to work as a modern technology of subjectivity, one that produces a very particular subject, produces a particular (if universalized) image of subjectivity. The modern testimony encodes within it an individuated but also gendered and racialized model of the subject. It defines not only how we imagine the self, but is at the very crux of a concept like self. What is more, the modern testimony produces and reinforces an ideology of proof, not least of all the proof of subjective interiority. I argue that in its current state, the modern testimony is inadequate to notions of complexity, difference, and performativity.

I am convinced that it is time to scrutinize the imitations of this form as a mode of resistance. My proposal, however, does not lie in doing away with testimonial forms, but in shifting its points of reference. Therefore, if it scrutinizes a very particular form of testimony, it extends and opens up the very question of testimony. I am not the first to take a critical lens to the testimonial form or to recognize its limitations—Derrida, de Man, Foucault, Shoshanna Felman, Cathy Caruth, Shelley Wong. But, I offer a unique triangulation of concepts, as well as hitherto unexplored frames of comparison. Through a Bakhtinian model of heteroglossia, I suggest that we look at testimony as an entangled form, one that cannot be possessed by a single, discrete subject. By looking at testimony as an entangled form, it allows us to consider different
subject positions. The heart of my argument lies in trying to demonstrate how testimony, translation, trauma are, so to speak, also entangled concepts. They constitute critical points in a larger ideological assemblage that has been defined by a notion of communication that understands itself as a transmission or transcription. This idea of inter-subjective transmission can be seen most clearly in the deployment of reported speech or quotation marks. Reported speech, or our modern use of it, is constructed as a relay replay, or record, one that corresponds exactly to an original, and is held to account in a way that prioritizes “the way it was.” But, if we can imagine reported speech, or perhaps I can put it this way, if we can imagine the witness differently, as the site of a relation that is performative, poietic and poetic, it can work against the grain of an impoverished concept of relationality that knows only discrete individuals. I am aware that there may be a multitude of avenues and possibilities, but here, I offer performances of shamanic possession as one such way to attempt to rethink our own notions of reported speech. If our current understanding of testimony and quotation relies on ideas of self-possession and proprietorship, shamanic rituals of possession are traditions that have understood reported speech in terms of dramatic performance and a shared address.

When relationality becomes the focus, testimony, translation and intergenerational trauma, these entangled concepts undergo a shift. For the purposes of my dissertation, I understand testimony not as transmission but as translation. By reading testimony as a form of translation, it allows the problematic of testimony to open itself up to questions of language, multilingual contexts, but also a transnational framework. Today, the autobiography or modern testimony has extended community of users—and it should concern us that not least among them are dispossessed communities of women of colour. I look at Asian American texts that revolve around women’s intergenerational traumatic histories, but these texts are also transpacific in
scope because these histories arise out of networks inherited from colonial structures. In order to think testimony in relation to difference, it necessarily must consider the point of view and complexity of women of colour, more specifically within a transnational frame. What can a historically individuated, gendered, and racialized form afford these women? And if it does award them something, on what terms?

*Entangled Testimonies* is a critique of modern forms of testimony; it queries the form as a technology of surveillance, containment, complicity, and *accountability*. The testimony as autobiography is simultaneously a labor of auto-self-representation where the “bio” in “autobiography” should flag a discussion of a biopolitics particularly as it concerns the gendered issue of emotional and sexual comfort—specifically the socio-economic but also ideological labor of militarized sexual labor and the labor of motherhood. So far, I have tried to outline a criticism of modern forms of testimony as:

1. A technology that produces an individuated subject.
2. Delimited by the constative.
3. Stemming from a racialized genealogy.

While provisional, a project that focuses on forms of possession as shared address (as opposed to the individual), performance (as opposed to the constative), and translation (as opposed to monolingual genealogies) can suggest a pattern, a shift, away from a schema of proof to one of poetics. I argue for a reading of testimony that focuses on the poetics of entanglement.

**PART II: Subjectivity in Translation**

In the early 1900s, the Japanese political novel was on the rise, and translations of Disraeli’s *Coningsby* inspired a trend among Japanese political writers who modeled their own novels after it. These Japanese political novels were translated into Chinese by reformists like
Liang Qichao and proved incredibly popular among the urban elite (Yang 24). The Chinese political novel, like its Japanese and English counterparts, was a means of exploring the future of its constitution from within the Xinzheng Reforms of the Qing court and the anti-foreign upheaval of the Boxer Rebellion. These Chinese political novels were, in turn, also being translated on the Korean peninsula. The history of the modern political novel can be traced through its translation, and although rooted in an English tradition, the translation and dissemination of these political novels and manifestos were a distinctly transpacific phenomenon that also imported concepts of freedom, individualism, and intellectual property. Within a quickly globalizing market for translation and world foreign affairs, the adoption of certain genres occurred in tandem with the political struggles for national sovereignty and political reform. According to Yoon Sun Yang’s *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men: Translating the Individual in Early Colonial Korea*, during moments of national crisis or in having to negotiate a national identity, political writers were translating their “own versions” of the modern novel and the modern subject (Yang 24). Yang has to put “own versions” in quotation marks because of how liberally these political authors borrowed from their own translations—so much so that, in retrospect, Yang needs to bring attention to the fact that it could arguably even have constituted plagiarism. The reason the ironic scare quotes is much more appropriate in this case than spelling it out as plagiarism per se is because the legal registers and frames for intellectual property had not yet been fully formed: it, therefore, could not have legally constituted “plagiarism.” At this point in Korea, writing and authorship was a much more fluid concept. It was from within this context of international translation that modern notions of intellectual property and citation were simultaneously taking shape in Korea but also the world at

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2 For a formidably researched account of the translation of the individual in early colonial Korea and East Asia, please refer to Yoon Sun Yang’s *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men: Translating the Individual in Early Colonial Korea.*
large. The United International Bureaux for the Protection of Intellectual Property (BIRPI), predecessor to the United Nations’ World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), was founded in 1893. The rise of intellectual property was an integral part of the rise of internationality and founded on ideas of national and individual autonomy; modern genres of individuality produced a particular cast of modern subjectivity. What emerges then from within this history of translation during a pre-modern, colonial juncture, is the fact that the process of translation, simultaneously, invented the novel and modern forms of reported speech. The history of modernity is inextricably tied up with the operations of translation and translating languages, the genre of the novel, and by extension autobiographical forms, are distinctly modern forms, produced by operations of translation that bear the stamp of colonialism both “domestically” and abroad. What this history of translation also suggests, however, is that the concept of subjectivity has and always is in translation, and while its Eurocentric lineage is undeniable, this transmission was never homogenous, nor was it a repetition without difference. What is important then is that it remains in translation—it was malleable and susceptible to change then, and is so today. The context of international translation in Yang’s study of the origins of the Japanese political novel suggest that, to borrow Yang’s turn of phrase, the translation of European genres into their “own versions” is a process and literary mode that deserves careful reading. I argue that even while these translations constitute a repetition and transmission, carry-overs, they may also be the expression of a different idea of human relationality. The history of translation, the poetics of translation, can be the space of a transmission and a critical revision.

PART III: A Genealogy of Individualism

The tale of Arang is not just a tale of yore. It resurfaces in surprising ways in the early 1900s in premodern colonial Korea from within a burgeoning industry of translation. In Yoon
Sun Yang’s formidably researched *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men*, she demonstrates that the writers of early colonial Korean domestic novels frequently turned to traditional folkloric forms while borrowing generously from the European forms that they were translating—more specifically the novel. So even while they were making a case for their “new novels,” marked as adhering to Western forms, they were reinterpreting, or translating, the older folk tales, at the same time. What these novels present then is an inter-cultural and inter-generic encounter that cannot adequately be defined by one or the other. Even while the encounter represents a hegemonic and hierarchical encounter, it would be too narrow to assume that the vector of impression only went one way, even if it in fact did in the most conspicuous of ways. What the figure of haunting highlights is that where there is a master narrative, it is often haunted by what it relegated to the margins. Yang does a momentous survey of the Korean domestic novel and focuses on a popular motif borrowed from an oral, folkloric tradition: the vengeful, female ghost. Although Yang chooses to read closely the example of “The Tale of Changhwa and Hongnyŏn,” the motif of the female ghost comes from the same stock of folkloric tales that Arang belongs to:

[H]aving turned into ghosts [,] […] [the two sisters] implore him to redeem Changhwa’s honor and take revenge on the offenders, only to witness him dying from shock. All those appointed as magistrates to the town for the next eight years either pass out or die before the ghosts finish telling their story to them […] The new magistrate not only confronts the ghosts without fear and listens to their full story, but opens a murder investigation and eventually punishes. (71-2)
The similarities are hard to miss. Yang refers to the ghost-women as witnesses, but witnesses to shock. In a story about ghost-women and their search for a witness-adjudicator, these returning figures also bear witness to the shock, the traumatic character, of their appearance.

The return of the folkloric trope of ghost-women in premodern Korean letters, the history of this return, presents itself as a fleeting, brief but nevertheless disruptive wedge in what most believe to be the seamless importation of the European novel of the individual. Yi Kwangsu’s 1917 novel Mujong (The Heartless) is known famously both within Korea and abroad as the first Korean modern novel. In the style of an archetypal bildungsroman, Mujong is about a sensitive young man whose inner person—translated as soksaram—opens his eyes, is awakened, to “the meaning of all existence” (1). Yi’s novel is without a doubt an exemplary text and it is not difficult to see at work the traces of a Western modern rhetoric about the existential discovery of an inner self. I don’t think it necessary to go into the rich body of scholarship on the relationship between the modern novel and the concept of individualism, or how the modern novel functioned as a technology of modern subjectivity. However, Yang, interrupts the traditional account of how European modernisms were naturalized in Korea, by offering a different account about the beginnings of the modern Korean novel: “I propose that the individual did not burst onto the Korean literary scene through one innovative work but emerged gradually through a trajectory of translation” (4). The translation/importation of the novel in Korea happened at the same time that:

a) Quotation marks were imported into Korean writing.

b) The first instances of citation and intellectual property were beginning to take root.

The interlocking gears of reported speech, the novel as genre, and intellectual property will be further discussed later. However, for now, let us focus on how Yang’s revision of history focuses
on early domestic Korean novels whose main characters are not sensitive young men, but women. First, the translation of European modern subjectivity was by no means direct and without interruption or change. The concepts were not imported without difficulty, frustration, and a radical structural as well as literary change. Second, the female domestic novel intervenes, but more notably disappears, in what appears to be a European genealogy of male subjectivity. The fact that it was part of a fleeting but transitional part of early modern translation history is fascinating, but its eventual erasure from a national and international account of literary modernization in Korea is even more remarkable. Third, this other bold account of the history of individualism in Korea demonstrates that the idea of subjectivity, even as it retains its Eurocentric trace, was and is a volatile and aleatory concept (Yang 22).

PART IV: Possession in Quotation Marks

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written [...] can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion [...] This citationality, duplication, or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is not an accident or an anomaly, but is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could no longer even have a so-called “normal” functioning. What would a mark be that one could not cite? And whose origin could not be lost on the way?

—Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy (320)

According to Yoon Sun Yang’s From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men, male ghosts in Korean folkloric traditions return to the world of the living to fulfill unfinished familial and social duties. On the other hand, female ghosts return to exact revenge on those responsible for their deaths. Boudewijn Walraven’s essay on “Popular Religion in a Confucianized Society” traces the cultural roots of vengeful, female ghosts to shamanic folk religions and their rituals of possession and exorcisms that took place in distinctly female spaces, usually the inner quarters which were partitioned off from the public, male space of official ancestral worship. If the latter was the symbolic space of continuity, heredity and peaceful lineage, it was the female spaces that
were used to placate the angry, aggrieved, and the wronged. Arang’s tale takes its poetic energies from a shamanic tradition that is vitally built around a concept of shared testimony, returning histories, and the act of speaking on behalf of another. Yang’s research looks at how these folkloric motifs, particularly the figure of the female ghost, are translated back into Korea’s early modern domestic novels. Written by male political writers, these modern novels were dominantly about modernization, enlightenment, and the new turn to rationalization. It is not surprising that when these ghostly tropes were translated for the new domestic novel, it came with a significant modification.

Unlike their folkloric counterparts, the female ghosts the early modern texts are never exactly “real.” After their untimely deaths, other women—sisters, maidservants—“play at” being ghosts in order to scare and terrorize their antagonists. The trope of the folkloric female ghost turns into the early modern “ghostly double” (89): “Kŏmhong runs the risk of being killed in order to speak for her mistress.” (89). In Yi Haejo’s Blood of Flowers (1911), an early colonial domestic novel that translates the famous p’ansori folktale “The Tale of Ch’unhyang,” Sŏncho is blackmailed by a corrupt inspector to accept his marriage proposal, but after sleeping with her, he runs away. After her death, her sister Moran trains to become a professional dancer and is invited to entertain at an upper-class social event where she spots the inspector. Moran then begins to act “as if she were possessed by Sŏnch’o’s ghost and divulges the inspector’s corrupt behavior and wrong-doings” (92, my emphasis). Yang argues that these trends in the early domestic novel reflect the enlightenment turn to rationalism. Therefore, ghosts and shamans were, effectively, edited out or revised. The folkloric forms were exorcised, so to speak, of their phantoms: a disenchantment. What is remarkable about Yang’s intervention is that in spite of the
narrative’s “efforts to banish them, female ghosts eventually find their place in early colonial Korean literary imagination” (87):

Traditionally, a female ghost was a culturally sanctioned literary device that offered some imaginative leeway for women to speak out against oppressive gender norms. In the process of rewriting “The Tale of Changhwa and Hongnyŏn” as a didactic tale of “civilization and enlightenment,” [...] [the authors] strip the supernatural elements from the traditional ghost story while creating what I call a “ghostly woman”—a female double who speaks for women’s rights on behalf of a chaste yangban wife. (40)

Yang convincingly argues that the revised trope is a useful tool for reformist male writers who wish to inscribe a liberalist agenda while still maintaining traditional gender norms (i.e. the chaste woman). Even while I do not disagree with Yang at all, despite all the intentions of the reformist male writers, I would argue that the pair—the ghostly woman and the ghostly double—together, exceeds agendas of the authors. Yang is right to say that we “may not be able to rejoice wholeheartedly at the emergence of this new female figure because they spout the colonialist rhetoric of the “civilizing mission” (9). By way of both continuing in the line of Yang’s argument, I would respectfully argue for bracketing the rhetoric of these ghostly women and therefore putting to the side what they say. It becomes much more suggestive to focus on the shift that occurs between the shamanic oral tradition of ghostly women and the early modern domestic novels of performing women: how do these women act or act like or act out? Rather than read this translation as a disenchantment, and consequently read this as a monologic translation from Korean folk shaman traditions to European modern enlightenment, which may be happening all the same, it seems more productive to ask: what is the relationship between
vengeful ghosts and performing women? What is the relationship between possessed women and performing women? What can either or both say about a traumatic history and the problematic of testimony?

Precisely at the juncture of generic innovation in early modern Korea, while translating and importing the European novel, the folkloric figure of the female ghost reappears as a possessed, performing woman whereupon the critical question is: is this real? Is she faking? Is she acting? Is this a performance? The possibility of perjury, of lying, and of acting—acting like and acting on behalf of a wronged sister and acting out against systemic, patriarchal structures of violence—haunts a testimonial modernity. Even while performance and lying may not be mutually inclusive, what the trope of the performing double suggests is the possibility of a testimony that takes place not in spite of performance but sets the stage for a performance. These early modern forms host a form of testimony that takes place outside the dichotomy of truth versus lie. The figure of the possessed, performing women is both a poetics and a politics, but it is also indexical. This shift from the ghost to possession, this translation, that occurs at the encounter between folkloric forms and the modern novel, marks, also, the question that underwrites modern subjectivity: are they lying? Through the premodern domestic novel, the problematic of testimony turns on the possibility of perjury, of faking, that intersects with the question of performance. Why was the figure of the ghostly woman taken up as a trope in the early modern Korean novel? What made it so amenable to that particular translative, polyglossic milieu and the times of imperial modernization? If the figure of testimony—pronounced either by ghosts or their performing sisters—was amenable to translating the modern individual into the colonial Korean context, it is because the testimonial context is already intrinsically tied up with the European legacy of the individual and the development of modern subjection as such.
Hannah Arendt, in *On Revolution*, comments on how many of the most meaningful political terms borrows its terms from theatre. Of these, she specifically makes note of the term *persona* from *dramatis personae*, the masks of Greek theatre. Carried over from the theatre and into legal terminology, the distinction between a private individual and a Roman citizen was a question of legal personality—a rights bearing, legal personality who is capable of appearing before the law, of understanding the significance of an oath and bearing witness. Without this legal persona, ‘natural man’ is a “politically irrelevant being” (107). In a way, what my dissertation traces in the reverse is what Arendt notes as a carry over from the theatre into the legal; it attempts to look back at a legal terminology that pervades contemporary politics, and to study its kinship to theatre and performance.

The tale of Arang and all its other versions, translations, variations, foreground the scene of a trial, but at its heart is the scene of testimony. It isn’t simply incidental that this particular trope was picked up by the modern novel, especially if we consider the modern novel’s relationship to modern subjectivity. The translated trope marks a history and legacy of European ontologies: the individual and a schema of testimony as proof. Thus, the translation from the figure of the female ghost to the possessed witness is not simply the results of European rationalism, but also the trace of its inherent contradictions. So not only did the import of European novels and European ideas rewrite Korean shamanic folklore, in the encounter of translation and imperialism (the two industries are, of course, interlocking gears), the figures of Korean shamanic folklore reinscribe the very anxieties within European concepts. The site of the premodern Korean domestic novel is the site of a hegemonic discursive encounter, but the history of this encounter remains as a critical trace, and for lack of a better word, performs its own theory of testimony that does not unfold in spite of the European influence or because of its
shamanic roots—rather, it takes place in their dialectical meeting. The trope of Arang and her sisters, through a history of translation, deconstruct European but also domestic epistemological traditions.

The history of the industry of translation in premodern Korea is simultaneously the history of a figural translation: phantom victims to possessed witnesses. This juncture of translation also occurs at what I would call a double colonial encounter. Korea, at the time, was a Japanese colony and most of the English texts were likely read, first, in a Japanese translation. What I have referred to as a Western tradition of individualism, therefore, cannot simply be thought of as “Europe.” We see that the encounter of translation exceeds the industry of translation. What would appear to be a monologic translation from a subordinate language into a hegemonic lingua franca, and what would appear to the direct transmission of Enlightenment concepts, is a hetero-discursive encounter whose impression can be detected in the poetics of witnessing. Cathy Caruth in Unclaimed Experiences 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

[…] *It is this literality as we have said that possesses the receiver and resists psychoanalytic interpretation and cure.* Yet the fact that this scene or thought is not possessed knowledge, but itself possesses, at will, the one it inhabits, often *produces a deep uncertainty as to its very truth*” (5, my emphasis).

I want to deconstruct the concept of self as a being in possession of oneself, and in order to do this I take some important cues from a practice that has always understood the value of being possessed by someone else, being possessed by history. By being attentive to shamanic practices of performative possession, I do not wish to suggest that it be understood solely as a symptom of
trauma, even as I leave open the possibility of their mutual implication. It is, for me, first and foremost an art form that performs a kind of literality, a history, through which we might begin to put aside what it means to possess knowledge and to understand instead how knowledge possesses the one it inhabits.

PART V: Reported Speech and the Kut

A kut is a kind of public festival where evil spirits are warded off or placated. During the kut, the shaman incorporates performances of spirit channeling, we might call it possession, in order to elicit the goodwill of ancestral spirits and to relieve any outstanding grievances from their past lives. I am making a case for shamanistic performances of possession as instances of quotation and citation. Within Western scholarship, we are more familiar with technologies of reported speech that take the form of citations, quotations, third person reportage, the testimonial form, etc.; however, my project will look at, alongside some of these more well-known practices, performative aspects of shaman rituals as a register of testimony and reported speech. My research focuses on the question of medias of transmission and testimony—it looks at technologies of reported speech. I look at how these technologies are employed within the testimonial form. At the same time, I also look at Korean shaman ritual practices like the communal kut. Some might understand my project as a rationalization of the mystical aspects of shamanism; however, I am asking that we re-enchant the modes of reported speech most familiar to us—to recognize the mystical aspect of quotation. I argue that technologies of reported speech, like the quotation mark, but also certain facets of shaman rituals, are not transparent processes of homogenous transmission but rather devices of framing. My focus on reported speech is developed through Bakhtin and Volosinov’s theories of the novel and direct, indirect discourse. The main focal point lies in determining that direct speech is itself a form of reported
speech; the reported speech of an interior, so-called original dialogue. Autobiographical forms are deeply entrenched in this logic of speech, and is, therefore, a distinctly modern discourse. While pronominal assumptions underwrite all our forms of speech and writing, the autobiographical form has an epitomic status. So, in to begin to re-evaluate the form of autobiography, it requires a new take on reported speech. Therefore, I take up the fact that while some anthropologic studies have recognized the performative value of shaman rituals—too often relegated to a cultural artifact—scholarship across the disciplines has largely failed to see its own citation and quotation practices in those terms. Therefore, not only do I read literary texts, but I also do close readings of literary scholarship. By doing an untraditional meta-literary reading of theoretical texts, I hope to cast our own citational practices of scholarship and its disciplinary division of knowledge into critical relief. It hopes to encourage a dialogue between works of theory and literature that is different from a model of application: for example, applying theory to literature. By doing a comparative reading of theory and literature, my hope is that it will allow us to see the poetic language at work in theory and the theoretical language at work in literature. Especially because in modern literature, the pronominal is already assumed. But, according to this system, certain forms of witnessing (for example, shamanic forms) prove “untrue.”

If we were to take the performativity of testimony and reported speech seriously, the university and the academy at large would have to radically reconsider its citation practices and most importantly its ideas of intellectual property. It is worth noting that the history of intellectual property was not, as one might expect, born of the ideals of liberty and free speech. As a legal concept, intellectual property was developed to fortify state censorship and utilized for weeding out enemies of the state. It is not surprising that its history is more or less contemporary
with the birth of the nation-state. In essence, the act of wedding speech to personality was, historically, used as a means of policing political dissent. Similarly, if we look at how reported speech functions in literary works like the novel, focalization is an operation of managing possessives. The task of identifying a focalization and narrator is the tricky business of keeping narrative and the quotation marks apart—it seems, in theory, perfectly applicable to any text. All one does is pick out the content contained within quotation marks and attribute it to the right speaker/character, the remainder is usually set apart and put to the narrator or author, or else a hybrid perspective between author, narrator, and character. For the texts that make this difficult, we have usable categories like indirect speech, stream of consciousness, quasi-direct discourse that help contain the different species of narration. But, in the effort to categorize and differentiate, it leaves behind its ideological signature that signals itself to be a construct and form. On one hand, according to neoliberal assumptions that are very much present in our forms of literature, we believe that people can speak more freely, but in fact we are delimited by the face of free speech.

As Étienne Balibar puts it in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, “to possess things one must, in effect, first “possess one-self,” and this self-possession is nothing other than the generic concept of intelligence” (58). This generic concept of intelligence belongs to a schema of individuated testimony as proof of self-examination. The knowing self is the self that can examine itself, and the proof of this self-examination is given through the act of testimony. We need to possess ourselves, and the proof of this is given in the form of testimony—reasonable, able, fluent, and coincident with fact. There is a direct relationship between the capacity for self-examination and the right to self-representation. What this means is that there are real ontological, social, and political stakes for someone who is incapable of confessing or providing testimony. In *The
Woman Warrior, the narrator writes, “insane people were people who couldn’t explain themselves” (Kingston 186). Thus, when we argue for the means to self-representation, even when it is on the side of social justice, it is necessarily entrenched in a concept of self-examination. I want to break the yoke that exists between a concept of self-possession, and by extension the capacity and the right to possess, and the possibility of testimony. My approach to this is to look closely at a different mode of possession, one that may be in conversation with a theory of trauma and the concept of performativity.

PART VI: Asian American, Transpacific Women’s Writing

I look at Asian American women’s writing that revolves around intergenerational traumatic histories that are transpacific in scope. I look specifically at the testimony of structurally dispossessed and traumatized women of colour in relation to the question of redress. Narrated by multiple generations of women of colour who must contend with the dislocation of migration and a history of violence, the narrative is usually shared between two or more women—more often than not it is a maternal figure and a younger woman. The older figure holds a traumatic past that is difficult to speak of: for lack of memory, lack of fluency, compounded by a myriad of other factors not limited to race, gender, age or mental health. What appears to be a linguistic barrier between the two women is compounded by the question of a traumatic past that is not rendered idiomatic from within the current forms of self-representation. Thus, a linguistic discontinuity is a figure for a more fundamental discontinuity that revolves around the question of testimony. Translation becomes the figural index for a problematic of testimony. Why is a testimony not possible in this instance? From the point of view of trauma, the traumatized subject does not have a presence to self. From the point of view of translation, a language is not available to the experience. The displacement of testimony and the displacement
of translation intersect around this story of trauma. Between the mothers who cannot say and the daughters who do not know, the women in these texts consider the possibility of a shared, embodied testimony that belies what it means to “say” and to “know.” Testimony emerges not as the monadic expression of discrete, autonomous subjectivity but instead as the entangled and shared expression of a set of social relations. I argue that women’s writing, particularly diasporic women’s writing, demands an account of testimony that is transnational, heterolingual, non-individuated form of testimony.

The city of Miryang, which means “secret sunshine,” is a region notable for its historical significance. It was the site of critical independence movements during Japanese colonial rule, which culminated in the Miryang massacre of 1919. The city is also well known for its version of the arirang. The arirang is a form of Korean folk song. Characteristic of the arirang is its untranslatable refrain that makes up the core structure of the song: the repetition of the three syllables a-ri-rang. Hence, the name of the form is also its content. The syllables have no apparent meaning. Traditionally a very virtuosic form, this untranslatable core is generally performed with a note of han. The han designates a very specific kind of affect that can only be approximated as a sense of injustice, or a deep and unforgettable grievance. When these untranslatable—even in the Korean itself—refrains are performed with a tone of han, it is meant to sound like a great plaint or a controlled, artful wailing. Surrounded by the verses that proceed and come after it, this repeated core is the climactic moment that gives lyrical, embodied expression to a strong, mournful, and even mad energy. It is incredibly controlled, fine-tuned, while always incorporating an ethos of improvisation. Thus, the han cannot be separated from its performative nature: it is meant to be performed, dramatized, and made into a public scene or event. The Miryang arirang then, which has since become a kind of national anthem, is
inextricable from these branches of lore but also the contemporary history of the region. Despite the fact that the folk song can be traced back to the Joseon era, Korea’s contemporary history has had a retroactive power in shaping its many valences. The arirang has, markedly after the Japanese occupation, been utilized as a powerful symbol of Korean nationalism and an essential Korean archive of cultural memory. It is interesting that this folk form’s characteristic refrain is untranslatable, because that which is in excess of linguistic unity has been made to become the very figure for it—the untranslatable is reincorporated into that which can be apprehended, at the very least, as a Korean essence. According to unverified lore, the Miryang arirang may have been a commemorative lament for Arang told across the generations amongst the local women. The tale has found circulation in a community of trans-generational women. In a sort of afterlife, the body of lore that surrounds the tale in the form of unverified gossip and rumor travels an alternative trajectory, and creates a different lineage of storytellers. On the other hand, represented within the tale, is a lineage of powerful men who cannot fulfill the magisterial seat of justice. There is a kind of poetic logic to the fact that Arang’s grievance should find representation and resolution through a male figure, but performatively heard and told by a community of women. The tale of Arang is situated, both geographically and figuratively, in a thick, knotted space of desire that is as contradictory as the city’s name—secret sunshine: the desire to bring to light, to remember, to translate, and at the same time to keep secret. It attests, beyond the letter of the tale, to the conditions of possibility or impossibility for female autography. What kinds of testimonial possibilities attend angry, sad, resentful, and aggrieved women who have accounts to settle?

PART VII: Madang—A Literary Space
The *kut* was a performative ritual that was intimately aware of occasion and space—often, it took place in the quarters of the house that were set apart for the women. There was, however, a specific *kut* called the *madang kut* that was performed on behalf of wandering spirits, those spirits that did not belong to that family. A space was set aside within the home for ghostly strangers. A ghost that could not find its rightful family shrine was more often than not a spirit who died due to extraordinary or particularly unusual or violent means: those who died young, before their time, away from home, particularly aggrieved or wronged. It was for these wandering souls that this *kut* (a practice intimately tied to space) is kept as a kind of last reserve. The *madang* denotes architectural space—the older, Korean houses were designed so that the quarters were in the shape of a square. Thus, the *madang* is the smaller space in between. It is where, due to the architectural design of these houses, everyone convenes, and there is direct access from the front door. It is the threshold space between the familial space and the space outside it. I want to make an analogical case for literary testimony, the literary instances of reported speech.

I argue that the literary space functions much like this threshold space of performance and for the convening of multiple and varied discourses. Like the *madang kut*’s rituals of possession that recognize foreign spirits, the forms of reported speech can function analogously within literary texts. Discursive entanglement will happen in every and any social context; however, there is something to be said about how a literary space—both mimetic and performative in tenor—casts this discursive entanglement into relief. It is both the mimetic and performative quality of literary texts that allow for an unaccountable compression of space and time, that is not unrelated to what Walter Benjamin calls a “true picture of the past.” For Benjamin, this true picture of the past does not “mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’”
A theory of history, to bear witness to the past, means also to “retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (391). He concludes that only “that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. (391). For Benjamin, this true account or image needs to be seized as an image:

[…] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. (The Arcades Project 463, my emphasis)

Within the flash of a figural or poetic instance, the present and the past relate to each other in the form of a constellation and not a vector. Similarly, the madang kut is the space for the alien words of others, a ritual that assumes from the outset the heteroglossia of discourse. But, the ritual performances were also symbolically dense occasions. By deploying modes of reported speech but also the force of figural significance within its rituals of possession, it was able to host voices from the margins. Today, the madang, the cleared square of space, for our modern forms of reported speech and the figures of speech is the literary text. In essence, anything found in quotation marks, is apostrophic. Derrida refers back to Goethe’s writings on parody as a mode of translation and as an act of appropriating a “foreign spirit” (Demeure 17). What is worth noting, though, is that Goethe is wary of translation, especially when one “demands a surrogate
be found for all foreign fruit at any price, one that has been grown in his own soil” (17). The latter is an example of homolinguual translation. So, the question remains, can we host foreign spirits without demanding a native surrogate?

Some versions of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” include a fascinating addendum on soothsayers. Or, in other words, “truth sayers.” For very obvious reasons, the term truth sayer is interesting to think about with regard to testimony. He writes, “The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogenous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance—namely, in just the same way.” (264). According to Benjamin, the soothsayers understood that the future could say something to the present, and therefore it was not fixed nor was it independent of the present. When Benjamin states that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future, he says, “this stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment” (264). Those who turned to the soothsayers for enlightenment believed the future could be changed. If the epoch of the soothsayers experienced the past in the same way, it means that they understood that time was relational—that our relationship to the past, like the future, could be changed. The past was not foreclosed. The soothsayer barters in this: the belief that things could be otherwise. I don’t believe that this passage is meant to be nostalgic in any way. I would be in error to undertake a study of shamanic performance with a spirit of nostalgia, or to use it as an Orientalized, ethnic or nativist screen. This is especially so because my dissertation is committed to recognizing how the shamanic ritual, like testimony, is a technology of reported speech and therefore shares certain paradigmatic problems. As a performative form, the shamanic rituals, even as it distinguishes itself from reportage and documentary forms, also competes with it, and thus
shares a discursive overlap with these forms. Rather than hold up shamanic performance as the mystical form preferred to the legalized forms of reported speech, the crux of my dissertation is the reverse: our modern forms of reported speech, while we do not recognize them as such, is performative, and if we were more attuned to its performativity, it might yield new frames of thinking about how this technology might be reclaimed or recaptured for a concept of messianic time. What was understood so intimately by the shamans (whose rituals of possession also included aspects of divination) is how an unresolved past can have a retroactive power in the present. Benjamin concludes his essay with a commentary on how the Jews were prohibited from looking into the future, and that the Torah and their prayers instructed them in the practice of remembrance. However, he reminds us that for the Jews, the future became “homogenous, empty time. For every second was a small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter” (246). But, what is messianic power? Benjamin writes that “only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments” (390). The Messiah is that which will redeem all of time, it will spread out across time and the past, and redeem history. Necessarily, even while it is a figure of the future, it is, simultaneously, a figure of radical redress. This enigmatic idea begins to make more sense if we also understand that, for Benjamin, the eternal lamp that is the image of genuine historical existence “cites what has been—the flame that was once kindled—in perpetuum, giving it ever new sustenance” (407). Benjamin envisions a coeval community where the past, present, and messianic future are part of a heteroglossic and infinite citability. Testimony can be the site for this wonderful citability, this occasion for new sustenance. Where testimony takes place, in other words, whenever an address takes place, it is the poetic experience of a heteroglossic language—it is legion. When understood as a document of proof, testimony can only represent the past. By
arguing for the retroactive power of testimony, however, *Entangled Testimonies* asks: how can history be reopened?³

*In the voices we hear, isn’t there an echo of now silent ones?*

*Don’t the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize?*

*If so there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one.*

*Then our coming was expected on earth.*

*Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim.*

*Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply.* (Benjamin 390)

³ This turn of phrase is Shelley Wong’s. I can’t remember on what occasion she used it, but I do know that when I hear the phrase in my mind, it comes to me via her voice.
CHAPTER 1
A Techno-Mediatic, Testimonial Modernity

Are the word and the concept “lie” still appropriate, given their conceptual history, to designate the phenomena of our political, techno-mediatic, testimonial modernity [...]?
—Jacques Derrida, Without Alibi (42)

The term “techno-mediatic, testimonial modernity” was used first by Jacques Derrida in Without Alibi. Throughout the chapter titled “History of the Lie,” he tweaks this compound term differently from time to time: “tele-techno-mediatic modernity,” “capitalistico-techno-mediatic hegemony,” “rhetorico-technomediatic res publica,” “mediatic techno-performativity.” The hyphenated compounds show on a formal level that a kind of gap in terms exists—he shows, through this constant calibration, that he is trying to refer to a multi-tiered modern industry that cannot adequately be captured by a single term of concept. Derrida challenges Arendt’s use of the term “lie” in her famous essay, “Truth and Politics”: “this counter-truth does not belong to the category of either lie or ignorance or error, doubtless not even to the category of self-deception…It requires, therefore, another name, another logic, other words” (56-7). The aim of this chapter is to establish several foundational and interrelated arguments about a testimonial modernity because the distinction that Arendt wishes to make between the traditional lie and the modern lie is an important one. So important that Derrida takes it further by drawing out the modernity of the modern lie, while at the same time scrutinizing the usefulness of the term “lie” itself. Drawing on Arendt’s argument about the modern lie, Derrida suggests that the term “lie” may be wholly inadequate to the political phenomena of a techno-mediatic, testimonial modernity. In line with both Arendt and Derrida, I argue that while testimony may not be a

4 To be fair, even for Arendt, the modern lie is an altogether new phenomenon. According to Arendt, whereas the traditional lie veiled the truth, the modern lie destroys it. If, traditionally, an image or portrait functioned to flatter reality, the modern image—the simulacra—offers a “full-fledged substitute for it” (“Truth and Politics” 252).
modern invention, the way it has come to bear on ontological categories but also our understanding of history suggests that it holds an altogether different status in modernity. So, first, I want to establish that the question of testimony is a question for modernity. In order to establish this, I argue that it is important to look at the historicity of testimony. Second, I want to look closely at testimony as a modern industry and more specifically as a modern technology of subjectivity. Finally, I propose that one such way of attempting such a departure is to be attentive to its performative and poetic quality.

Central to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* and his theories of narrative form and the novel is the concept of reported speech. Bakhtin is especially interested in the history of the form of transmitting another’s speech. He suggests that it rose to prominence alongside a European interest in stylization: “there developed an acute interest in the problem of transmitting another’s speech, and in the problem of syntactic and stylistic forms available for such transmission. This interest developed specifically in Germany, in the philological study of French and German.” (337). This is an arguably Euro-centric history of the technologies of reported speech that fails to take into account diverse traditions, the different possible histories of reported speech; however, it nevertheless does recognize the historicity of such forms. And despite the possible Euro-centricity of his historicization, he may not have been entirely mistaken or misled because several sections later, he links together the invention of devices of speech with juridical thought:

The enormous significance of the motif of the speaking person is obvious in the realm of ethical and legal thought and discourse. The speaking person and his discourse is, in these areas, the major topic of thought and speech. All fundamental categories of ethical and legal inquiry and evaluation refer to
speaking persons precisely as such: conscience (the “voice of conscience,” the “inner word”), repentance (a free admission, a statement of wrongdoing by the person himself), truth and falsehood, being liable and not liable, the right to vote and so on. An independent, responsible and active discourse is the fundamental indicator of an ethical, legal and political human being…It is enough to point out the role played in narrowly judicial spheres by the formulation, analysis and interpretation of testimony, declarations, contracts, various documents and other forms of others’ utterances. (349-50, my emphasis)

This coupling between devices of reported speech and a juridico-ethical imperative is a phenomenon specific to Western philosophy. The devices of speech, though its prototypes were not invented during modernity, came to hold an unprecedented significance with the rise of civil and political liberties, transactional/contractual law, and the democratization of government. The rise of democratic government, the legal and political arbitration of wills, the contiguous rise of contractual law and property rights, heralded a new, modern era for the technologies of reported speech. These forms were constitutive of subjecthood because “an independent, responsible and active discourse” became “the fundamental indicator of an ethical, legal and political human being.” (349). Central to a study of the modern significance of these technologies of reported speech is an “analysis and interpretation of testimony” (350). Modern liberal thought did not so much secure the freedom of speech as necessitate a representation of the freedom of speech. The speaking subject was the free subject. The dimensions of juridical interrogation migrated outside the strictly legal context and became the generalized condition of modern personhood. Similarly, Derrida writes,
Ethical, juridical, or political responsibility, if there is any, consists in deciding on the strategic orientation to give to this problematic, which remains an interpretive and active problematic, in any case a performative one, for which truth, no more than reality, is not an object given in advance that it would be a matter of simply reflecting adequately. *A problematic of testimony, as opposed to proof, seems to me to be necessary*, but I cannot develop it here. (61, my emphasis)

As Derrida puts it, the artifactuality that we mistake for the truth of information is subject to “filtering, selection, editing, framing” (65), and it will “deform in order to inform without it being possible to assign or localize an intentional lie in the mind of a single individual or even a delimitable group of individuals, albeit an international corporation” (65). What becomes apparent is that at the same time that “the truth of information” operates in a mode of hegemony that cannot be assigned to a single individual let alone a delimitable group of individuals, the ideology of individuality is forcefully reinforced. If the term “lie” is inadequate to state ideology and revisionist histories, it is because technologies of ideology go beyond the opposition of lie/truth, intent/nonintent, voluntary/involuntary, subjective/collective, psychological/social. And yet, by circumscribing and defining the person, socially, legally and economically, as an individuated unit, it makes any sort of collective action difficult if not unlikely. Immersed within a collective lie about individuality, it estranges political solidarity and diverse understandings of community.

**PART I: I, Pierre**

In 1975, Michel Foucault edited an unusual case study of parricide: *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother...* June 3, 1835, a Normandy peasant named Pierre Rivière, then twenty years of age, murdered his mother, his sister, and his younger
brother with a pruning hook. Foucault was fascinated by it. His case study is complete with the
dossier of legal proceedings, Rivière’s own fascinating memoir/autobiography, and a collection
of essays by members of a seminar at the College de France including Foucault’s own, “Tales of
Murder.” The case study has, unsurprisingly, been turned into two filmic reproductions and reads
very much like a modern psychological mystery novel. It could easily join the ranks of today’s
bestselling mystery fiction. For a text that is quite dated, it is remarkable how easily it reads for
the modern reader. In 1836, the case was first reported in the *Annales d’hygiene publique et de
medicine legale*, but there were a “number of unusual features about it” (vii). The dossier was
“unique among the contemporary printed documentation” (viii). In 1836, within the French
courts, there was a heated ongoing debate concerning the use of psychiatric concepts in criminal
justice (ix), and at the very center of Rivière’s case was the question, unprecedented for its time,
about madness and criminality: if a man is mad, should he be tried and held accountable in the
same way? In 2018, this is hardly a new question, but at the time it was and most importantly not
unrelated to defining the modern subject. In other words, it is possible to see, in this fascinating
case study, the early history of a juridico-testimonial discourse: the role that testimony as a
technology plays in determining what constitutes a human—in the same breath, sane—subject.
Foucault himself puts it this way,

I think that what committed us to the work, despite all our differences of interests
and approaches, was that it was a “dossier,” that is to say, a case, an affair, an
event that provided the intersection of discourses that differed in origin, form,
organization and function—the discourses of the canonical judge, the prosecutor,
the presiding judge of the assize court, and the Minister of Justice; those too of the
country general practitioner and of Esquirol; and those of the villagers, with their
mayor and parish priest; and, last, but not least, that of the murderer himself. All of them speak, or appear to be speaking, of one and the same thing […] But in their totality and their variety they form neither a composite work nor an exemplary text, but rather a strange congest, a confrontation, a power relation, a battle among discourses and through discourses.” (x).

The text that is bound by Foucault and his contemporaries is one where the seams still show. The case study brings together the disparate discursive mechanisms (legal, literary, psychological, and the memoir itself) that surround a crime case that became the defining occasion for a new mode of analysis and a multi-part discursive industry that were in the very process of being produced. I would argue that it marks the creation of a modern genre of memoir that is already, at the same time, a case study. The contestation about how to determine whether someone is a madman or a criminal hinged on Rivière’s testimony, his remarkable memoir, autobiography, and self-authored case study.

Foucault and his colleagues published these documents to mark a “battle of discourses” in the relations of power and knowledge, but he adds to this critical outcome the effort to review “outdated academic methods of textual analysis” (xi). Something about this case study provoked not only a study of discourse, but it provoked a reason to rethink current methods of reading. Beyond the different discourses that Foucault himself identified, the dossier includes death certificates, letters from the mayor, transcripts of interrogations, statements by witnesses, and a significant number of newspaper articles. But, of course, it also includes the academic discourse of Foucault and his colleagues. Even as they wished not to superimpose their own text on the dossier itself, edited and collated by Foucault, it is wrapped up in an academic discourse, more specifically the question of textual and meta-textual analysis. It is a heterolingual text. The text
not only precipitates at the site of an inter-discursive battle, it joins the melee. Once this “inter-discursive battle” settles, it will settle into the form and style of a genre.

But to return to the dossier published in the *Annales*, it marks the beginnings of a branch of jurisprudence, the interdisciplinary study of psychoanalysis and criminal law, and I would argue could serve as a prototype of criminal profiling, but more than that it offers a fascinating account of how a single and singular case precipitated at the site of contending discourses that were as yet unsettled in determining this new turn in criminal justice. But, what is arguably most fascinating is, as I mentioned, just how readable this case study is—even for a modern reader there are little to no formal anachronisms and little to no sensibility of *datedness* that often comes from reading a text, the dossier and memoir at least, that was written over a hundred and eighty years ago. Moreover, there is a noteworthy degree of literariness: dramatic language, theatrical arcs, poetic language, etc. Foucault himself confesses, “It was simply the beauty of Rivière’s memoir. The utter astonishment it produced in us was the starting point” (x). Look at the language at Foucault uses to describe Rivière’s memoir in the introduction:

> And, placed as it is at the time of its writing, Rivière’s memoir comes to assume the central position which is its due, as a mechanism which holds the whole together; triggered secretly beforehand, it leads on to all the earlier episodes; then, once it comes into the open, it lays a trap for everyone, including its contriver, since it is first taken as proof that Rivière is not mad and then becomes, in the hands of Esquirol, Marc, and Orfila a means of averting that death penalty which Rivière had gone to such lengths to call down upon himself.

On the next page, he continues:
As to Rivière’s discourse, we decided not to interpret it and not to subject it to any psychiatric or psychoanalytic commentary [...] we could hardly speak of it without involving it in one of the discourses (medical, legal, psychological, criminological) which we wished to use as our starting point in talking about it. If we had done so, we should have brought it within the power relation whose reductive effect we wished to show, and we ourselves should have fallen into the trap it set [...] and most importantly, owing to a sort of reverence or perhaps too, terror for a text which was to carry off four corpses along with it, we were unwilling to superimpose our own text on Rivière’s memoir. We fell under the spell of the parricide with the reddish-brown eyes. (xii-xiii)

Foucault’s description of the text is almost on the level of an anthropomorphism—as if it had a personality, a will, a force, as if it was the text itself that committed the murders. He speaks of traps and spells, and of being hardly able to speak. And yet, the trap and the spell seems be of a different order because he seems to suggest that it was possible not to fall into its trap, whereas its spell was a different story. By examining closely this unusually written section and why Foucault seems to make this strange distinction, it can, among other things, say something about what Foucault intuited as the production of a formal, at the same time literary, mechanism. Foucault appears to be looking at the juncture of psychoanalysis and criminal justice when he and his colleagues try to avoid falling back on the very discursive sways that they wish to highlight or analyze. But, when he speaks of its terror, its beauty, he is referring to its literary quality. Thus, between the trap and the spell, what is truly terrifying and hard to dispel is the way a literary genre wedd itself to this juridico-psychological discourse. Foucault marks the birthplace of a modern form—a testimonial form—that is a Frankenstein’s monster of sorts.
What made Rivière’s crime so aberrant and extraordinary—parricides were rare but not unknown—was that it was difficult to locate the true crime. Was the crime his act or was it the memoir? Can a memoir be criminal? The complication, in part, arises from the fact that there are multiple chronologies that interweave the act of the crime and the writing of it, where the two at times coincide and at other times do not (leaving it only as imagined or aborted project): intended, premeditated, edited, revised, executed, recorded. But what is interesting is that the fictional timelines, necessarily, are not independent of “what actually happened” because the two—fiction and fact—are implicated in each other and mutually constitutive: “The text does not relate directly to the deed; a whole web of relations is woven between the one and the other; they support one another and carry one another in ever-changing relations” (201). Rivière’s memoir is written in prison, and according to the timeline of his trial, it was written between the first and the second court interrogations. According to this memoir, Rivière had conceived of the idea—both murder and memoir—at the same time. The first section would be composed of a biography of his father’s and of his mother’s life. The second section would be composed of the reasons for his murders. Once the first draft was completed, he would commit the murders, then afterwards mail his manuscript, followed by his own suicide. However, Rivière confesses to revising this initial plan: “[the act] would no longer be interwoven with the text; it would be shifted from the center, placed outside, at the culminating point, and at the same time moved to the far end of the text, and would, so to speak, be finally produced by it” (201). In his revised plan, Rivière plans to first narrate his parents’ life in a memoir that could be read by anyone, then write a secret addendum narrating the murder to come, and then he would commit the murder. Between the first and second plan, the most significant change is the form of the memoir and its “publication.” In the first “draft,” the announcement of the crime comes first, the biographical
section of his parents’ lives, and then the reasons for the deed. But in terms of its publication, going public, it would be received in its entirety, as one text. In the second “draft,” what comes first is his parents’ biography, which would be “published” first, a text that describes the murder to come would be written but in secret, and then he would commit the murders. In his final revision and execution, he commits the murders first, and instead of writing wanders for a whole month before he is arrested, makes false statements during his first interrogation about why he committed the murders, then in prison, he pens his memoir at the request of the judge.

Between the drafts and the final, there can be no clear separation because Rivière is clear about the fact that although he wrote the act text a long time after the killing, his memoir had been drafted in his head beforehand, that he had “considered most of the words he would put in it” (201). In the words of Foucault, it is a “memoir stored beforehand in the memory” (201). Rivière’s memoir infiltrates every aspect of the crime and the trial, even the intended scenarios are part and parcel of the finished text-act, and consequently creates the sense that the murder and the narrative are one, that they are, as Foucault says, consubstantial (200). Foucault’s concludes,

[in] its contemporaries’ opinion the narrative of the crime was definitely not something aside from, or over and above, the crime which would enable them to grasp the reasons for it, but simply one element in Rivière’s rationality or irrationality. Some said that the signs of madness could be found alike in the fact of premeditated murder and in the particulars of what was narrated; others said that the same signs of lucidity could be found both in the preparation and circumstances of the murder and in the fact that Rivière had written it down. In
short, the fact of killing and the fact of writing, the deeds done and the things narrated, coincided since they were elements of a like nature. (200)

Even while the argument was about whether or not Rivière’s memoir was an evidence of madness, or on the contrary sanity, it, in the same sweep, creates simultaneously, the illusion of a status quo. Suddenly, what was once not assumed has been as if it has always been: text, crime, and subject have been inextricably welded into one homogenized subject—“the elements of a like nature.” The subject of the autobiography is the subject of the act. In one incredible swoop, by wedding the act with the testimony, the testimony becomes a species of proof not only for the crime but for the subject. If, before, the act was proof of the crime, the testimony is now proof of the criminal—the difference is subtle, but entirely significant. The consubstantiality of murder and text became “an exhibit in evidence.” This means that in order for testimony to count as a species of proof, the consubstantiality between narrative and deed had to be produced. And the terror that Foucault mentions, if it were my guess, stems from the realization that this production was orchestrated, if not single-handedly, in large part by Rivière himself, or to be more exact the text itself:

His contemporaries seem, therefore, to have accepted Rivière’s own game: The murder and the narrative of the murder were consubstantial. They might all have wondered whether one of the two was a sign of madness or a proof of lucidity as against the other; no one seemed really surprised that a humble Norman peasant “barely able to read and write” should have been able to couple his crime with a narrative of this sort, that this triple murder should have been interwoven with the discourse of the murder, or that when Rivière undertook to kill half his family he should have conceived of writing a text which was neither confession nor defense,
but rather a factor in the crime. In short, that Rivière could have been, in two different ways but in virtually a single deed, an “author.” (200)

What is an author? The problematic of modern testimony is the question of subjectivity, and the assumption that the subject authors deeds and words. Therefore, the subject is a priori. Put differently, what this suggests in the reverse is that the subject is he or she capable of writing an autobiography, to testify to ones life and ones thoughts, to transcribe without error an internal dialogue. Elsewhere, in an essay titled “Christianity and Confession,” Foucault points out that Tertullian translates the Greek word for exomologesis, part of the Christian rites of penitence and testimonial confession, and this word is publicatio sui: to publish himself (The Politics of Truth 176). The testifying subject is the subject par excellence. And this, according to Foucault, is a trap.

A trap is that which appears as one with its surroundings, homogenous, unremarkable, familiar, and ordinary. When Rivière fled the scene of his crime, he did not hide (as Foucault emphatically points out). He was “invisible” for an entire month, due in part to the “systematic blindness of all those who passed him by” (203). But the most suspenseful turn in this text is this: the trap is not, by definition, that which remains hidden, it is, first and foremost a weapon. In order to come out of his unwanted invisibility, Rivière decides to make a weapon that he creatively dubs a “calibene” for it “might better serve…the role I would be playing” (203). Foucault writes, “and this it was, an escutcheon and a confession, a lethal weapon and fool’s bladder, which he carried at arm’s length; and it was by this that, by a strange complicity, he was finally recognized […] The bow was so to speak a mute declaration which became a substitute for the dark discourse engendered with the crime and intended to make him, by the narrating of it, glorious” (203). Here, Foucault, in what is not merely metaphorical, makes a connection
between the production of confession—the dark discourse—and the “calibene.” They are, according to him, literary inventions and literary weapons, and what would usually be on the order of figurative language has a terrible actuality to it because of the fact that the weapon itself was used in order to elicit attention and recognition. It acted not as the figure for a discourse, but in its figurativeness was discursive:

And the reason why it did play that role may be that Pierre Rivière’s games, his imagination, his theater, what he called his “ideas” and “thoughts” were one day […] transformed into discourse/weapon, poem/invectives, verboballistic inventions, instruments for “enceepharing”; into those engines of death whose names were fabricated and whose corpses were buried, those words/projectiles which were from now on never to cease springing from his lips and spurting from his hands. (203)

Rivière’s trap is both invisible and visible—it remains inconspicuous to detection, but also doubles as a form of weaponized recognition. What this should signal is that a discourse is both silent and gregarious, both invisible and too visible. Testimony, like the “calibene,” is a discursive tool that has more than ever been enlisted as a means of recognition—but like any tool, it has a life of its own, and recognition, visibility is a discursive game that comes with its own terms. Rivière is completely aware of the fact that this calibene serves a purpose and he finds it appropriate to the role he is playing. What makes Rivière’s discourse both disturbing and dark is this clear awareness of how the authoring of a crime involves role-play—not in the popular sense of the term, but he is clear that there is a role to play in the discourse of criminality and legal responsibility. It is why his weapon of choice, one that he names himself, is one of
recognition. But, this genre of recognition has its roots not first in juridical discourse but popular literary culture.

Foucault devotes the second half of “Tales of Murder” to an increasingly popular form and genre of the 19th century: “Rivière’s narrative is subsumed—at least so far as its form is concerned—under a vast number of narratives which at that period formed a kind of popular memoir of crimes” (204), which consisted mainly of contemporary broadsides and fly sheets. In a subsection titled “The Historical and The Everyday,” Foucault traces how these broadsides served to transform “the familiar to the remarkable, the everyday to the historical” (204) and more specifically it “became new, with all its canonical details fixed once and for all: floating rumor was transformed into statement […] came to produce history” (205, emphasis). Everyday rumour becomes new, becomes fixed, transformed into statement, and thus producing a History. In the reverse, it reads the conditions for the writing of a history. It reads the conditions for historical value and recognition. In order to reach the status of a history, it has to, first, be fixed into statement. Foucault writes that the ambiguity presented by these sheets is a modern phenomenon that stems from the “processes of a subterranean battle which continued in the aftermath of the Revolutionary struggles and the Empire’s wars around two rights” (207): “the right to kill and be killed and the right to speak and narrate” (207). Rivière’s wedding of crime and testimony precipitated at the intersection of a modern question about rights, but more specifically the right to kill and to be killed and the right to speak and narrate. The right to speak and to narrate, alongside the right to kill and to be killed, had become nothing short of the very right to be human.

The broadsheets of the early 19th century had certain generic characteristics. The first section was part of an objective narration of the events by an anonymous speaker, and the second
the criminal’s own sorrowful lamentation where the criminal came forward to rehearse his deed to an audience: including his own biography, his remorse, and a soliloquy that depicted the terror of his moment of death. What was formally quite new for its time was the use of the first person. Rivière’s memoir, written for the most part in the third person, is full of reported speech: he said, she said, I said, etc. Although the text does not use quotation marks as we would have used them today—the quotation marks, at the time, were still in the process of being standardized—there is a clear, remarkable transition to the first person that can practically be traced back to an exact point in the text. For the majority of his memoir, Rivière uses terms of reported speech, “I said” “she said” “he said,” especially for his parents’ biographies. As the narrative transitions into his reasons for why he committed the crime, the narrative transitions and turns inwards, into his own psychology “I thought I would,” “I feared,” and “I conjured” or “I envisioned.” But, as we near the end of his memoir, the form shifts dramatically, markedly. Compare the following passages, separated only by ten pages:

A.

The latest book I read was a history of shipwrecks lent to me by Lerot. I found in it that when the sailors lacked victuals, they sacrificed one of their number and ate him to save the rest of the crew. *I thought to myself:* I too will sacrifice myself for my father, everything seemed to invite me to this deed. Even with the mystery of redemption, *I thought* that it was easier to understand, *I said:* our Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross to save mankind, to redeem him from the slavery of the devil, from sin and from eternal damnation […] When I heard that nearly fifty persons had wept when my father had intoned the Asperges, *I said in my heart:* if strangers who have nothing to do with it weep, what should I not do, I who am his
son. I therefore took this fearful resolution, I determined to kill all three of them [...] I thought to myself he will hold me in such abhorrence that he will rejoice in my death, and so he will live happier being free from regrets. Having therefore taken these fatal resolutions I resolved to put them into execution. (106, my emphasis).

B.

As I went I felt this courage and this idea of glory that inspired me weaken, and when I had gone farther and came into the woods I regained my full senses, ah, can it be so, I asked myself, monster that I am! Hapless victims! Can I possibly have done that, no it is but a dream! Ah but it is all too true! Chasms gape beneath my feet, earth swallow me; I wept, I fell to the ground, I lay there, I gazed at the scene, the woods, I had been therefore. Alas, I said to myself, little did I think I would one day be in this plight; poor mother, poor sister, guilty maybe in some sort, but never did they have ideas so unworthy as mine, poor unhappy child, who came plowing with me, who led the horse, who already harrowed all by himself, they are annihilated forever these hapless ones. Nevermore will they be seen on earth! Ah heaven, why have you granted me existence, why do you preserve me any longer. I did not stay long in that place, I could not stay at this spot, my regrets fade somewhat as I walked on. (112-113, my emphasis)

The transition, the increasing standardization of direct, internalized speech is remarkable. Thirty years before the publication of Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment (studied at length by Bakhtin as an exemplary text for internalized dialogue) was this remarkable specimen of narrative experimentation. Beyond the psychiatrization of law and the medicalization of crime,
this case bears witness to the birth of a genre, the genre of modern testimony as a technology of subjectionhood and subjectivity. It is not a coincidence that these changes to narrative form were happening concomitantly with the psychiatrization of the law, or the wedding between the author of a text and the author of responsible action—they mark, as I’ve repeatedly emphasized, the interlocking gears of an ideological industry.

In the English translation, Rivière’s memoir begins with a translator’s note featured in the full body of the text right below the title. The translator explains that in the original French edition, the memoir was transcribed exactly as it was set down in the manuscript, not withstanding a few changes that had been made to facilitate an easier read. The translator’s note reads:

An interesting question is why the original form of the manuscript, with its shaky orthography and punctuation and its vagueness in the use of capitals, was left as it stood when it was printed in 1835. Historians who have seen manuscripts of the late 18th or early 19th centuries, in particular manuscripts by doctors, who were after all persons of good education, know that their orthography is frequently very idiosyncratic. After all, too, the ‘prescriptive and Republican schoolteacher’ had not yet appeared on the scene to standardize the formal details of writing. But the printer’s foreman had already begun to set type in accordance with his own uniform rules for spelling, punctuation, and the use of capitals when such manuscripts came to be printed. Why, then, were these rules not employed with Rivière’s manuscript? Was the idea to show that it really was by a peasant, the parodic act of someone miming a discourse and making a muddle of it because it does not fall within the normal province of the written word? At all events, it is
symptomatic that the version we have was so badly transcribed at the time that Pierre Rivière is constantly saddled with mistakes and incoherences which are belied by a comparison with the manuscript itself. Almost any sort of nonsensical errors could be ascribed to a peasant; hence the copyist or the printer’s foreman constantly fabricated more of them than there really were. (53-4)

This instance of transcription, and even translation, demonstrates that a testimony is never spoken in neutrality, it goes through, in this case a literal, but also an ideological typeset. To conclude that we must save human testimony from mechanical and human error is to miss the point entirely—testimony itself is a mechanism that comes with its own typeset. At a time when punctuation was still in the process of becoming standardized, it should flag the historicity of testimony and how it came to be a particularly modern genre:

> From Biblical history as learned at school to recent events taught or commemorated in the fly sheets or broadsides there was a whole province of knowledge with which his murder/narrative was vested and to which the murder/narrative was committed. The historical field was not so much the brand of explanatory substance as the condition which made this premeditated murder/memoir possible (209)

The socio-historical conditions that surround the Rivière case do not so much account for a criminal individual as much as it does the conditions of possibility for crafting a memoir, one intended to effect significance, historical significance.

> What does an extraordinary case of parricide, the memoir of a monster, have to do with the testimony of normal humans? At the heart of this juridical dispute, the question is not whether or not Pierre Rivière is a monster (though that is what most concluded), no, it hinges on
whether he is sane. If he is sane, he must come before the law as a legal *person* and accept the consequences of his crimes. If he is insane, he cannot be tried as a legal person, or a person at all for that matter. What made the case so frustrating was that his memoir demonstrated every sign of intelligence, and it was this that the courts could not reconcile: how could a man in possession of intelligence and rationality, conduct such a crime? Rivière’s memoir completely confounds the assumption that rationality was in and of itself *good*:

Rivière, there is little doubt, accomplished his crime at the level of a certain discursive practice and of the knowledge bound up with it. In the inextricable unity of his parricide and his text he *really* played the game of the law, the murder and the memoir which at this period governed a whole body of “narratives of crime.” Was it an irrational game? The majority of the jury seems to have decided that the fact that he played this familiar game both in the text and in the deed, that he was the dual author and appeared as the dual subject, was *monstrous rather than insane*. (209, my emphasis)

The right to kill is also the sign of responsibility—someone who can wield the right to kill must also answer for his self-authored crimes. The law can deal with the monstrous human; what is truly foreign to the letter of the law is insanity. It was for this reason that Pierre Rivière among his many other identities—peasant revolutionary, psychopath, misogynist, madman—had to be a monster. His monstrosity stemmed not only from the nature of his terrible crimes, but his mixing intelligence with unlawfulness. Foucault notes that at the time the dossier was compiled, it was a “remarkably full documentation, full not only for that period, but even our own” (ix). Despite this, an immediate and “complete silence ensued” (ix): “What could have disconcerted the doctors and their knowledge after so strongly eliciting their attention?” (ix). The medical
community had compiled and published the dossier, but there was something unspeakable about it.

What Foucault repeatedly calls Rivière’s game is not a monologic discourse. It is crossed, mutually produced, and was caught up in a multi-tiered legal mechanism that had long been in place before his testimony:

Rivière was the accused; the point at issue therefore, was whether he really was the author of the crime. He was up before an assize court jury which had had the right to grant extenuating circumstances since 1832; what it had to do, therefore, was to form an opinion of him in accordance with what he had done, what he had said, how he had lived, the education he had been given, and so forth. And lastly, he was subjected to a medical examination; here the question was whether his action and discourse fitted the criteria of a nosographic table. In short, his deed/text was subjected to a threefold question of truth: truth of fact, truth of opinion, and truth of science. To a discursive act, a discourse in act, profoundly committed to the rules of popular knowledge there was applied a question derived elsewhere and administered by others. (210)

The newness of Rivière’s discourse is, therefore, not the product of a single, murderous genius. On the contrary, its newness is in the particular fusion of discourses that created the conditions of possibility for a murder/narrative discourse where the author of the act is made commensurate with the author of testimony, consequently making it possible for testimony to function as a species of proof.

So, what does a parricide, a horrible murder, have to do testimony and histories of redress? Those political agents who work in the spirit of a contretemps, for the histories of
redress, need to be attentive to how the form of modern testimony comes with its own idioms, its own industrial practices, the medico-legal forms of examination, and evaluative measures that can be a far cry from a spirit of justice. This is not to do away with testimony altogether, but I am arguing for a revision of a schema of testimony as proof, as evidence, and as statement. A discourse of recognition that can be traced back to these popular 19\textsuperscript{th} century broadsheets were weaponized by Rivière, but beyond Rivière’s own intentions or expectations, it was fused with a contemporaneous medico-juridical discourse that itself was in the earlier stages of development. We can see how a literary genre of historical recognition came to have its place in the courts, how it developed into what we recognize today as the genre of modern testimony. In our most earnest efforts to “award” historical significance to alternative and minority histories, what discursive practices have we had to resort to? And are they the best forms, in their present condition, for what needs to be done? Even before content, the form is already culpable. A form already institutes meaning and significance. The forms that we use, like weapons and tools, have a history. And if they have been used violently, they need to be wielded carefully because they have a tendency to run the track of least resistance. We remember that the definition of threat, also, is a poverty of choice and a question of survival. What kind of freedom shares these affinities with the logic of a threat?

In an essay titled “The Night Watch (instead of “the book of himself”), Derrida explicitly brings together the question of autobiography—as the parenthesis suggests—and matricide. And although he’s referring to Jacques Trilling’s work on James Joyce’s \textit{Ulysses}, the following quote can hardly be read, following a close reading of Rivière’s autobiography, without some surprise: “And this knowledge is always put in the service of the revolution within the psychoanalytic revolution: the matricide rather than Oedipus, \textit{the matricide who weaves his ruses into the act of}
writing, a matricide who hounds the mother since he cannot have his way with maternity” (90, my emphasis). Derrida quotes Trilling himself when he writes: “What’s being questioned here is the link between the giving birth of writing and maternity” (90). Derrida will go on to suggest that matricide is in alignment with self-negation, and he makes reference to the Biblical Job: “Why did you bring me forth from the womb?” (Job 10:18). According to Derrida, “in confessing, the curse confirms, repeats, reproduces, and makes endure that which it would like to repress […] The wanting inscribes denegation within it: I do not want, I cannot want what I say I want: not to be born—or to die […] But, far from paralyzing matricide, the contradiction motivates it […] Compulsively, interminably—and writing comes to be inscribed in this repetition.” (91). What does the self-negation of matricide have to do with autobiography?

To kill oneself by killing one’s birth, in other words, the maternity of one’s mother. So as to entertain the suicidal illusion, yet again, of giving birth to oneself. On one’s own, freely, to oneself. […] Auto-parthenogenesis of a writing, for example, that would like to deny or—for this amounts to the same thing—to appropriate without remainder the entirety of one’s heritage. One writes, but it would be necessary to do otherwise in order to redo or remake oneself. In order to be in the end, as Joyce would have wanted, “father and son of his works.” (101-2).

The matricide hopes to destroy a concept of dependence. Derrida suggests that the auto-parthenogenesis of writing desires a terrible sovereignty: to dub oneself the father and the son, to engender oneself. The delusions of grandeur are unmistakable. Derrida writes, “writing dreams of sovereignty, writing is cruel, murderous, suicidal, parricidal, matricidal, infanticidal, fratricidal, homicidal, and so on…writing is a killer.” (102), and he adds that it is “beyond every
drive for *power* and *mastery*” (103, my emphasis). To which, he asks the question: “Is writing without matricide possible?” (102). What kind of a writing would constitute a “writing without writing” (103)? The “other writing” (103), the “altered writing, the one that has always worked over my own in silence, at once, simpler and more convoluted, like a counterwitness protesting at each and every sign against my writing through writing” (103)?

**PART II: The Confessing Animal**

*The problem of modernity is closely associated with how people undergo social transformation as a result of which they acquire a new mode of identification [...] This testifies to the historical truism that the words “subject” and “subjectivity,” in the modern sense, were never used prior to the eighteenth century [...] the concept of subjectivity was newly invented without precedents. —Naoki Sakai, “Individuality and Identity in Early Modern Japan” (4)*

Foucault writes, “Western man has become a confessing animal” where “one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell” (59). And he argues that it is through this act of “self-examination” that we come to form the “basic certainties of consciousness” (59). Testimony is a technology of subjectivity. The confessing subject, the subject able to testify, is the subject par excellence. As such, it underwrites all our modern institutions and practices: hospitals, schools, militaries, prisons, courts, citation practices, property, contractual agreements, the news media, and more. The traditional concept of testimony comes from a genealogy of individualism within Western philosophy, often traced back to early Christian thought, notably St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, and developed in the seventeenth to eighteenth century by philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. I contend that this modern turn is analogous with the relatively recent rise of the form of quotation and reported speech. Testimony, whether it is about myself, an event, or someone else, always employs some configuration of reported speech, most importantly reported “inner” speech. Consequently, accurate testimony becomes a matter of finding the closest and most approximate
calibration to this inner truth (therefore the problem of inner reported speech is not altogether
different from a theory of translation). Within this model, the central unit is the individual who
can provide an accurate representation of the past. From this perspective, testimony functions
like a recording.

*Western man has become a confessing animal.* But, at the same time, there is the strong
suspicition that the confessing animal is a western man. The universal witness, the universality of
the witness and objective truth, is actually a *specific* one that is racialized and gendered. The
witnessing subject, the subject, looks a certain way. Not so very long ago, section 394 of the Act
Concerning Civil Cases passed in 1850 stated that no “black, or mulatto person, or Indian” was
allowed to testify against “a white man.” Because the letter of the law did not specify about
people of Chinese descent, in 1853 when George Hall murdered a Chinese man, the California
State Supreme Court ruled that the Chinese should be classified as “Indian” and they, effectively,
were barred from testifying against a white man. This was overwritten twenty years later in
1873; however, I believe there is still a lot of work to be done. The terms of inclusion must be
revisited and revised.

**PART II: Testimony as a Technology of Subjectivity**

*Truth is not by nature free […] its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power.*
—Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (60)

*The agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained),
but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the
one who questions and is not supposed to know. And this discourse of truth finally takes effect
not in the one who receives it, but in the one from whom it is wrested.*
—*The History of Sexuality* (61-2)

In “Technologies of the Self,”* Foucault argues that any discursive technology of selfhood
“linked to constant writing activity” is one of the most “ancient Western traditions” (27). But, in
The History of Sexuality, he also explicitly argues for a modern turn. He is clear that the ability to give an account of oneself (for him, the term he uses is ‘confession’) is a powerful and modern subjective technology:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile. (61)

In Foucault’s Politics of Truth, a series of essays, the last is “Christianity and Confession” where he traces a “genealogy of the modern self” and traces it back to the Christian themes and practices of self-examination and confession. Even while he recognizes that the techniques of self, self-examination and confession, have classical precedents (Hellenistic and Roman philosophies), he singles out the particularities of the Christian tradition. Borrowing from this Christian tradition, the modern technologies of self are nevertheless “quite a new way of organizing the relationships between truth and subjectivity” that constitutes thought as a “field of subjective data needing an interpretive analysis” (183). Similarly, in Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, Shoshana Felman asks, “What is the significance of this growing predominance of testimony as a privileged contemporary mode of transmission and communication? Why has testimony in effect become at once so central and so omnipresent in our recent cultural accounts of ourselves?” (6). The form of testimony, arguably, has undergone a particular modern turn that constitutes it as the mode, par excellence, of autonomous, self-expression. Even if this should be about someone else, or about what someone
else said, it is first and foremost predicated on my being recognized as a subject, as a self-conscious subject capable of expression. This can be seen in the fact that the primary condition of admissibility for a witness in the court of law is their ability to understand the significance of an oath. We have become accustomed to believe that testimonial confession is the medium of our thoughts and feelings—as if thoughts and feelings were a priori and independent of these medias. Technologies of speech, speech genres, are not technologies for subjectivity, but technologies of subjectivity. It is a mediatic-technology that produces subjects, not simply expresses them.

Reported speech hinges on the desire to be able to tell apart who said what, this speech as belonging to this person and that speech belonging to another. At the same time, and perhaps most importantly, the construct of my testimony as the “reported speech” of my inner condition. Testimony has, today, come to represent the possibility of a transparent transcription between an inner reality and its expression. The modern form of testimony, whether it is about myself, an event, or someone else, employs some configuration of reported speech, most importantly reported “inner” speech. As such, it underwrites all our modern institutions and practices: hospitals, schools, militaries, prisons, courts, citation practices, property, contractual agreements (commercial, industrial, legal—not that these are necessarily separate or mutually exclusive. It is the logic of testimony that dictates the laws of reported speech, self-reported speech (confession), and even the utterance that we believe to be our innermost, inalienable, and independent thoughts. Whether or not the quotation marks are visible, the speech genre of reported speech—though it can be as diverse as direct speech, indirect speech, quasi direct speech, and the many calibrations between these forms—constitute subjectivity and in turn constitute our notions of transmission and communication.
Studies of the forms of testimony have revolved around the belief that we must let truth speak, that so long as truth is found and revealed, it will right all wrongs. Thus, studies in histories of trauma, studies of minority groups and histories of oppression, have leaned on the notion of “returning the voice” to silenced histories and subjects. My project is not to deny the structural acts of silencing, but to recognize that silence is not one, but multiple: “There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault 27). It is not enough to draw ever-increasing concentric circles of inclusion within a community of speech. It would be naïve to believe that returning modes of speech, without interrogating these very forms, is enough. We know from the compounded instances of current issues that no amount of proof, no amount of video footage for example, has been able to stall the toll of violence and brutality. A more just concept of testimony requires a profound shift in terms of how we define the subject, the value of truth, what comes to play in our notions of “free” speech. It is not enough to add testimony upon testimony without a deep wariness for the conditions of possibility for speech, for the so-called medias of transmission and testimony. It cannot be a question of quantity, but a radical rethinking of the idioms of listening. By changing the idioms through which we represent testimony, how might we listen differently? What would it mean to radicalize the form of testimony? What is the value of testimony? How might a certain homogenizing operations be at work within the form of testimony under the guise of “accountability”?

There is a serious ethical stake in my argument because I am suggesting that testimony (or lack thereof) cannot be thought of, only, in terms of repression. More simply put, the formula that silence is a condition of repression needs to be reconsidered. Silence—repression, Testimony—free speech. These pairs need to be recoupled and reconfigured if it means a better
understanding of how speech can be a mode of resistance and a mode of complicity, \textit{at the same time}. We must undo the romance of pure resistance. Our modes of resistance are streaked with aspects of complicity. Complicity has become a kind of dirty word, but what we must accept is that it resonates with strategy. What perhaps makes the critical difference between these two words—complicity and strategy—is whether or not we have an unsentimental understanding about what informs our modes of resistance. However, my argument must tread carefully because it can easily be turned into another reason to reinforce the violent structures of silencing—which are very real and material. Foucault writes, “these are the characteristic features attributed to repression…repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, nothing to know” (4). Repression is very real—there are very real operations involved in silencing and disappearing entire communities and cultures of people. It is not this that I want to contest. Similarly, Foucault writes,

\begin{quote}
The affirmation of a sexuality that has never been more rigorously subjugated than during the age of the hypocritical, bustling, and responsible bourgeoise is coupled with the grandiloquence of a discourse purporting to reveal the truth about sex, modify its economy within reality. (8)
\end{quote}

In other words, sex was never more “repressed” than when popular discourse purported to \textit{reveal} the truth about sex. What this means is that we should never fail to be skeptical of \textit{revelation}. If a discourse of revelation and repression are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually reinforcing, it is worth thinking about the value of modern testimony in these terms. Foucault goes on to say that his “aim will not be to determine whether these discursive productions and these effects of power lead one to formulate the truth about sex, or on the contrary falsehoods
designed to conceal the truth, but rather to bring out the “will to knowledge” that serves as both their support and their instrument” (12). He is clear about his aim: it is not an issue of truth or falsehood, but about a study of a “will to knowledge” that cannot be dismantled using a toothless binary like speech versus silence. He writes:

Let there be no misunderstanding: I do not claim that sex has not been prohibited or barred or masked or misapprehended since the classical age; nor do I even assert that it has suffered these things any less from that period on than before…All these negative elements—defenses, censorship, denials—which the repressive hypothesis groups together in one great central mechanism destined to say no, are doubtless only component parts that have a local and tactical role to play in a transformation into discourse, a technology of power, and a will to knowledge that are far from being reducible to the former. (12)

Censorships and denials are all powerful forms of violence, but the study of contemporary social and racial disparities have been all too focused on these negative forms. The power of discourse and the technology of power cannot be subsumed within the mechanisms of repression, and to fail to attend to the technologies of power that appear most innocent would be a mistake. Thus, a theory of speech, more particularly “reported” speech in the form of testimony, must be able to get outside the bind of immediately valorizing testimony as being opposed to silence and repression. Repressions are very real and very brutal, but they are part of a larger discourse of “the will to knowledge.” Foucault warns that any defense against these repressive schemes can also be tactically within this “will to knowledge”: in short, silence, but also speech, can be used in the service of what he calls a new regime of discourses. The regime of discourse is not only gregarious but is radically heterolingual:
Silence itself—the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. (27)

I do not mean to say that silence is not repressive, or that those who have been brutally silenced and oppressed should not be given the space to speak, freely. But, by examining the conditions of speech, it is my argument that “free” speech can be further radicalized than mere inclusion. Thus, I must insist on more: an as yet unqualified more that is not predicated on a notion of quantity or increasing numbers. In order to consider the uneven terrain of representation for disenfranchised subjects, I look at how an inalienable freedom of “speech” is its own kind of capital that also screens the complicities at work within modes of contestation. It is why the question of redress cannot be couched in terms of silence versus speech, but rather the forms of testimony. But, the forms of testimony need to be understood as performative.

The function of the quotation mark as we recognize it today was consolidated in the 19th century, more specifically with the rise of print culture and the form of the novel, but its prototype was in fact a stroke, a dash, that can be traced back to the earliest forms of textual notation. It was used primarily to “cross out” or set aside parts of that text that were superfluous, or deemed, less than necessary, but also to mark out a moment of special interest, to provide a
Marginal accent that was the equal of saying, “look at this!” or “this is interesting.” It would be mistaken to argue therefore that the history of the mark or in this case the quotation mark demonstrates merely its repressive force. The mark was not invented simply to mark the natural boundaries of a text—marginalia and text proper—but was itself the invention of those boundaries. In short, the mark effects the difference between text proper and the marginal. The quotation mark, while it has come to represent reported speech, in fact has a genealogy of irony. It is why, even today, quotation marks stand for reported speech but also the utmost irony of “scare-quotes.” We see that even as it operates as reported speech, it still retains the trace of its performativity.

But, what exactly do I mean when I argue that testimony is a technology of subjectivity? Foucault counts the confession among the technologies that produce a form of knowledge-power: “a guarantee of the status, identity and value granted to one person by another it came to signify someone’s acknowledgment of his own actions and thoughts…[today, he who confesses] is authenticated by the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself” (58). This assumes that “confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom” (60). He continues, “one has to have an inverted image of power in order to believe that all these voices which have spoken so long in our civilization—repeating the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks he is nothing thinking—are speaking of freedom” (60). But the repeated figures for speech—“voices,” “spoken,” “to tell what one is and what one does,” “speaking of freedom”—hold a special status. In “Christianity and Confession,” Foucault requotes an anecdote provided by Cassian in order to demonstrate the necessity of confession as a verbal act.
A young monk, Serapion, steals a loaf of bread evening. His spiritual director already knows his crime, and delivers a sermon about the truthfulness. Convicted by the sermon, Serapion takes out from under his robes the bread that he had stolen, and then he confesses, verbally, to having stolen it. At the moment of his verbal confession, a light tears itself away from his body, spreading the stench of sulphur. Foucault points out that the decisive element here is not that the director knew the truth, or the revelation of the stolen object, but the verbalization of confession:

> The verbal act of confession is the proof, is the manifestation of truth. Why?
> Well, I think it is because what marks the difference between good and evil thoughts, following Cassian, is that […] if one blushes in recounting them, if one seeks to hide his own thoughts, if even quite simply one hesitates to tell his thoughts, that is the proof that those thoughts are not as good as they may appear.

Evil inhabits them. (185, my emphasis)

If one, for whatever reason, cannot verbalize his thoughts—if he blushes, if he hesitates, that in itself is proof of evil. Effectively, what becomes inextricably fused is the schema of testimony as speech, and as proof. The most lucid formulation of testimony as a subjective technology follows on the next page:

> This confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes it and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile. (61)
It is worth thinking about silence and forms of speech not as a uniformly negative or positive quality, but rather as an actively regulated, instituted and managed effect. It is because these techniques of power are polymorphous, that it would be a fatal error to believe that any solution is as uniform as the freedom of speech. The event of testimony then becomes not an evaluation of truth, as it would seem to suggest, but an overdetermined product that has been calibrated according to a certain representation of what speech looks like and sounds like. Our speech acts are inflected by others, but also power. Walter Benjamin writes in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that to consider history is a “tiger’s leap into the past. This jump, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands” (XIV). We have every reason to be suspicious of the context in which these testimonies are carried out—perhaps even more so when they seem most sympathetic to the victim. What then is decisive for the problematic of a technology of testimony as reported speech is not to free the truth from lies, but to free the question of testimony from the narrowness of what is evident, what is self-evident.

Instrumental to a homogenous, stilted representation of speech is a concept of monolingualism. When I refer to monolingualism, I want also to highlight how it assumes an individuated, discrete subject. In “Christianity and Confession,” Foucault outlines a genealogy of self-examination that borrows from Christian monastic traditions of confession, and, for the first time in history, thoughts are considered possible objects for analysis (183). But, more than that, they are objects of suspicion “since they can be secretly altered, disguised in their own substance” (184). He continues,

[T]his reality capable of hiding in my thoughts is a power […] which hides inside my thoughts, this power is of the same nature as my thoughts and my soul. It is the Devil. It is the presence of somebody else in me. This constitution of
thoughts as a field of subjective data needing an interpretive analysis in order to
discover the power of the other in me […] is quite a new way of organizing the
relationship between truth and subjectivity. (184, my emphasis)

Thus, for the first time in history, heteroglossia became one and the same with evil. On the other hand, to have a pure voice, free of the power of the other in me, is to be innocent. However, the Christian tradition, if it rejected the voice of the Devil, also recognized the work of the Holy Spirit in the penitent’s soul. And it was, above all, capable of staying with an incredible contradiction: the idea that the power of the other was the “same nature as my thoughts and my soul,” thus a rejection of the Devil was also an abnegation of self. In a secular age, we have inherited these rites of self-examination, but unlike the Christian tradition, have forgotten heteroglossia altogether which has made it possible to hedge, to fortify the hermeneutic self. When these discrete, modern selves come together in the company of other subjects who subscribe to the same schemas of personhood, they create communities based on similarity.

Abdul R. JanMohamed, in his remarkable work *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death*, describes the unique representational economy of dreams and expressionist texts. According to JanMohamed, both dreams and expressionist texts disregard the rules of realism, naturalism as well as those of rational logic (27). In both cases, they work against the “imperative to represent “objective reality”…as in a dream, the dramatis personae are characterized by fluid, interchangeable identities that very often operate collectively in pursuit of a singular story” (27). Naoki Sakai, in “Individuality and Identity in Early Modern Japan,” writes, “in modern societies, the modality of identification for individuals was transformed so drastically that the topic of subjectivity became relevant in the discussion of identity” (4). The first time I read this, I read past it and had to do a double take. He points out that, in modern
societies, the issue of identity and subjectivity became so indelibly wed that even if you read a sentence about its historicity, it is easy to glide over it. The reason it is so easy to miss the point in this sentence is because what it tries to bring up as a question reads like common sense. The topic of subjectivity became relevant to a discussion of identity; it was not always the case. Can we reconceive of identity apart from subjectivity? Can I think of my-self without the self? By being attentive to the heteroglossic forms of reported speech in the following texts, I argue for a similar notion of *dramatis personae*, one constituted by fluid identities that operate collectively in pursuit of a singular, not single, story.

PART III: Faith and Truth

I hesitated to include this section on faith and truth for fear it would sound proselytizing. But, the question of testimony deserves a, if exploratory, discussion about faith, about truth, and their relationship to each other. I have taken much of this rather long chapter expounding on modern technologies of subjectivity, and deferring again and again to Foucault’s genealogies of self and a history of the Christian tradition of confession and self-examination. Therefore, it would be remiss of me not to talk about faith. And it would seem dishonest not to include my own confession: I am a woman of faith. The word testimony, undeniably, at least in the English-speaking world, carries an associative nod to the gospels and the testimony of the saints. I want to re-read the significance of testimony from within the gospels.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus goes to Capernaum on the Sabbath and enters the synagogue to teach. A man possessed by an evil spirit enters the synagogue and cries: “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (NIV Mark 1:24). To this, Christ replies, “Be quiet!” This event records one of the earliest testimonies regarding Christ. Throughout the gospel of Mark, Christ often warns people
not to speak about their encounter with him. The author of Mark suggests it was because it drew too much attention to his miracles, and took away from his message of salvation. Not all testimonies, it would seem, are created equal. How then are we supposed to understand the oft quoted: “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32)? It is at direct odds with the previous scenes where testimony is silenced in order that it might not detract from the message of truth and freedom. Jesus tells the crowd: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32). To his followers, he gives them a pair of instructional phrases that are conditional: if you hold fast to your faith and follow my teachings, then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. It is clear that the first condition for freedom is not “truth” but discipleship—in the Biblical context, an incredibly intimate relationship. The truth is not simply there as a given to be unearthed or uncovered, it is an exercise of learning and a practice of faith. It is therefore, first and foremost a relationship.

In the most famous and iconic of trials in literature, Jesus is questioned by Pontius Pilate. The Book of Matthew records that “The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so they could put him to death.” (NIV Matthew 26:59). Finally, two “false witnesses” come forward and they testify: “Then some stood and gave this false testimony against him: “We have heard him say, ‘I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man,’” (Mark 14:57). This testimony is a peculiar one because anyone who has read the Gospels in its entirety would know that it isn’t entirely untrue. During his time in Capernaum, Jesus clears out the temple courts because he sees men trading and exchanging money and is angered that the temple courts have become a common marketplace. The religious leaders ask the Christ by what authority he has cleared out the temple, and it is to
this provocation that Christ replies, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” (NIV John 2:19). There is nothing “factually inaccurate” about the false testimony that the witnesses bring forward. They are “false” because they are intended to entrap him and to frame him.

During Jesus’ interrogation by Pontius Pilate, Jesus tells Pilate, “You are right in saying I am a King. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” (John 18:37). To which, Pilate, asks: “What is truth”? He asks, what is truth? The tone here is unmistakable. Pilate, through his tonal inflection, points out the futility of truth. He is asking the Christ: what good has truth done you? You will be crucified in spite of all the truth in the world. Indeed there is Truth, but this Truth is not equal to the blinding light of facts. The very notion of faith belies this. The trial of Jesus, a scene of trial no less, demonstrates that the fulfillment of Truth was not the revelation of his identity, but precisely his acting it out, taking it to its fruition on the cross. The gospels are full of testimonies regarding Christ, not all of them were always encouraged, and in its critical moments leading up to the crucifixion we see the function of ‘false’ testimonies, false in spirit, not in fact. In the Book of 1 John, it reads, “The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” (1:2-3). The gospels do not understand testimony as documentary but rather, for lack of a better word, evangelical. The testimonies of the Gospels are concerned not foremost with truth as fact, but with fellowship. The Truth that stretches above the realm of men, entered its domain, and submitted itself to testimony, even false testimony, in order to restore a fellowship that was broken.
Derrida, in an essay titled “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” asks: “can a prayer, must a prayer let itself be mentioned, quoted, and taken up [entraîner] in a compelling [entraînante] agogic proof?” (194). In a poignant moment of doubtful faith, he writes:

Are there criteria external to the event itself that would allow one to decide whether Dionysius, for example, distorted or rather accomplished the essence of prayer by quoting it, and first of all by writing it for Timothy? Does one have the right to think that, as pure address, on the edge of silence, foreign to every code and to every rite, hence to every repetition, prayer should never be turned away from the present by a notation or by a movement of apostrophe, by a multiple of addresses? That each time it takes place only once and should never be recorded? But perhaps the contrary is the case. Perhaps there would be no prayer, no pure possibility of prayer, without […] the (at least apparent) multiplicity of addresses […] (194)

The cross at Calvary is one of the most opaque and strange of Biblical scenes. According to the Book of Matthew, a darkness covers over the entire land, and Jesus cries out “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). It is a scene of despair, of anguish, and depicts the profound sever of the most intimate of relationships—God from himself. Yet, what people often forget is that this cry of great sadness and utter despair is also a quote. Jesus quotes from Psalms 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.

Yet you are holy,
Enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our fathers trusted;

They trusted, and you delivered them.

The mark of citation accents the cries of despair so that it is also a prayer, a psalm, a declaration of faith, and prophesy on the brink of its fulfillment.

I am a woman of faith. I am also a woman of colour. I have always held a complicated relationship to Christianity both as a personal practice of faith but particularly with regard to its violent, colonial history. My grandfather’s grandmother was part of the earliest generation of Christians on the Korean peninsula, converted by Canadian missionaries. Four generations later, a Korean-Canadian, Christianity, for me, is a complicated, vexed lineage and trace of migration. To reconcile my faith and my scholarship has been no easy task. Still, and everyday, the figure of the Christ on the cross never ceases to move me: a powerful conflation, a conflagration, of victory painted as sacrifice. When we speak of the host, the Eucharistic bread, it refers to the sacrifice, the literality of a flesh broken and passed around as an act of shared communion. When the Christ breaks bread with his disciples during the final supper, he requests that they remember him: This is my body broken for you, do this in remembrance of me (Luke 22:19). The tropic persuasion of the cross—the reason it moves me, personally—is its physicality: the broken body taking the place of a broken relationship, and thus inaugurating new, radically altered terms of relation through sacrifice.

Foucault, in “Christianity and Confession,” in a section that is anomalous in tone, discusses the “deep contradiction, or, if you want, the great richness, of Christian technologies of the self: no truth about the self without a sacrifice of the self. [The centrality of the confession of sins in Christianity finds an explanation here. The verbalization of the confession of sins is
institutionalized as a discursive truth-game, which is the sacrifice of the subject.” (189). For Foucault, the richness of the Christian tradition is that the technology of confession undoes the subject. Done properly, the verbalization of confession should lead the penitent to abandon the self, give it over to God: the sacrifice of self. And he says of the modern adaptations of confession, the “great problems of Western culture,” is that it founds “the hermeneutics of the self not, as it was in the case in early Christianity, on the sacrifice of the self but, on the contrary, on a positive, on the theoretical and practical, emergence of the self” (190). He argues that the aim of modern institutions (judicial, medical, psychiatric, political, philosophical theory) was “to constitute the ground of subjectivity as the root of a positive self, what we could call the permanent anthropologism of Western thought” (190, my emphasis). He concludes,

And I think that this anthropologism is linked to the deep desire to substitute the positive figure of man for the sacrifice which, for Christianity, was a condition for opening the self as a field of indefinite interpretation. [In addition, we can say that one of the problems of Western culture was: how could we save the hermeneutics of the self and get rid of the necessary sacrifice of the self which was linked to this hermeneutics since the beginning of Christianity.] (190)

In an act of radical heresy, modern, secular Western culture found a way to selectively adopt the hermeneutics of the self without a concept of sacrifice. What would it suggest, then, to adopt a concept of sacrifice, without the hermeneutics of self?
PART I: Trauma and Translation

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one cannot stay silent
— Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudilliére’s History Beyond Trauma

Arang’s testimony, a testimony of trauma, is not only mournful in tenor, it is described as terrible and frightening. Her repeated visits that take place in the bed chambers of men who should be dreaming, but instead are awakened to the vision of a nightmare, is resonant with studies of trauma and Freud’s writings on PTSD. When Arang returns, she does not return as simply the subject of her trauma, but she returns as the figure for trauma. Cathy Caruth, in Unclaimed Experiences, writes that trauma is a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world […] an event experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known […]” (4). She continues, “trauma is not locatable in the simply violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Similarly, Shoshana Felman writes in Testimony, “the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, not available to its own speaker.” Therefore, the possibility of witness needs to be thought apart from self-representation. Felman deconstructs the assumption that knowledge, which itself is premised on the concept of self-knowledge, makes meaning transparent and accessible. However, what returns to “haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (Caruth 6). The structure of a traumatic

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5 This line is itself a quote/misquote. It is from Wittgenstein’s closing lines to Tractatus, ‘whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.’
experience arises out of a history of violence, but a violence that has not yet been fully known, even to the receiver herself. The term “trauma” has become a familiar term, used commonly and widely, but there is a way in which the image of trauma has become static and ossified. Representations of trauma, particularly in cinema and popular media, have often depicted a kind of hijacking of consciousness where the experience, in its possession of the subject, renders her a technology of recording: an unchanging, unresponsive recorded video reel that plays, repeatedly. *Entangled Testimonies* argues that the structure of repetition in trauma can no longer be read as a recording but needs to be read as an instance of history performing, or re-citing, itself. History can and does possess us, but as a recitation, not a recording. I argue that this critical shift in frame can yield productive ways of thinking about histories of redress.

When Benjamin writes, “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was,” it is the term *articulate* that gives pause, and allows for a reading of certain histories as sharing a structure of trauma. How does it account for a history whose history is felt only as that which was missing, but therefore in no way unmarked? The subconscious grapples with this gap or lacuna, and returns to it again and again; it feels for that disruptive chink that changes the texture of how we understand the fabric of a history. So when Benjamin writes in the same essay that “thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad” (263), there is a way in which it sheds light on how the structure of trauma, differentiated from repression or suppression, is the arrest of all psychic economy.

**PART II: Memory and Trauma**
In a fascinating essay by Robert Epstein “The Empty Brain,” he refutes the idea that the human brain works like a computer. Rather than think of the brain like a repository of data, he argues that it is designed specifically to make social connections. Epstein takes his readers through a short history of brain metaphors and its relationship to technological developments. In the 1500s, when automata powered by springs and gears were being invented, philosophers began to think of humans as complex machines. In the 1600s, thinkers like Thomas Hobbes suggested that thought was generated by small mechanical motions in the brain. In the 1700s, discoveries about electricity and chemistry led to new theories of human intelligence. By the 1800s, the brain was described using telegraphic and communications metaphors (1-2). Epstein argues that today our language has been completely taken over by information processing (IP) metaphors when it comes to imagining the brain and human memory (2). He, emphatically, argues that we are not born with “*information, data, rules, software, knowledge, lexicons, representations, algorithms, programs, models, memories, images, processors, subroutines, encoders, decoders, symbols, or buffers*” (2). While “computers really do operate on *symbolic representations* of the world. They really *store* and *retrieve*” (2), human memory does not work this way. A significant number of cognitive scientists, notably Anthony Chemero, the author of *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science* (2009), in what Epstein calls the anti-representation model of human memory, argue that memory is a “*direct interaction* between organisms and their world” (5). Epstein compares human memory to a practice, just like a pianist becomes more skilled at playing a concerto. Interestingly enough, Epstein illustrates the concept of memory by distinguishing the act of remembering something from recognizing it. When we recognize something, all that is required is to be conscious of the fact that we have had this perceptual experience before. However, to re-member is to “have to try to relive an experience” (5). When
we experience something, we are changed in some way (5), and the brain was changed in a way that allows us to *re-experience* it to some extent (5). Thus, nothing is “stored” or “retrieved” in memory. Epstein writes, “no one really has the slightest idea how the brain changes after we have learned to sing a song or recite a poem. But neither the song nor the poem has been ‘stored’ in it. The brain has simply *changed* in an orderly way that now allows us to sing the song or recite the poem under certain conditions.” (5). According to Epstein, the fundamentally relational quality of memory is why “no two people will repeat a story they have heard the same way and why, over time, their recitations of the story will diverge more and more. No ‘copy’ of the story is ever made; rather, each individual, upon hearing the story, changes to some extent—enough so that when asked about the story later […] they can *re-experience* hearing the story to some extent” (5). The diversions and changes that occur between recitations are not in spite of memory, but is its very quality. But perhaps most importantly, this notion of relational memory undercuts the idea of a consistent self. Memory, and therefore history, relies precisely on a changing, relational being. What we can learn from trauma theory is a different model of “remembering” altogether—beyond cognition, beyond recollection, consciousness, personal agency, individual subjectivity, and the IP metaphors that flood our understanding of subjective thought and memory. The relational structure is suggestive of a repetition that bears more similarities to a performance— to acting out the embodied gestures of a scene we have acted out before. And while I have reservations about aligning trauma with learning, the theory of trauma is a site of an unlearning that is, nevertheless, a critical part of learning. Recent scholarship has tended too often to ask who is the traumatized subject? Who counts as traumatized? Who doesn’t? To ask these questions, as useful as they are, may have missed what trauma theory suggests about the category of the subject altogether.

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A discussion of anti-representational models of human memory is related to brain plasticity as well.
The conceptual difference between memory as a process of information management versus relationality is interesting, but according to trauma theory, the structure of trauma does not belong at all to the domain of cognitive memory. Why even discuss memory? It seems just as erroneous as referring to an experience of trauma, since trauma is, in fact, a missed experience. But, memory is precisely the point, since trauma is the experience of a missed experience. In the same way, by paying close attention to what Epstein argues is the fundamentally relational structure of memory, I argue that the experience of a missed experience attests to a missed relation, or an impoverishment of relations. Epstein writes that any experience of memory is the experience of how the brain has changed in response to certain conditions. Similarly, the experience of a missed memory should mark how someone becomes indelibly changed in response to certain conditions, particularly impoverished ones. This has very significant consequences to a question of trauma and dispossessed communities—it reverses certain critical causal assumptions. Often what attends trauma is also a destroyed sense of community, relationality, and sociality. But, according to a theory of memory and trauma where relationality is prioritized, it means that the loss of community is not merely an additional calamity to the conditions of trauma and the impossibility of testimony, it may be constitutive of it. To put it simply, when we have no one to speak to, when we are isolated, it not only makes it difficult to relay a latent memory, it destroys its possibility. Sociality then is not secondary to memory, as if there is memory first and then relay after. To destroy a person’s sense of relationality is not just to take away the opportunity to relate, but it is the possibility of relay itself that constitutes memory. Chapter one and five will go further into the problematic of recorded speech, but it should suffice it to say for now that what appears to us today as the most adequate and qualified witness shares something in common with recording: repetition of content without wandering,
without manipulation, without change, correct, precise, and accurate. Shoshanna Felman writes that we need “a new form of narrative as testimony not merely to record, but to rethink and, in the act of its rethinking, in effect transform history [...]” (15). Testimony needs to be understood as a poetic performance, a form that produces ways of relating, that is fundamentally incommensurate to something like a record or empty, homogenous repetition.

PART III: Intergenerational Trauma, The Subject in Relation

Important to a theory of trauma has been the study of its intergenerational structure. The work of scholars like Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillièrè, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, Cathy Caruth, Gerard Fromm, Anne Adelman, Marianne Hirsch, Grace Cho, and others breaks away from a schema of the individual. In Davoine and Gaudillièrè’s work on intergenerational trauma History Beyond Trauma, they argue that madness cannot be circumscribed by the individual but is “a collective affair” (241), produced from within and by a socio-historical context. Trauma, for their work, provides the social link whereby histories and experiences speak to each other. According to their model of communication, it is the histories that speak to each other, not subjects. Benjamin, in “The Storyteller,” warns that we are poorer than ever in experience; we have lost our ability to exchange experiences. Studies of trauma have focused on locating an experience, or the radically reduced ability to experience, but only the most nuanced of this scholarship has paid attention at all to the radically reduced ability to share experience. In some of the case studies cited in History Beyond Trauma, the transcriptions of the analysts’ narratives demonstrate an extraordinary confusion of pronouns and forms of reported speech: it is as if neither the speaker nor the form can decide who is speaking or which stories belong to whom. In one particular case study, Davoine recalls a man she refers to only as Henry. During her sessions with Henry, a “social link”, the site of a transference, takes place
between the analyst and analysand where certain words come to have a shared, but also unique significance. Davoine writes,

In refraining from replying to Henry, when he asked her about her gray color, the analyst did not understand that her silence was noisy and confirmed the impression, registered on her face, of a disappearance without word or trace. This silence, even considered as a consequence of her private grief, did not belong to her. On the contrary, it was the common property of the field of death that they shared that day, with the result that a bit of confidence, like as small piece of terra cotta, could be produced, creating the possibility of a subject between them, what Benedetti (1971) calls a transitional subject, in a symbolic exchange [...] (67)

The dialogue turns on the word “gray” and its associations become a shared register. Drawing on this concept of a traumatogenic social link and the “transitional” subject, I want to make a case for the translativa subject, the subject in transit as not being an individuated one, but the provisional link between subjects, the possibility of a subject between them, the subject in relation.

Trauma studies thinks through a more complicated notion of enunciative positionality: who is speaking? To whom are they speaking? To whom do these stories belong? It is as if a history of trauma chooses its site; as if traumatic inscription seeks out resonant structures of relation through which to make itself felt. A study of intergenerational trauma, at its most robust, destabilizes subject positions and considers a heteroglossia that cannot be subsumed under master pronouns. Caruth writes that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24). She writes that “history is

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7 Henry reads on the face of the analyst a certain impression, and he says, “Your face looks gray.” The analyst had just attended a funeral that day and was coming to terms with the profound sadness of having to see their friend being “buried without a trace.” (67)
not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can only be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation” (71). This line is annotated with a note:

[...] trauma already describes the individual experience as something that exceeds itself, that brings within individual experience as its most intense sense of isolation the very breaking of individual knowledge and mastery of events. This notion of trauma also acknowledges that perhaps it is not possible for the witnessing of trauma to occur within the individual at all, that it may only be in the future generations that “cure” or at least witnessing can take place. (136)

The note brings to our attention a model of witnessing that must be situated outside an individuated subject. The structure of intergenerational trauma traces, then, the movement of a translation between subjects.

In Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*, she reads carefully and slowly in a very specific dream from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* where a father has just lost a son to an illness. The son has just died and is laid out on a bed surrounded by candles, and the father goes into the next room to lie down for a bit. He dreams that his son is at his bedside, and asks “Father, don’t you see I’m burning?” and the father wakes up, hurries into the other room to find that one of the candles had toppled over and the bed had caught fire. She writes:

From this perspective, the dream reveals, indeed, a reality beyond the accident of a single empirical event, the chance death of a child by fever. For showing, in its repetition the failure of the father to see even when he tries to see, the dream reveals how the very consciousness of the father as father, as the one who wishes to see his child alive again so much that he sleeps in spite of the burning corpse, is
linked inextricably to the impossibility of adequately responding to the plea of the child in its death. The bond to the child, the sense of responsibility, is in its essence tied to the impossibility of recognizing the child in its potential death.

*And it is this bond that the dream reveals*… (106, my emphasis)

Beyond the accident of a single empirical event, it is the awakening itself that both shows and reveals something beyond the traumatic circumstances of losing a child: it reveals a relationship, a bond, the ethical responsibility—its impossible demands—that one has toward an other. Here is one more excerpt from the chapter:

Such an awakening, if it is in some sense still a repetition of the trauma (a reenactment of the child’s dying), is not, however, a simple repetition of the same failure and loss—of the story of the father alone—but *a new act that repeats* precisely a departure and a difference […] the *performance* of an act of awakening that contains within it its own difference: “Repetition,” Lacan says, “demands the new” (61). This newness is enacted in the fact that the words *are no longer mastered or possessed by the one who says them*—by the child who has died and for whom it is eternally too late to speak, or by the father who receives the words as coming from the place of the child, the self that was asleep. Neither the possession of the father nor the possession of the child […] (110, my emphasis)

We are talking about a dream, but it is also a scene, one that can hardly be read, in any sense, as documentary. Caruth refers to a *reenactment*. But it cannot be owned either by the father or the son; instead, it is the testament to a relation. This scene transmits something, but it is nothing like a linear transmission or one that is “accurate,” it is a repetition with a difference that produces a
different understanding of how something, in this case someone, stands in relation to something or someone else. At the same time, it bespeaks new enunciative positions—one that cannot transmit the voice of the dead, but does imagine them. This position that can be authored by no one but a relation imagines the voice of the dead in relation to the living.

The site of intergenerational relationships has been integral to trauma studies. Arguably, this suggests that these relations are not secondary sites to an originary trauma, but somehow bespeak the very fundamental conditions of trauma. I am wary of a notion of genetic, or strictly familial intergenerational trauma. It is my belief that a notion of a social justice seriously shortchanges itself by being yoked to a concept of ethnic unity or nationalisms. Furthermore, my project recognizes the limitations of a model of intergenerational trauma that does not take into serious consideration the sociogenic principle at work within any transmission or passing on of traumatic histories. What does it mean to grow up under a parent whose ideas of sociality have been reduced or all but destroyed? Studies in intergenerational trauma cite example after example where the encounter with an unassimilable event is passed on in complicated ways—at times motivated by the demand for truth, a reconstruction of meaning, the guilt of survival, the responsibility of witness, etc. Consequently, it is often the case that the testimony of the children is not strictly theirs, but inextricably entangled with their parents. This is different from saying that it *is* their parents’ testimony. Davoine and Gaudillière’s work make very clear that the parent and child’s testimonies are imbricated together. One misses the point entirely if intergenerational trauma is understood as a kind of ventriloquism. For example, when the testimony, “this is my fear,” is reduced to “this is actually my mother’s fear,” it leaves no room to investigate how this trauma has been constitutive of the child’s psyche and the child’s subjectivity. We require more scholarship that conceives of trauma in terms of a more complex notion of sociality, where the
social does not equal the sum of individuals. In *Entangled Testimonies*, the fundamental unit of reference is the relation.

*Entangled Testimonies* takes as its focus a unit of relationality—the intergenerational—as opposed to a personality. In other words, a subject contends not only with the traumatogenic narratives of their predecessors, but they may also constantly be submitted to the same structures of violence and discrimination—this crosses lines of gender, sexuality, and race, but above all requires a shift in thinking about the model of trauma not only as a repetition, but a repetition with a difference, or to put it another way a compounded repetition.\(^8\) Thus, when speaking of a transmission of trauma, it is neither the site of the mother’s trauma or the daughter’s trauma, but a relation forged through resonance and bears witness to difference. Their narratives are not equal to one another, but their imbrication marks some kind of structural relation that attest to institutions and cultures of violence that stretch and span countries, oceans, and lifetimes. Different subjects are made to physically embody the effects of a compounded trauma differently, and an understanding of this is absolutely necessary to understanding asymmetric relations of power.\(^9\) Intergenerational studies of trauma attest to the inadequacy of the individual model of clinical psychoanalysis, and this project hopes to be one such instance of it where it broadens its scope to take into account events of trauma that span years, historical eras, and the compounded events of a trans-historical, structural violence. In this spirit, I believe that translation studies can actively open up the parameters of intergenerational trauma studies. If intergenerational studies of trauma have traditionally been studied within the context of family, when in conversation with translation studies, it becomes possible to think apart from a linear

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\(^8\) Professor Dagmawi Woubshet’s ideas about compounded mourning can be found at greater length and detail in his book *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS*. The concept of compounded trauma was first suggested to me by Professor Dagmawi Woubshet.

\(^9\) I am indebted to both Dagmawi Woubshet and Shelley Sunn Wong for bringing this to my attention.
genealogy and toward a transhistorical, transnational concept of trauma that goes beyond a model of genealogical inheritance. Therefore, what would it mean to think of testimony, not as transmission, but as translation?

Before we begin to think of testimony in terms of translation, it begs the question, is it possible to translate a testimony? What is a translatable text? When discussing the “translatability” of a text, Benjamin raises the question of a claim not fulfilled by men:

One might, for example, speak of an unforgettable life or a moment even if all men had forgotten it. If the nature of such a life or moment required that it be unforgotten, that predicate would not imply a falsehood but merely a claim not fulfilled by men, and probably a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God’s remembrance. Analogously, the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them. (70)

He says, even if men should prove unable to translate a text, its translatability should still be considered. Just because men should prove unable to translate, it has nothing to do with a work’s translatability (that quality that requires it be translated). But he makes this point through an analogue according to which, even if all men should prove unable to remember it, one might speak of an unforgettable life. To speak of an unforgettable life, I cannot help but think, is related to the testimonial act. Made possible through the structure of an analogue, translation and remembrance occupy the same plane. Even if men should fail to translate or remember, Benjamin says it should not preclude the very quality of its translatability or its memorability. What is more, because he invokes analogue, it is possible to infer that, like remembrance, if the nature of such a work required that it be translated, that predicate would not imply a falsehood but merely a claim not fulfilled by men. Between the analogues lies this hinge: even if men
should prove unable, this is not a question of falsehood. Though it might appear like I am
belaboring a point, both the structure and the language construction are very important. In one
deft sweep, Benjamin recovers the possibility of translation, of remembrance (for him, also
always an act of history as redress), and testimony; he recovers these from a framework of proof.

Why is a schema of proof inadequate to the question of witness and redress? Derrida
answers this question by way of an aporia that makes itself felt in the relationship between
testimony and translation. Derrida writes,

We see already announcing itself the poignant question of untranslatable
testimony […] testimony resists the test of translation […] But what would an
untranslatable testimony be worth? Would it be a non-testimony? And what
would a testimony that was absolutely transparent to translation be? Would it still
be testimony? (69)

Riffing on Benjamin’s concept of the translatability of a work (impossible to determine whether
it is a coincidence or a moment of uncited citation), Derrida refers to the specificity of the genre
of testimony. Derrida suggests that it is the very quality of testimony to invite translation and
resist it. Testimony operates on behalf of proof and in the place of proof, but it cannot and should
not be proof. The summons of a testimony cannot take place in a situation where there is
ineluctable and adequate proof—here, testimony would be unnecessary (69). Derrida suggests
that the form of testimony implicitly and necessarily operates in a context that requires a proof of
history but cannot itself constitute proof. If this is indeed the case, in a legal, socio-political and
epistemological system that privileges the language of proof, testimony can become a trap that
affects different bodies and different subjects unevenly. Summoned to provide testimony, to
prove the violence carried out against their bodies and livelihood, the burden of proof lies with
the communities of the dispossessed. The ambivalence of testimony has enormous political consequences for the marginalized communities since their testimonies can be too easily disavowed as insufficient in proof or instrumentally sentimentalized and selectively adopted for agendas of the state.

A large part of this project is about bringing translation theory and trauma theory in conversation with each other. By bringing together the idioms of translation theory and trauma theory, bodies of scholarship that have their own singular, independent histories, I realize that I will have to tread carefully and to take care not to pass over the discontinuities. I am convinced that while studies of translation and studies of testimony have no marked shared history—either in terms of their birth as a discipline or its scholars—, both have struggled with a similar question: the problematic of testimony and witness. Thought together, they may provide new idioms that work against accustomed ways of thinking about the sequence of time and therefore history, representation, modes of knowing, and most importantly, by challenging established subject positions, change how we think about relationality (both intersubjective and intrasubjective).

**PART IV: Representation and Repetition**

When I first began to think the theory of translation and the theory of trauma together, instinctively, I was drawn to their shared concern with the form of repetition. According to Benjamin, “to grasp the genuine relationship between an original and a translation requires an investigation analogous to the argumentation by which a critique of cognition would have to prove the impossibility of an image theory” (73). What this incredibly dense analogy suggests is that the question of translation is, already, implicitly a critique of cognition and of representation. We begin to see the outlines of a very specific and powerfully bound conceptual triangulation.
between translation, trauma, and representation. It follows that the question of representation, which is premised a priori on the capacity for self-representation, is a problematic of testimony: translation, trauma, and testimony. But, in the post-enlightenment, a critique of cognition and representation is no novel idea. What is perhaps worth paying attention to, however, is how Benjamin approaches such a critique:

[I]t is a matter of showing that in cognition there could be no objectivity not even a claim to it, if it dealt with images of reality; here it can be demonstrated that no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change. (73)

His answer to working against long-entrenched ideas of objective reality and cognition is a theory of translation, but one that has radically different relationship to repetition. Here, repetition is not something like a perfect recording but imagined as an afterlife. Benjamin writes, “if the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations, this is not accomplished through a vague likeness between adaptation and original. It stands to reason that kinship does not necessarily involve likeness” (77). Benjamin’s theory of translation is also a theory of history: the afterlife of a translation, one that is not identical to the original, is suggestive of the retroactive, or as Benjamin might say messianic, power of the present-future and a politics of redress. The past is never a discrete frame but is always in relation to the present-future that, therefore, can always undergo a change. Thought of as translation, it is possible to hold frames of comparison without commensurability, kinship without likeness, a resonance out of joint.
His theory of translation that complicates the relationship between original and translation, between “first” and “second,” makes an interesting point of contact with intergenerational—first versus second generation—trauma studies. Is intergenerational testimony legitimate? Can a subject who has no real, firsthand experience be an adequate witness? The idea of representation and mimesis depends on a strict notion of sequential temporality: the integrity of the original, the “first,” is requisite to a theory of representation. Caruth writes that the theory of trauma in individual or collective history—ultimately the impossibility of separating the two—engages with the problem of knowing and of representing (*Unclaimed Experience* 5). Trauma is a mode of historical witness that cannot be subsumed in what is known or represented. Not unrelatedly, Caruth is clear that trauma is not locatable in the original event. The structure of trauma is one of repetition, where it is the event of the repetition that re-marks the missed as such. In the famous case of Emma, it is not the original event of her molestation that traumatizes her. After her transition through puberty, a second event in a retail store, presumably retroactively, constitutes the event in her past as a traumatic one. The latency in the structure of trauma disrupts any guarantee for the integrity of the first event, and the second as secondary or subordinate. The retroactivity within the structure of trauma disrupts a cause and effect model while providing a frame through which to think outside linear temporality. The affinity between a theory of trauma and a heterolingual model of translation is that the repetition, the translation, is not secondary or subordinate to a notion of the original con(text). Rather, it is the translation that retrospectively attests to an already fragmented original; it is in the repetition that the structure of trauma attests to the missing event as already missing. The structure of trauma traces the movement of translation—as the return that imagines itself as a supplement but enacts a departure.\(^\text{10}\) Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation* writes that repetition, the re-citation (the récit)

\(^{10}\) For a thorough and extended formulation of this repetition as departure, please refer to Cathy Caruth’s
is a structure that annuls structure because to repeat something is an “extravagance” (388)—a surplus that calls into question the structure that contains it. Together, they propose a shift away from models of representation (and self-representation) and toward repetition.

PART V: Testimony, Trauma, Translation

But, there is something, intuitively, different about translation and a theory of trauma. The event of translation is understood as a linguistic event, whereas a traumatic event—whether it is a single event or a compounded history of violence—is understood as a historical one. How then, does the scene of translation and the scene of trauma, respectively linguistic and historic, speak to each other. What affinity can there be between history and language, and why should they matter to each other? But, how do a theory of trauma and a theory of translation illuminate each other? Why might a historicity of language matter? And how does language bear history? And how are these questions tied to the problematic of testimony and witness?

In the introductory paragraph of Derrida’s Demeure: Fiction and Testimony, a slim but dense and unusual reading of Maurice Blanchot’s short story “The Instant of my Death,” he begins by letting his readers know that the title is an instance of parody, a mistranslation, a quotation gone awry—what he calls a “displaced echo” and a “twisted translation” (1). He is playing off of his own words used in the funereal eulogy for his friend Paul de man. On speaking about funereal or autobiographic writing, he refers to that space in between fiction and truth. The displaced echo can be heard in the revision: “fiction and truth” versus “fiction and testimony.” The triangulation of fiction, truth, and testimony that happens by way of a parodic translation is emblematic of the problematic of the act of witness. Here, the operative frame is ‘fiction and x,’ where ‘fiction and x’ represents a binary or a relationship of opposition. But then, through an operation of translation, testimony takes the place of truth and it introduces an irreducible section, entitled “The Child’s Game,” in Literature in the Ashes of History.
ambiguity. Is the substitution based on similarity? Are they synonymous terms? But, more than anything, the displacement seems to signal their difference. What is the difference between truth and testimony? In a strange way, the question of their difference, the structure that makes such a question possible, also performs the aporia of witness: to take someone else’s place without co-option. The displacement of truth by testimony happens in a moment of translation, and this has a relationship to the question of fiction. Let us take this one step at a time.

Testimony comes to edge out a concept of “truth” and this is made possible through an instance of translation. What is the relationship between testimony and translation that it should be in league with each other against a concept of truth? How does the movement of translation perform what testimony tries to name? Testimony and translation, these two pairs are not equal to the other but they are related. Testimony is by definition an address, and an address always assumes translation. Sakai suggests that it is through a mode of translation that two idioms carry out a mutual co-figuration. A translation between two idioms is always a testament to both, and a testament to their encounter. Therefore, how we define testimony intrinsically comes to bear on how we conceive of translation, and vice versa. They are inseparable concepts. And they are linked by a concept of reported speech. These triangulated concepts are inextricably bound, to change one is to change the others, simultaneously.

When testimony and translation act under the tyranny of “truth”—a concept of truth that presumes the transmission of information—its performative force is forgotten. Through a formulation of translation that displaces “truth”, the structure of the relation changes. What was a relationship of binary opposition, fiction and truth (fiction versus truth), turns into a relationship of association, fiction and testimony (fiction as testimony). The very instance of displacement introduces an instability into a relationship of opposition. Through translation, truth is switched
out for testimony, and consequently creates a gap in between the structural, the grammatical, relationship between fiction and truth. The moment of translation produces a deep uncertainty for the knowledge of truth. To reconceive of translation as a performative act as opposed to a transmission (as a process that is in excess of a trade in synonyms) simultaneously acts on our concept of testimony. In displacing “truth,” testimony comes into a relationship with a concept of performativity but also fiction. Entangled Testimonies looks closely at literary testimonies, and even when it looks at so-called official testimonies, it looks at their literary quality.

Translation and trauma meet in the figure of the witness. In the poetics of witnessing, a concept of history but also relationality (and therefore communication/translation), meet. As long as bearing witness is a question of address, it is a question of language (testimony and translation). And given what bearing witness means, it is an address that arises within a moment of historical danger or urgency. It is why every act of witness is also an instance of history and language, and why those instances of language are also historical. Through the triangulation of trauma studies, translation studies, and studies of testimonial form, I ask two questions that are really one: how does language bear history (even as they are historical products)? Within the poetics of language, can a history arise? Together, they simultaneously deconstruct two very important assumptions: 1) language as empty and homogenous, 2) history as empty and homogenous. Consequently, testimony, both the language and the historical circumstances that have precipitated or required it, always says more than it does. The language that testimony deploys is a figural one that has a history (a history that is nothing like empirical events). By approaching it from the place of translation and not conceptual unities (subjective, linguistic, etc.), it allows scholarship to begin thinking about testimony, witness, history, and communication from the point of view of foreignness.
PART VI: Theories of Translation—From a Communications Model to Relationality

In recent years, a handful of scholars have challenged the communications model of translation: the idea that translation is a linear transmission of information from one language into another. Translation, according to this model, replaces one word with another that has approximately, the same meaning. This model assumes, but then in turn creates, isomorphic structures between one idiom and another. The communications model of translation assumes that between one subject and another, on the condition that they share the same linguistic code, a message can be transmitted without going astray. The problem with such a model is that it is entirely preoccupied with mediating an understanding. This model of communication reduces translation to a transmission. Walter Benjamin in “The Task of the Translator,” writes, “any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information […] This is the hallmark of bad translations” (69). According to Naoki Sakai, “the experience of not comprehending an other’s enunciation or of the other miscomprehending your verbal delivery is grasped immediately as an experience of understanding the experience of not comprehending” (6). Within a communications model of translation (Sakai refers to it as homolingual translation), when we encounter something we don’t understand, we immediately recuperate it for categories of knowing. Sakai argues that translation is not an empty, homogenous medium between two different idioms, but the technology that creates their difference and their respective linguistic unities. His criticism of the communication model is not a criticism of translation itself, but an image of translation. It cannot be a “good” or “bad” thing because it is not a measure of value but the technology that has the potential to produce it—it is pure relationality itself.
But, what does this have to do with testimony? Sakai differentiates between the verbs “to address” and “to communicate”:

Unless one aims first, one cannot even “fail to strike it.” In this sense, just as “aiming” is prior to “striking,” so “addressing” is anterior to “communicating.” And “addressing” is distinguished from “communicating” because an addressing does not guarantee the message’s arrival at the destination. (4)

The difference between “to communicate” and “to address” is where I find the crux of Sakai’s project. Sakai reframes a discussion of translation as a theory of address. Against the grain of the communication model, Naoki Sakai coins the term “heterolingual address” in order to consider a mode of address that does not “abide by the normalcy of reciprocal and transparent communication” (8). The heterolingual address assumes an “essential distance not only of the addressee from the addresser but also of the addressee or addresser from himself or herself” (8). Therefore, in the heterolingual address, every address occurs “as the act of translation, and translation takes place at every listening or reading” (8). Sakai’s theory of translation, by introducing distance between and within subjects, destabilizes subject positions. It destabilizes both inter-subjectivity and intra-subjectivity:

[…] translation introduces a disjunction instability into the putatively personal relations among the agents of speech, writing, listening, and reading. In respect to personal relationality as well as the addresser/addressee structure the translator must be internally split and multiple, and devoid of a stable positionality. At best, she can be a subject in transit […] translation is an instance of continuity in discontinuity and a poietic social practice that institutes a relation at the site of incommensurability. This is why the aspect of discontinuity inherent in translation
would be completely repressed if we were to determine translation in the form of communication. (13)

Sakai’s theory of translation is fundamentally a theory of subjectivity. Here, translation is not subordinate or after the fact of linguistic unities or subjective sovereignty for that matter. Translation does not mediate an address and its translation, but is the address itself that creates nodes that are, in turn, consolidated in concept as subject positions and social identities. Translation does not mediate between terms, but creates them. It, then, serves not as the bridge between pre-existing terms, but is the very structure of relation that allows them to come into existence as relative terms.

A theory of translation as heterolingual address assumes an aggregate community, one that is not predicated on linguistic, ethnic, or epistemic homogeneity. The particular constellation of translation scholars that have informed my research—Walter Benjamin, Naoki Sakai, Jacques Derrida, Rey Chow, Brett de Bary, and others—against a communication model, instead posit that translation structures our relationship to ourselves, to others, to the living, to the dead, and even to God—perhaps it is a modality of faith. I quote Naoki Sakai from his seminar on “Cultural Difference and Translation”: “the basic reason for translation is in its performativity. Translation is like an act of addressing whose accomplishment is not certain, precisely because it is uncertain. We translate to reach what is not fully known to us. In this respect the act of translation is the modality of the future. Therefore translation is something like hope. Hope is one’s existence toward the future” (March 26, my emphasis). The horizon for translation is hope: by acknowledging the unknowable, that there is an irreducible core that we perhaps cannot know

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11 Refer to Naoki Sakai’s *Translation and Subjectivity*.  
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in the other, we hope to enact a communion with the unknown, and in this act of hope what is created is the condition of possibility for a relation. Not a border but a horizon.\textsuperscript{12}

PART VII: Telecommunications Model

But, what the scene of a community of witnesses foregrounds is the premium put on likeness but also proximity. What is perhaps already implicit in a criticism of a communications model of translation is a larger critique of models of telecommunications. The idea of spatialized time, as so many\textsuperscript{13} before me have already argued, has been vital to our ideas of community, nationality, progress, civilization, and history. I believe that our most fundamental ideas about communication and even witness are underwritten by a linear concept of time and consequently a limited idea of space. However, trauma theory thinks against the privilege of presence, and reverses the assumption that a witness can give an account of what happened because they were there. Rather, it suggests that because they were there, exposed to a set of violent conditions, the experience—that which was unassimilable to consciousness—was missed (Caruth 4).\textsuperscript{14} What trauma theory undoes, then, is the violent injunction to a will to knowledge and to presence—even a presence to self. Trauma theory riffs on, even as it critiques, a chrono-spatial concept of witness that is based on proximity: in order to be a witness, the subject-witness must be near the event in time and space. Ontologically speaking, a chrono-spatial concept of witness but also translation measures the distance between the self and the self, precisely by demanding that there be no distance at all. I must be coincident with myself; I must be coincident with the event. I must have been present at the time of the event, and at the time of the event I must have been

\textsuperscript{12} This idea of bordering was also introduced to me by Naoki Sakai in the seminar, “Cultural Difference and Translation.” For more on bordering, refer to Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson’s Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor.

\textsuperscript{13} Thongchai Winichakul, Naoki Sakai, Benedict Anderson, Johannes Fabian, to name a few.

\textsuperscript{14} This is not to say that the victim of trauma has no memories whatsoever, the missed instant—that instant—is missed in some way.
present to myself. It is this self-coincidence that constitutes my subjective truth as being, and a
being, full of intent—the intention to be truthful. Consequently, a communications model is also
implicitly a telecommunications model. I argue that the modern form of testimony has implicitly
cast itself according to a telecommunications model of translation. By drawing on recent theories
of translation, I think about testimony not as transmission but as a translation, but where
translation itself undergoes a translation from a communications model to something else.

Caruth writes, “Through the notion of trauma, I will argue, we can understand that a
rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our
understanding, that is, precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may
not” (11). A theory of trauma thematizes what is arguably the question of and for modern
testimony: how does one go about telling, with the greatest precision, that which is not available
to consciousness or experience? I want to repeat Naoki Sakai’s understanding of homolingual
translation: “the experience of not comprehending an other’s enunciation or of the other
miscomprehending your verbal delivery is grasped immediately as an experience of
understanding the experience of not comprehending” (6, my emphasis). A theory of trauma and
translation, together, can effect a disruption within our representation of the knowing subject and
the speaking subject. They suggest that some things cannot even be accounted for in a
phenomenal way; rather they are suggestive of the broken rhythm of a disturbance that exceeds
epistemic gratification. The act of autobiography, according to Shoshana Felman, is itself “an
impersonal witness to a history of which it cannot talk but to wish it nonetheless bears witness in
a theory of translation…a constant fragmentation of a [totalizing view of history], a continuous
disarticulation of any illusion of historical closure or historical totalization” (161). Thus, both a
theory of trauma and the Benjaminian notion of translation is a mode that, in its attentiveness to
that which is unassimilable, looks outside the meaning of itself, outside the boundaries of an epistemic certainty.

PART VIII: Quantum Entanglement and a Theory of Testimony

In Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the other*, he argues that the conditions under which an anthropological praxis took shape was necessarily linked to colonialism and imperialism. Throughout the work, he argues that the notion of the West and the Rest, as well as the nation-state emerged out of a concept of spatialized time. The West made up a cultural and civilized center, and the index for culture or civilization was, for the Other, measured in terms of distance and therefore time: distance was difference (16). How proximate or distant one was from this civilized, cultural center determined who or what could be considered “forward” or “backward” according to a narrative of linear progress. Fabian writes that “time resembles, and bears on, the problem with language and communication” (42). Because, within our spatio-temporal reality, communication and correspondence is premised on sharing the same time and sharing the same space: “communication is, ultimately, about creating shared Time.” (31). It is why there can be no basis for nonhierarchical relations between a “forward” and “backward” group of peoples. By creating a spatialized notion of time, it becomes possible to discriminate groups by relegating them to an ideological or cultural past. Fabian is critical of temporal distancing because it demonstrates a “persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (31). Thus, something as benign as a concept of time encodes within itself a racialized concept of hierarchical subjects. Therefore, the question of a representation of time, the structures of representation and language, the structures of relationality, not withstanding their ontological status, can be more pressing, more immediate, for certain subjects. The questions about less violent and non-hierarchical
forms of relationality are, without question, about race and gender. Therefore, Fabian proposes coevalness, a theory of temporal synchronicity and simultaneity, as a theoretical model for resisting temporal distancing. Coevalness is a concept of events and participants that occur at and therefore in the same time. According to Fabian, “for human communication to occur, coevalness has to be created. Communication is, ultimately, about creating shared Time.” (31). And, the idea of creating shared time needs to be thought in tandem with a concept of the witness: who can share our time(s)?

What this question forecasts is the image of a monolingual community, one that imagines itself as being alike but also transparent. The injunction against false testimony, not unlike the one against a bad translation, underwrites the fantasy of a monolingual community. The fantasy of perfect, reciprocal truth and transparency is, in essence, encoded within what we feel as the homeliness and comforts of a monolingual community. By monolingualism, I am referring to the assumption that we can understand the other better when he or she speaks like us, looks like us, lives like us, thinks like us, etc. The key turn of phrase here is “like us”—this likeness, the “ness” of us. In Derrida’s essay “Demeure: Fiction and Testimony,” he writes,

[A]n implication of the “we”—the “we” as sharing of the idiom of co-responsibility for linguistic competence, so to speak—testifies to an essence of testimony. There could be no attestation without it. There could be no witness—not only no witness who is present and one who perceives as witness but no witness who attests, who bears witness—without speech act, of course, but above all without someone who can be assumed to have at least a sufficient mastery of the language. (35)
At the end of this suggestive passage, he asks: “To what extent can this competence be shared? How and on the basis of what metalinguistic criteria can it be evaluated?” (35). What Derrida suggests is that the question of translation and testimony are conceptually, inextricably, entangled. He suggests that “There is no lie otherwise […] Thus I can only lie to someone who hears me, who understands me, who understands my language the instant I am speaking to him or to someone of whom it is assumed that his competence rigorously equals, indeed matches my own” (35-6). Testimony presumes a monolingual code. The figure of translation shares the same space as the figure of witness. Who qualifies as a witness? A witness is someone who was there, who saw the scene in question. Now, we if were to extend the logic of one witness, and imagine a group of people who witnessed the same thing: we have a mutual understanding about what happened because we saw it, we witnessed it, together. There is something, fundamentally, monolingual, about a community of witnesses (even if they don’t, technically, speak the same language). In a sense, a nation-state is the extension of this logic of a community of fellow witnesses: we share the same idiom because in some way we believe our experiences are alike, we saw the same things, we witnessed the same things, we were present within a scene called national history, a common language, and certainly a camaraderie that stems from a feeling of being “together.” The essence of testimony requires a concept of relationality and today, this has been reduced to less fluid concepts of “we”: people who speak like us, looks like us, think like us, share the same level of competence, etc. To invert such a concept, it is necessary that an understanding of testimony take its cue from a heterolingual notion of translation. The two questions are mutually implicated ones: who can share our time? Who qualifies as witness?

But, to return to Fabian’s argument, our ideas of the epistemic subject are deeply embedded in our notions of spatialized time. In an ironic, intentional, use of the very language of
linear time, Fabian writes, “I consider regressive the fact that anthropology achieved its scientific respectability by adopting an essentially Newtonian physicalism (Time being a universal variable in equations describing nature in motion) at a moment near the end of the nineteenth century when the outlines of post-Newtonian physics […] were clearly visible” (16). In order to begin thinking differently, in ways that attempt to unlearn the partitions and schemas of linear temporality, we need a model of temporal relations that can be thought outside sequentiality and outside Newtonian physics. According to Newtonian physics, between Particle A and Particle B, any transfer of information (transmission in the largest sense of the term) must travel through space and time. The relationship between A and B, therefore, is based on cause and effect and therefore proximity. All of relationality, according to the Newtonian laws of motion, is the effect of an a priori cause—even the speed of light cannot exceed this threshold. Thus, simultaneity—what, I believe, Fabian might have meant in some sense when he theorized “coevalness”—is inconceivable. Even those things that appear to happen at the same time, as the theory of relativity proves, are not so: everything is sequential. Our construct of memory is also sequential: first the event, then the representation of the event in memory. Our valorization of the truth is also defined by spatialized temporality—it is why something is “further” or “closer” to the truth. According to this model, at best, memory in the form of testimony can only be preserved. It is altogether too conservative a notion on which to base all our political acts of redress and alternative histories.

A theory of testimony needs to be brought “up to date,” so to speak (I use the turn of phrase ironically, not sincerely). If quantum physics has outstripped the assumptions of space and time that belong to Newtonian physics, we might be able to learn something from quantum entanglement. Quantum entanglement describes two particles that have become “entangled” in
such a way that the information that they share cannot be attributed to one or the other; any change that happens, happens at the same time—defying all the physical laws of motion.

Entanglement is an understanding of simultaneity and synchronicity, of a shared time that occurs at such incredible distances that it, so to speak, eliminates it. It demonstrates an instance of relationality that does not occur within the normal bounds of space. What this means is that whatever is shared between these two participants have happened at a speed faster than light—now, time is no longer linear. Spatio-temporal distance is no longer relevant within a framework of entanglement. Rey Chow already asks, in her book Entanglements or Transmedial Thinking about Capture where she also borrows the term “entanglement” from the field of quantum physics, “if entanglement could not also be a figure for meetings that are not necessarily defined by proximity or affinity. What kinds of entanglements might be conceivable through partition and partiality rather than conjunction and intersection, and through disparity rather than equivalence”? (1-2). I think through the problematic of testimony with a provisional model of entanglement. Borrowed from the quantum theory of entanglement and radical pairs, it provides one such model that disrupts conventional notions of space—of proximity and remoteness—and relationality. The quantum theory of entanglement is a radical reversal of Newtonian physics that, very crudely put, is a law of relation based on cause and effect and a geo-spatial notion of time. In other words, the theory of entanglement is useful as a concept to think outside the model of telecommunications.

I argue that spatialized time is also what organizes our ideas of testimony and witness. Let us consider the key terms, according to Chow, that determine encounters within time and space: proximity, impartiality, and equivalence. This is the language of the modern witness. Your credentials as a witness and the validity of your testimony hinge on: proximity in time and
space to the event, impartiality and factual equivalence. Put differently, especially in terms of its relevance to a theory of testimony, a concept of entanglement defies a valorization of origin and original sites, and furthermore the schema of “event” as that which takes place in temporal sequence. If testimony is about the relations of transfer, the model of entanglement provides a way to think about testimony apart from centers, origins, proximity, affinity, impartiality, and equivalence. Einstein described entanglement as “spooky action at a distance,” except of course it isn’t at a distance at all; rather, it collapses all ideas of distance and proximity. Quantum entanglement disavows all sense of causality because it renders telecommunications irrelevant. While entanglement for this project might suggest something about the forcefulness of a desire to disentangle, it does not presume an original moment of un-entanglement. Rather, it begins with entanglement.

I cannot, at least not now, read this particular passage from Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” again without thinking about quantum entanglement and what it means to our philosophies of history:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history […] A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (263)

At the heart of quantum entanglement is the idea of “simultaneity.” Newtonian physics and the laws of relativity rejected the idea that something could have a relationship with another thing
outside of relativity, cause and effect, origin and destination, first and second. In an expression like “time of the now,” I hear the language of radical simultaneity.

PART IX: Entanglement and Heteroglossia

In Bakhtin’s well-known text *The Dialogic Imagination*, he writes, “Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualification, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or on the contrary, by the “light” of *alien words* that have already been spoken about it” (276, my emphasis). Drawing on the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia, *Entangled Testimonies* argues for a theory of testimony that is “entangled, shot through with shared thoughts” (276). I argue for different idioms with regard to the problematic of testimony: a testimony beyond proof, beyond the signatory of an autonomous individual, beyond a concept of the voluntary, and toward a concept of an always, already entangled testimony. Every community creates its own discursive culture, and every time we enter the presence of others, we create the possibility for a different, shared idiomatic hive of discourse. However, it is, at the same time, important to remember that ‘entanglement’ also means ensnarement, danger, and seduction.¹⁵ Bakhtin argues that parodic forms “liberated the object from the power of language in which it had become entangled as if in a net; they destroyed the homogenizing power of myth over language; they freed consciousness from the prisoned consciousness within its own discourse, within its own language. (*Dialogic Imagination* 60, my emphasis). Therefore, a study of speech forms and testimony that takes entanglement as its site of critical inquiry must take into account power relations and relations of complicity.

¹⁵ For rich and suggestive reading on entanglement and escape, refer to Rey Chow’s *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture*. 
If we look closely at what he suggests is the value of parodic language, it does not play at being the “means of direct expression,” but rather at being “the image of language, the image of the direct word.” (59). For Bakhtin, a theory of the image of language is premised on a distancing between language and reality, and one whose fidelity, or in his words “authenticity,” stems from its ability to act as a figure, as image. In short, he completely reverses the logic of authenticity where it isn’t the figure that mimes reality, but where the “reality of discourse” stems from its figurative-ness. Bakhtin writes,

For the novelist working in prose, the object is always entangled in someone else’s discourse about it, it is already present with qualifications … novelistic images seem to be grafted organically on to their own double-voiced language, pre-formed, as it were, within it, in the innards of the distinctive multi-speechedness organic to that language. (331)

In order to understand Bakhtin’s theory of a truthful language, or what he would call the parody of language, we must distinguish between the word and the image of the word. I believe this difference might, if a reductive formulation, effectively be translated as the difference between the language of communication and the language of a poetics. In the second chapter, “A Techno-Mediatic Modernity,” I will argue that the modern form of testimony operates as a species of proof that, following a European epistemic tradition, is individualized and juridical. Against the grain of such a concept of testimony, Bakhtin’s theory about the image of language as an experience of poetics might be one such way to give space to a different language of testimony, one that is attentive to its heteroglossic milieu.
CHAPTER 3
The Quotable Gesture: Reported Speech, Performance, and Possession

It’s the law of quotation marks. Two by two they stand guard: at the frontier or before the door, assigned to the threshold in any case, and these places are always dramatic. The apparatus lends itself to theatricalization, and also to the hallucination of the stage and its machinery: two pairs of pegs hold in suspension a sort of drape, a veil or a curtain. Not closed, just slightly open.
—Jacques Derrida, Of Spirit (31)

One can go even further and remember that interruption is one of the fundamental devices of all structuring. It goes far beyond the sphere of art. To give only one example, it is the basis of quotation. To quote a text involves the interruption of its context. It is therefore understandable that the epic theater, being based on interruption, is, in a specific sense, a quotable one.
—Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theater?” (151)

PART I: Epic Theater

I want to propose a comparative frame between the Brechtian notion of epic theater and the rituals of shaman possession, the latter itself constituted by a long history of Korean theatrical performance and folk music. It is a precarious frame because, rightly, one must ask, why draw a parallel between Korean shaman practices and epic theater, what Benjamin refers to as a “European road” (150)? Benjamin, almost as soon as calling it a European road, insists that it is European insofar as it is a “secret smugglers’ path” (150). This last analogy is itself a recitation of an earlier reference to Galileo, the subject of Brecht’s Life of Galileo. According to Benjamin, the emphasis of the play can be found in the penultimate scene where Galileo “succeeds in smuggling his main works out of Italy” (148). While acknowledging the roots of epic theater as explicitly European, Benjamin nevertheless situates this tradition in relation to a history of state surveillance and a legacy of smuggling, one whose very survival depends on leaving its native shores. It is no secret that Brecht, in developing his theory of epic theater, was inspired by Chinese theater. Brecht’s theory of epic theater is, already, in dialogue with “Asian”
modes of theatre. But why defer to Benjamin, Brecht, and epic theater at all? Why not discuss Korean shamanic performance in terms of its own history of theater and folk art?

Epic theater is a didactic project meant to dismantle the sensational. Brecht makes clear that the purpose of epic theater is to “deprive the stage of its sensation derived from subject matter” (148): “If the theater is to cast about for familiar events, “historical incidents would be the most suitable.” Their epic extension through the style of acting, the placards and captions, is intended to purge them of the sensational” (148). The function of placards and captions—not so different from forms of citation—is to purge the sensational, and to forestall a different kind of purging—catharsis, the “purging of emotions through empathy with the stirring fate of the hero” (150). For Brecht, critical distance takes place through alienation and must be understood as a discovery of “the conditions of life” (150) that takes place “through the interruption of happenings” (150). He illustrates the cooperation between alienation and interruption through a scene: a family is in the middle of a feud and “at that moment the stranger appears in the doorway” (150). In this way the “stranger is confronted with the situation as with a startling picture” (151). The aspect of being startled, surprised, comes from the point of view of the stranger. For Brecht, and for Benjamin, the critical position par excellence is illustrated through the scene of an unexpected opening onto, a door opened up onto a family scene, and the stranger stands there, startled, and this effects an interruption. The placards and captions, the gestures of quotation, the spirit of critical theater, belong to one who effects a disruption: the stranger.

In a subsection entitled “The Quotable Gesture,” Benjamin makes clear that interruption constitutes the spirit of epic theater: “To give only one example, it is the basis of quotation. To quote a text involves the interruption of its context. It is therefore understandable that the epic theater, being based on interruption, is, in a specific sense, a quotable one” (151). Even while the
clause “to give only one example,” seems to suggest that this is simply one among many, it also highlights its epitomic status. According to Benjamin, the effect of making a gesture quotable is an achievement of epic theater, and one way that an actor can achieve this is to quote his own gesture on stage. And again, the examples are of enormous significance. Benjamin cites two of Brecht’s plays as theatrical instances of quoted gestures. First, in the musical comedy Happy End, Lilian sings a crass song in a sailors’ tavern and later, to account for this misconduct, she re-enacts the song and gestures before a council of the Salvation army (151). Second, in The Measure Taken, alternatively known as The Decision, a party tribunal scrutinizes a number of its comrades, and they must evaluate various indicting reports. A number of witnesses are called on to reproduce the indicting events by reenacting the gestures. Both instances figure a trial of some sort, and the re-enactment of gestures is provided, respectively, as a form of confession or an accusation. But, in both examples, what is acted out is a trial—but it is a double performance because the actors play characters that must act out (quote) the past. They are instances of reported speech that are accompanied, theatrically, by reported gestures. The performance of giving witness, false or otherwise, is fundamentally quotable. But, this is not simply an account, it is a staged account. And the value of the epic theater lies in its theatricality, its bringing attention to its staged-ness, its performativity—and that is where, for Brecht, its didactic quality lies. He is arguing for the critical value of a staged act of witnessing, its quotability. Testimony is, always already, quotable, and therefore has the potential to be read with an eye to its performativity.

In a text that chooses its examples carefully, Benjamin pays special attention to Brecht’s theatrical adaption of Gorky’s novel by the same name, Mother:
This second application may be seen most fully in *Mother*. It was a particularly
daring undertaking to keep a social drama free of the effects which empathy
produces and which the audience was accustomed to. Brecht knew this and
expressed it in an epistolary poem that he sent to New York workingmen’s theater
when *Mother* was produced there: “We have been asked: Will a worker
understand this? Will he be able to do without his accustomed opiate […]?” (152)

He suggests that the technique of learning is most fully apparent in this particular political play,
one that, interestingly enough, takes a mother as its central figure. Pelageya Nilovna Vlasova, a
Russian factory worker, is left to raise her son, Pavel, on her own. Nilovna’s life is one of hard
manual labor, abuse, and poverty, and she has no interest in politics. But her son, Pavel, begins
to bring home his books on revolutionary politics and mass uprising. As a consequence, Nilovna
also becomes involved in revolutionary politics. Gorky’s novel is fascinating because it isn’t
despite her maternal feelings but through them that she becomes a revolutionary. The narrative
binds the life and times of a Russian woman’s entry into politics in a way that is inseparable
from her maternal feelings. Can the life of a mother, a mother who is also a Russian
revolutionary, be depicted without sentimentality? Can it function as other than the Mother, an
iconic opiate? Can she be expressed in her full complexity? How was Brecht able to carry out a
didactic play about class struggle through the most sentimentalized of figures? I believe that
what Benjamin found so daring about this play was that it did not utilize the charge of empathy
that it could have easily manipulated and deployed through the figure of the mother. Using the
most naturalized and sentimentalized of figures, Brecht undertakes a theater of class struggle.
And he makes use of a repeated and particular technique: the quotable gesture. For Brecht and
for Benjamin, the quotable gesture has an effective critical value that invites pause and
politically productive reflection, but most importantly it disrupts the program of cheap empathy and à-la-carte sentimentality.

By looking critically at the practice of shamanic rituals of possession, I want to explore how it might articulate a study of poetic quotability—the quotable gesture. I want to focus on the performative form of possession in relation to scholarship. First, what might shamanic ritual share with what Brecht calls the achievement of epic theater? There is no question, for anyone who has seen a Korean shamanic ritual, that it is artful, highly theatrical, bordering on the pantomimic, and explicit about its performative quality. However, it might seem counterintuitive to understand shamanic ritual in terms of a didactic or critical technique rather than, say, what Brecht suggests is the sensationalized empathy of dramatic/tragic theater. The traditional scholarship on shamanic practice has had no problem reading the art as a mode of psychological and emotional catharsis. The forceful laments, the wailing, the figure of “possession” itself, is more easily associated with the sensational empathy that Brecht is suspicious of. Yet, much of the laments and the wailing, “quotations” from the realm of the dead, are interspersed among long virtuosic monologues of reprimand, correction, and instruction. The focal point of these rituals of possession is not simply to empathize, that role is, in fact, already taken care of in a carefully structured performance. It is the shaman herself who takes possession of the figure of dramatized empathy, and frees the audience to do a different work. The shamanic form of possess is a spiritual channel, analogous to quotation marks, that has a strong social aspect (also analogous to a tribunal). Before a community of people, the shaman acts out the quotable gestures, the indictments from the otherworld, brought forward against the living. It leaves the audience, most likely the family members, responsible for learning and mitigating the material conditions for this display of unrest and discontent. In both epic theater and shamanic forms of
possession, they utilize quotable gestures in a staged tribunal, thus they understand how to address social justice without repressing the value of performativity. Modern forms of juridico-legal discourse have forgotten its theatrical and performative aspect.

PART II: Performativity and Possession

The quotation mark is a form of possession, and I argue that it needs to be read as a performative gesture. Through a comparative frame that reads shaman practices and literary techniques side by side, not only should it illuminate something about the quality of these literary moments but I do conceive of shaman practices outside of exoticized or essentialized frames. I argue that we read shaman practices as relational but also literary technologies. In performances of possession, the shaman must accurately quote the tone, accent, dialect, and mannerisms of the spirit—it is a necessary part of its parodic and dramaturgic nature. She is rarely asked to enact the dialects of other regions because of her traditionally local presence. She is, however, absolutely fluent in the nuances of her local idioms: she must be capable of re-enacting the tongues and mannerisms of an entire spectrum of social class, from the highest local official to the poorest peasant, every age, and both men and women. Shaman practices remain popular in Korea, but is has had to adapt to its changing times. Interestingly enough, today, shamans have to be fluent in a wider range of dialects, tones, and inflections of language. Unprecedented in pre-modern Korea, there is even a recorded instance of a shaman channeling an English-speaker, the General McArthur—a specific symptom of modern Korean history. But to return to the main point, what is critical to the event of possession (while it functions as a kind of test for the shaman’s skill and the authenticity of her possession) is a shared vocabulary and idiom. Between the client’s concerns for or grievance against the dead, or the restless spirit who requires consolation, the success of the performance relies on the shaman’s ability to pick the right terms
to relate these histories, experiences, and entanglements. In a way, the shaman must be adept at intuitively and skillfully reading into a collective, shared history. It helps that as the village shaman she would have had access to the many narratives and histories that are part of that community. The shaman’s shrine acted as a communal meeting place for all the village women. It was the very social epicenter of gossip, rumor, bartering, matchmaking, weeping, and storytelling. The colloquial term in Korean for a frequent customer is ‘dang-gol,’ and, though most contemporary users have forgotten its origins, it refers to those who regularly visited the shaman’s shrine. The shaman’s practice was one of paying close attention to how a shared idiomatic discourse bespeaks entanglement as a form for testimony, as an expression of sociality, but also an ontological mode of being. It is noteworthy that venerable shamans are often called manshin—ten thousand spirits. Who is speaking?

PART III: Laurel Kendall’s *The Life and Hard Times of a Shaman: Technologies of Recorded Speech*

The following is a reading of Laurel Kendall’s *The Life and Hard Times of a Shaman*. A traditional study of shamanism would not be appropriate to this project. Instead of looking at what we are used to calling ‘primary’ documents, I look at an unusual work by the foremost American expert on Korean shamanism, one whose title is a clear homage to forms of autobiography and biography. By performing a close reading of Kendall’s text, and not one on the subject of the shamans themselves, I am trying to approach the subject from a place that does not make the subject an object of study, but rather to look critically at the epistemological frames that create these objects of study as such. Furthermore, such a close reading does not comfortably fit under either the fields of Asian American studies or Asian Studies but can only be located from a trans-pacific context, and consequently tries to demonstrate the critical importance of seeing these two fields come together in creative and unexpected ways.
Laurel Kendall’s *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman: Of Tales and of the Telling of Tales* (1988) is a re-telling of sorts. In 1985, Professor Laurel Kendall published a well-received book titled *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits*. During her field research, she interviewed various Korean shamans and Korean women in the presence of her spinning cassettes that recorded the interviews. This particular work comes on the tail-end of her first published work, its—so to speak—afterlife, born out of discontent. It, like the title suggests, is about the tales of the shaman women but also about the telling of tales: Kendall explains that this second work is about the content of the tales that were passed on to her, but also about how they were told. Kendall hopes to effect a faithful reproduction of the gestures, the intonation that animated the original scene of storytelling. But, I would add, Kendall’s work is itself a testimonial text insofar as it records the stories of Yongsu’s Mother (the shaman woman featured in Kendall’s work), but is also a testimony about the first work, and therefore a testimony about disciplinary modes of telling and reporting. In a sense, this second work airs its grievances, its doubts, about the first. It is strangely conversant with the performative role Yongsu’s Mother has as a shaman when she channels the voices and grievances of deceased locals who return to mark their unfulfilled desires—the restless. But, what is operative in both contexts is a technology of reported speech. Here, the comparison becomes a strategic frame to look at the conditions of possibility for how we come to define the epistemic subject and the practical subject—it marks the division between who can study and who is studied by the discipline of anthropology. This separation is what makes it possible to distinguish between the practical subject—the shaman, and the epistemic subject—the scholar.16

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16 For more on the rift between the practical and the epistemic, anthropos and humanitas, refer to Naoki Sakai’s chapter “Subject and/or Shutai and the Inscription of Cultural Difference” in his book *Translation and Subjectivity* or Nishitani Osamu’s essay “Anthropos and Humanitas: Two Western Concepts of ‘Human Being.”
Kendall writes in her introductory chapter that, though the first book fulfilled its task as an ethnographic account of the social fabric of the religious life of Korean women, it was inadequate to conveying or representing an individual, personal life story (4). Here, a binary is set up between social knowledge and personal, subjective knowledge that can also be mapped onto certain disciplines. It is not surprising then that the two modes of analysis on the topic of Korean shamanism is also split along these very lines: as a socio-cultural phenomenon or as a case study in psychoanalysis. These women can find representation so long as they can be disciplinarily circumscribed as representative of a certain religious culture or through the frame of a psychopathology. Nevertheless, Kendall’s subsequent book sets out to work against the patterns of anthropological case studies; it focuses on a single figure in an attempt to restore the intonational valence of performance that was missed in the first publication. This second is born of a haunting, and performed as a means to put to rest a spirit of discontent.

What is interesting is that this re-membering or re-writing hinges on a particular figure, and this figure is, in fact, not the shaman as one might expect but the figure of recording:

[Yongsu’s Mother] knew that some of her vivid prose was lost on me, but there was my tape recorder, silent scribe and resolute witness to her story. Years later, after completing a dissertation and preparing a book, I returned to my tapes and transcripts of Yongsu’s Mother’s life. With leisure, patience, and a supply of dictionaries, I filled in what I had missed, hurt for her again, marveled anew at her feistiness, and giggled at her comic imagery, as she had intended. (4)

First, the imperative that demands this second account is desire: the desire to restore to Yongsu’s Mother’s words the fullness of her intentions. What underlies Kendall’s project, then, is the search for an original utterance and the fantasy that the original utterance, pregnant with meaning,
would give birth to complete understanding as it was intended. What are the aides to this return to meaning? The tape recorder, personified as silent scribe and resolute witness, transcripts, and a dictionary. What is the relationship between the act of witness and translation? What is the agreement or relationship between transcription, between a tape recording, between testimony, and between translation? Due to restraints in time and space, I will have to rely on a crude gloss: all three operate within a regime of reported speech. The different technologies that have allowed us to record, and to all appearances simultaneously (though this is not, mechanically speaking, the case), are not on a different order from the literary quotation marks: technologies of reported speech. What seem to us intuitively different technologies—quotation mark versus a tape/filmic recording—are in fact much more similar than we would expect. What was once the dual function of the witness performed nevertheless by different social roles—between the testis (objective third party report) and the superstes (first-hand testimony)—has, with the introduction of revolutionary technologies, rendered to some extent obsolete these social roles. Consequently, the difference between objective, measured report versus personal, subjective testimony is made even more pronounced, and has come to represent a fairly new dichotomy: machine versus human.

Consider this scene from the epilogue of The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman. After many chapters of Yongsu’s Mother’s stories told to Kendall and retold to us through Kendall, Kendall ends with an epilogue where she recounts her revisit to the shaman’s house in 1985 “to tell her that I had finally translated the story of her life” (126). The shaman takes Kendall up to a familiar mountain where she performs another kut, and for Kendall this is familiar terrain. After several days of keeping company with Yongsu’s Mother, Kendall begins to explain the “real purpose” of her visit: “I wanted to be certain that she understood what I was
about, and I wanted to discuss this project in privacy [...] one afternoon, when the last guest had departed...I brought out one of the old tapes and slipped it into my machine” (126). Has the kut, indeed, ended? Or, is it only that Kendall has begun her own in the presence of the shaman? Here is what ensues:

“You still have those told things?”

“Listen, do you hear the trucks going by your old house?” She listens, amused, but without the interest provoked by recordings of her recent kut. I tell her about the translations and about the book I plan to publish [...] I want to protect her and perhaps it is safest to abandon the project, but I also want her to know the worth of her storytelling.

“Americans won’t find it shameful; they’ll think it’s interesting, as interesting as a novel.”

“As interesting as a novel,” she repeats the phrase to herself.

“It has social and historical significance,” I continue, using a Korean vocabulary that I read rather than speak, the words do not ordinarily enter village conversation...She laughs, and agrees to help me.” (126-7)

Time has passed, and now it is time for Kendall to leave, again:

“And this,” she said, returning to her bag of gifts and drawing out the gourd dipper that I had requested to replicate a birth charm for the museum, “this has historical significance. [...]” “Historical significance,” she had taken my words because they intrigued and pleased her.” (127)

And this is how Kendall concludes her evocative second project. It is not, I believe a coincidence that the word that circulates between these women is “significance”—historical significance. It
is precisely this word, historical significance, that is shared. When it returns from within the quotations attributed to the shaman, it cannot belong to her without reservation because we have followed its trace from Kendall to the shaman. At the same time, because it precipitates from within this new context—the context of a gift no less—it does not properly belong to the scholar either. If we were to consider the shaman’s *kut*, a performance of possession, as a technology of reported speech, how does it compare to Kendall’s technology of *recorded* speech? This wonderful story about stories is in fact a scene set up as reported speech against recorded speech.

For a moment, we will assume, that recorded speech is different from reported speech, because we believe the former is more accurate. Why do we believe this? It operates on the assumption that the tape recorder is a disinterested party, that the tape recorder can have no intention to deceive and therefore it is the ultimate witness. This is the romance of recorded speech. But, it takes nothing less than a slight provocation to see how quickly this falls apart. We need to remember that this is a scene of framing. Both the technology of recorded speech and reported speech bear witness to something, and it is the construction of significance. It is constitutive of value. The recorder, then, is not a disinterested party at all: it is a *technology of framing*. Reported speech is, similarly, a *technology of framing*. The point I am trying to make is that testimony itself is a technology of recorded speech, comparable to technologies of recording. Technologies of recording are technologies of reported speech, and yet the authority of the former lies in keeping these categories somewhat apart. Both the shaman’s *kut* performed through a form of reported speech and Kendall’s *kut* performed through a form of recorded speech function as an index of historical significance, but in marking the past it also constructs an image of it. In doing so, the performance creates a context altogether new. Derrida writes in “Signature Event Context,” that every quotation can “break with every given context, and
engender infinitely new contexts” (320). Furthermore, he writes that there are only contexts, an infinite series of iterable contexts without an absolute center. What he calls both the duplication and the duplicity of the mark is what makes it a mark. He asks, “what would a mark be that one could not cite? And whose origin could not be lost on the way” (321)? The quotation mark, while explicitly appearing to mark a sequence, always operates outside of it. Thus, it becomes difficult to be assured of where one kut ends and another begins, and who is channeling whom, and what frames of possession or possessives can be used to determine whose voice belongs to whom. For example, throughout the text, there are font changes that are supposed to mark the difference between Kendall’s own narrative frame and Yongsu’s Mother’s voice. However, these are not adequate to keep their voices apart. At critical points, it becomes impossible to be sure who is speaking: Kendall, Kendall narrating something the shaman said, the shaman in her own voice, or the spirits that she channels. These fascinating knots become points in the text of exemplary heterogeneity and a plurality of voices. Who is speaking? The law of quotation falls apart throughout the text as we see phrases and words that cycle through and are shared between the narrative account and the one that should fall strictly within quotation marks. The rhetorical tone and idiosyncratic gestures of Yongsu’s Mother can, at times, be found within Kendall’s helpful parentheses, and these are echoed in parts of the text that cannot be said to properly belong to the shaman. The shaman’s own autobiographical tone is not uniform. Rather, there are surprising shifts between what one might expect to be the register of a young girl, an older woman, or at times it takes on a perspective and register that is indicative of a communal, cultural register that cannot properly be attributed to a single, personal subjective voice.\(^\text{17}\) What this text demonstrates

\(^{17}\) In English, this might be a proverbial voice, a voice that appears to be expressing a universal or well-known truth, a subjunctive, etc.
is an opening, a shared space where the performance of possession unravels the law of possessives.

The alliance between recorded speech and reported speech is most strongly felt in that they effect a problematic desire for the original utterance as the source of intent. Testimony as reported inner speech relies on the assumption that words are a disinterested witness to an original inner substance. Testimony as recorded speech relies on the assumption that the machine is an empty, disinterested witness to an original context. Recorded speech is an extension of the logic of reported speech. Translation, at least the homolingual kind as represented by a model of correspondence (i.e. the dictionary), is an extension of this as well. Consider this passage in Kendall’s *The Life and Hard Times of a Shaman*:

Yongsu’s Mother’s tales are punctuated by gestures and shifts in facial expression and colored by the changing pitch and cadence of her voice. Throughout the text, I have preserved in brackets a remembered grimace or roll of the eyes. This clumsy device makes a poor substitute for the immediacy of performance in an ethnographic film […] the reader is reminded that the tales had, when they were told, a more immediate audience. (9)

What Kendall describes as a clumsy device is the substitute, qualified as “poor” substitute, for something like an ethnographic film, another technology of recording. Kendall is, I believe, absolutely right to emphasize the performative aspect of Yongsu’s Mother’s tales. Every testimony is a performative act, and therefore its context and its immediate or remote audience, its intonational inflections, are critical to the act of transmission. Rather, there can be no transmission without these nodes of relationality. But, what I would like to draw our attention to is that, for Kendall, this provides a space to consider the importance of the status of address,
audience and context but only insofar as it constitutes the original utterance. What it should signal instead is the poietic function of every act of address that takes place in a constellation of speakers, and is in every subsequent “quotation.” What I am struggling to say is that Kendall’s provocative point loses its critical purchase if we use it to reaffirm the primacy or “immediacy” of the original utterance and to desire to reproduce it “more faithfully” in every “subsequent” context.

Laurel Kendall concludes her introduction to the text by re-examining the state of her discipline:

In recent years, several anthropologists have expressed dissatisfaction with the life history method, suggesting that there is something dishonest, or at least distorted, in the business of recording an informant’s life history. They argue that, at worst, life material is forced into the ethnographer’s a prior (and Western) notion of biography or determined by the ethnographer’s categories of inquiry […] they remind us that the truth of an informant’s life, like autobiographic truth, is shaped by the circumstances of the telling, and that memory and self-presentation are selective and sometimes self-contradictory processes. They have suggested that contradictory stories, and even outright fabrications, yield their own windows on the human soul. (13)

I found Kendall’s text very compelling, and it is certainly among the best that I have read on the subject of Korean shamanism. However, I must retain a last reservation for this final denominator described by Kendall and others as “the human soul” (13). This human soul, according to this passage, is aligned with autobiographical truth: a truth that Kendall seems to argue allows for error and contradiction where other genres—scientific, ethnographic,
anthropologic, objective truth—do not. This nevertheless demarcates a disciplinary and epistemological binary between objective truth and subjective truth; between anthropology and the humanities; between materiality and subjectivity; between the epistemic subject and the practical subject; social and psychological. Thus, while it valorizes a more expansive mode of storytelling, critically necessary today more than ever, it nevertheless leaves intact the very categories that are themselves “a priori,” “Western,” and left unexamined.

Kendall assures Yongsu’s Mother that her storytelling will be as “interesting as a novel” to Americans. I believe this comparison suggests something very important. There is a resonance between the form of the shaman’s testimony and the novel—if the former is amenable to the latter, I am inclined to think that the transfer is made possible because of certain formal qualities that make one hospital to the other. However, the transfer should also flag an elision, a mode of translation, which is worth being careful about. Before reading the simile for its comparison that brings together, in one figurative sweep, the testimony and the novel, I want to remind you that it was in response to Yongsu’s mother’s concerns about the reception of her stories in America. The shaman, whose position in Korean society is a marginal one, is afraid that her stories will be sources of shame in the Korean American community. It is in order to assuage her that Kendall tells the shaman that Americans will find her stories as interesting as novels. From the very beginning, the shaman intuitively understands that her stories will be read within a larger gendered narrative—a shaman woman’s fanciful stories would only shame her fellow countrymen in their new fatherland. But, what is interesting is that Kendall, by suggesting that it would or could be accepted as an interesting novel, has described the very terms according to which something like a Korean shaman woman’s stories would be able to negotiate or find its place among American letters—the terms and conditions of its inclusion.
Within the field of Asian American literary studies, there has been a critical and noteworthy controversy surrounding the fact that Asian American literature has largely been dominated by a genre of feminine testimonial/autobiographical writing. This exchange between the scholar and the shaman is, necessarily, about a trans-pacific and Asian American context—if not in the traditional sense. Being aware of this gives us a certain insight into what Kendall might have, if unwittingly, hit upon. The novels of Asian American women writers have often been generically confounding: often occupying the space between testimony and fiction. Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” in the late 80s, and this term has been widely applied to works by Asian American women writers. So while the “historical significance” of these books was recognized, they were marketed or sold as novels. The novel, as a genre, has always occupied this ambiguous difference between historical truth and factual truth. While this demonstrates the novel’s powerful ability to tread these differences and to function outside of their limitations, these particular Asian American novels (even when they were written by men) were sentimentalized or feminized in a way so as to inoculate political value. It is why, the issue of testimony, at least within the Asian American context, cannot be thought apart from questions of gender as well. But, at the same time, when something is actively “feminized,” it has, historically, been the product of a certain fear or apprehension that takes its cues from a masculinist, white supremacist discourse. Therefore it, simultaneously, marks the powerful potential within something like a feminine “historiographic metafiction” or a shaman’s story that is “as interesting as a novel.” Kendall reassures the shaman that her stories will be well-received, but also in order to protect the shaman she reassures her that she would use a pseudonym: Yongsu’s Mother. She tells her, “I will try to keep your name a secret” (127). What are we to make of the fact that sixty pages earlier, the shaman’s real name, in an inconspicuous parenthesis,
slips out? And is there, ever, something wholly unintentional about a parenthesis (though it tries to look like a carelessly appended detail)? But, it is, I believe, an honest mistake; there is no reason to believe that Kendall had intended to break her promise to the shaman. Again, Kendall has not lied—we can easily believe in Kendall’s good intentions and to see this for what it is: a mistake or oversight. What I am trying to suggest by pointing out this oversight is least of a criticism of Kendall, but rather the opposite. The form of reported speech, while constructed as a neutral technology of reportage, is in fact constructed through frames of power. The point I am driving at is that it should suggest, if nothing else, that testimony, against intent and against factual truth, marks a relation and an exchange, and as such it takes place, always, within relations of power. Consider the fact that both names, the shaman’s given name and “Yongsu’s Mother,” are not untrue. Just because the content of reported speech is “true,” does not mean it is empty of complicities with power. Regardless of content and the fact-value of an instance of reported speech, as long as it is relational, it is never empty of the question of power.
CHAPTER 4:
“Genres Are Not Innocent”: Women’s Autobiography and Asian American Literature

“[…] genres are not innocent or neutral aesthetic conventions or ideal types but are, instead, formal constructs which are implicated in the very processes of ideological production.”
--Shelley Sunn Wong, “Unnaming the Same” (106)

PART I: Asian American Pen Wars

“[…] virtually immediately upon publication, The Woman Warrior got entangled in various discourses…”
—Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, “Introduction” to The Woman Warrior: A Casebook (12)

Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior “may be the best-known contemporary work of Asian-American literature […] it is safe to say that many readers who otherwise do not concern themselves with Asian American literature have read Kingston’s book” (Wong 29). This is the opening line to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s essay, “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour,” where Wong herself serves as a remarkably clear guide through the troubled waters of a long drawn out controversy in the field of Asian American literary studies. This wonderful introduction appears deceivingly self-explanatory or matter of fact. While marking the significance of Kingston’s autobiography both within Asian American letters and American letters at large, she flags the work’s complicated and uneasy status both within and outside of Asian American literature. The Woman Warrior, the coloured woman’s autobiography, has had to negotiate a place in either and both Asian American literature and American literature. Whether we would like it to or not, it has become a field-defining work and remains a staple of introductory courses on Asian American literature, not merely because it is the most well-read Asian American work but because teaching The Woman Warrior is, in some sense, to teach a history of Asian American literary studies: “the critical issues raised in this debate are not merely
of passing interest. Rather, they lie at the heart of any theoretical discussion of ethnic American autobiography in particular and ethnic American literature in general” (Wong 29).

The 1991 introductory essay to the Asian American Anthology “The Big Aiiieeeeee” is famously known for Frank Chin’s polemic against Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, and it has since become a milestone controversy in Asian American literary criticism that occurred during a critical stage of an emerging discipline. According to Wong, *The Woman Warrior* is concerned with forging and bringing together a Chinese American identity that cannot be cast according to either a Chinese or American model: “over and over, we find [Kingston] forgoing the security of ready-made cultural meanings, opting instead to painstakingly mold a new set suited to her condition as a Chinese-American woman” (47). Wong highlights the singular plight of an American-born generation: “to read departures from traditional material found in *The Woman Warrior* as cynical manipulations of naïve white readers, as her critics have done, is not only to fly in the face of textual evidence but to belittle the difficulty and urgency of the imaginative enterprise so necessary to the American-born generation” (47). The Kingston controversy negotiates and therefore produces the parameters of Asian American literature, but it becomes the event that necessitated an understanding of what it means to be a hyphenated, Asian-American subject but also a woman. Published in *The Woman Warrior: A Casebook* almost two decades ago, the questions that Wong raises in her essay are still relevant today but it has also been compounded by new questions. And it is in taking women’s writing as its point of departure that Asian American literature needs to query anew the status of hyphenated American literatures from within a transnational frame. I am certainly not the first to do this. I come from a now significant assembly of scholars, notably Lisa Lowe, who have already begun this work. But to read *The Woman Warrior* and other Asian American texts with a specific focus on the
problematic of testimony in conjunction with trauma and translation theory will allow us to see
the complicities of but also the possibilities that rest with genres like the ethnic autobiography.

Frank Chin takes Kingston as the epitomic example of writers who “fake the best-known
works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history” (3). The
terms of Chin’s disagreement, notably, took place according to a concept of universally known
bodies of Asian literatures lore. The discipline of Asian American literary studies has always had
to contend with the idea of internationality: a Eurocentric republic of world letters, the domestic
hegemony of a white-washed American canon, but also a stock of Asian classical texts and
folklore. Asian American literary studies, from its very beginnings, had to position itself with an
eye to America’s relationship to Asia on an international stage but also the internal
contradictions of its heterogeneous peoples and histories. In Lisa Lowe’s “The International
within the National: American Studies and Asian American Critique” she writes that “racialized
immigration is indeed, along with American empire, part of a longer history of the development
of modern American capitalism and racialized democracy, a longer, more notorious past in
which a nation intersected over and over again with the international contexts of the Philippines,
Puerto Rica, Mexico, Korean, or Vietnam” (29). We think of Asian American history as a recent
addition to a fully matured, homogenous American historical narrative. As Lowe points out, the
very construction of America’s image as the protagonist of liberal democracy was performed
through its presence abroad, its ideological, military, and capitalist interests in Asia. As Lowe
suggests, intra-national literary studies, Asian American literature in this case, is one such way of
engaging with transnational studies. As an important segue into transnational Asian American
studies, the Chin—Kingston controversy is particularly worth examining at this juncture.
Alongside Wong’s guided tour, I want to raise the question of women’s autobiography again but reframe the way that this controversy is understood—or rather, to draw it out into a transnational frame. In so doing, it becomes easier to see how the autobiography is in league with an international world order that subscribes to a philosophy of individuated autonomy. But, let me be clear: I am not arguing that American literature has become swept up by an international market, and that it, as an effect, has had to renegotiate its terms from within this frame. I am not saying that we must pay attention to how Asian American literature, as a subset of American literature, has had to do likewise. Asian American literature, from its very inception, has been the exercise of contending with these international relations and histories. Read from within a transpacific frame, the Asian American figure is not commensurate to anything like “Asia” or “America” and therefore tells an entangled history that was part and parcel of the mutual configuration of “Asia” and “America.” The quickly cresting wave of transpacific literary studies suggests that what I have repeated vis-à-vis Lisa Lowe is by no means a new question at this point; however, what a re-reading of The Woman Warrior controversy should provide is a serious foray into the question of how the ethnic autobiography—a modern testimonial form—reproduces if not engenders the very ambivalence of women’s writing. What is the status of diasporic women’s writing? For a woman of colour, an immigrant, and the victim of a traumatic history, what modes of literary autonomy exist? Is autobiography a genre of autonomy, and is this the same thing as freedom? Can we imagine freedom without individuality? What is the status of a feminized ethnic autobiography in the larger scheme of American or international letters? How does it or doesn’t it avail itself to a diasporic woman of colour writing against the backdrop of a traumatic transpacific history? With Wong as my placeholder and guide to the question of autobiography as guided Chinatown tour, this chapter considers the discursive and
political stakes of the autobiographical genre and how it might be operating in today’s global market. A rereading of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* as a problematic of testimony should be suggestive of the subterranean expectations and demands that underlie the work of women’s writing and make their task a distinctly gendered, racialized, and nationalized literary labor that is different but also discursively tandem to the issues of a globalized, gendered division of women’s labor. In this way, diasporic women’s autobiography cuts the question of literary autonomy—the act of “auto” “graphing” (authoring) a life—at a particular slant that yields particularly timely questions. My stake in this controversy is not so much an entirely different set of questions, but a way of nodding in agreement in unusual places from both sides of the argument.

Chin’s main criticism of *The Woman Warrior* is part of a larger assessment of the historicity of autobiography. According to Chin, it is a form that derives from Christian testimony and a tradition of self-deprecatory, confessional forms:

> Autobiography is not a Chinese form [...] [t]hey wanted to Europeanize China. [...] [A]utobiography is a Christian form, descended from confession, and Hu Shih believed, from testimony. St. Augustine’s *The Confession* is generally acknowledged as the first autobiography; Hu Shih said that the Gospels of the New Testament—the books Matthew, Luke, and John—were the first autobiographies. (“Come All Ye Asian American Writers,” 11)

As such, he accuses Asian American authors of autobiography of having ingratiated themselves to a white supremacist public. For Chin, the autobiography is a colonial form:

> Although *The Woman Warrior* does not deal with Christianity, Chin places it in a tradition of Christianized Chinese-American autobiographies from Yung Wing’s
My Life in China and America through Pardee Lowe’s Father and Glorious Descendant to Jade Snow Wong’s Fifth Chinese Daughter […] His rationale is that all autobiography, like religious confessions and conversion testimonials, demonstrates “admission of guilt, submission of my self for judgment,” for “approval by outsiders” (Wong 35).

I agree with Chin. And to agree with Chin, at least today, has been wildly unpopular (not without good reason, of course). Frank Chin famously also wrote in his essay “This is Not an Autobiography” that “[a] Chinaman can’t write an autobiography without selling out” (35), but also that it is “the only Chinese American literary tradition” (Wong 35). And, he has, unfortunately, a point, if an exaggerated one. Elsewhere in “Come All Ye Asian American Writers,” Chin makes a related and important point about the American publishing industry, “Every Chinese American book ever published in the United States of America by a major publisher has been a Christian autobiography or autobiographical novel” (xi). Thus, he makes a probing comment about the state of American publishing: “American publishers went crazy for Chinese women dumping on Chinese men” (27). It is true that American publishers selectively supported, funded, and publicized a genre of “feminine” Asian American autobiographical literatures in ways that were, and are, problematic. Thus Chin’s anger, initially, stems from a well-founded understanding about the hegemonic make of American publishing, and how it is shaping an Asian American popular canon in its own image.

Today, Asian literature is making quite a “splash” internationally and in the United States. For example, there has been a significant turn to Korean literature in the last five years and the two works that have had notable international success are Shin Kyung-Sook’s Please Look After Mom and Han Kang’s The Vegetarian, the first-time winner of the newly refashioned
Man Booker International Prize.¹⁸ Both works focus on women’s issues and have been lauded as a realistic portrait of the legacies of neo-patriarchy in South Korea. Although the writing styles, the literary tones, are completely different, thematically at least, they are surprisingly resonant with Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, especially with regard to themes of gender roles, poverty, and mental health. The marketing surrounding these two works, as well as the discrepancies between how they are publicized internationally and domestically, have been both fascinating and disconcerting. If, in Korea, they are highlighted as either familial or feminist works, as soon as it is “translated” for an international market, more particularly the U.S., they become “realistic portraits of Korea.” The reason this example is a fascinating knot for the question of Asian American feminine autobiography is because, in light of the fact that these women are Korean and not Korean American, it poses a direct challenge to an essentialist idea of “Asian novels” from “Asia.” It would seem that American publishing and a certain readerly public apply the same exoticized and referential standards to both Asian American and Asian literature. By reading together the reception of Asian literature and Asian American literature, it allows for clarity about issues of gender in American publishing; it is why a transnational frame for feminist studies is urgent. Chin may very well be right: some of the literatures favored under the auspices of selective, racist American publishing trends have been complicit with an American ideology of gatekeeping, othering and gendered, but also racialized, exoticisms.

Even while I have serious reservations about the misogynistic rhetoric of Chin’s indictment of women’s autobiographies, I am in agreement with Chin on certain points. My argument is in many ways an extension of Chin’s, especially because it is, like his, a criticism of

¹⁸ Prior to 2016, the year that Kang won the prestigious accolade, it was awarded to an author of any nationality for a body of work published in English or widely available in translation. Beginning in 2016, the award was given to a single book in English translation, recognizing both the author and the translator.
modern forms of testimony. The thrust of my argument relies on taking very seriously the claim that autobiography is descended from a European tradition of confession and testimony. I am in agreement with Chin’s reading of America’s particular brand of Orientalism and his sharp assessment of how American publishers are both shaped by and shape a post-cold War American ideological agenda. I want to write against the grain of a reactionary response to what Chin rightly assesses as the limitations of the testimonial form. Today, his essay has been put aside, not without good reason, as a thinly guised form of masculinist rhetoric riddled with sexist and essentialist assumptions. But, he is quite right to be wary of the ethnic autobiography and its roots in Christian testimony—and this has been largely overlooked in the field. In the spirit of Chin, I insist on a critical review of testimonial forms. At the same time, it is clear that testimony must also absolutely be thought together, as the Chin-Kingston controversy illuminates, with the question of race and gender.

Chin’s criticism of the American press quickly shifts, however, to a question of hyper-masculine writing versus feminine writing, that is further mapped onto, respectively, a spectrum of real and fake history, real Chinese versus fake Chinese. Chin’s accusation of Kingston and her “spawn” amounts to a criticism launched against Asian American feminists as having imbibed the philosophies of white feminists and sold out their fellow countrymen. His aversion to an assimilationist feminine autobiography prioritizes an authentic, Chinese literature that he infuses with the language of fraternity. This gives us a renewed sense of exactly how difficult it must have been for Asian American women writers to negotiate their role in a highly contested and inhospitable literary scape. On the one hand, a popular American public projected an overdetermined reading that limited women’s writing to a concept of referentiality and organicity seen as intrinsic to their being women and people of colour, the anthropologic subject. On the
other hand, within the Asian American community, a strain of masculinist rhetoric had rendered feminine writing as not being referential enough—it was poetic, fake, and embellished as opposed to the straight, evidential, male writing rooted in a tradition of brotherhood. Chin responds to a racist, American rhetoric that feminized and vilified Chinese men by re-asserting masculinity and ethnic homogeneity thereby maintaining these categories. He writes, “the differences between Western and Asian civilization are real, sharply defined, profound, and easily stated: Western civilization is founded on religion. Asian civilization—Confuciandom—is founded on history” (34). For Chin, the Western canon and the Chinese canon are irreducible, absolute categories that further differentiate a Western “subject” from a Chinese “subject.” He creates large, monolithic categories that rely on ethnic uniformity; he homogenizes a “Chinese” subjectivity, a “Chinese” history, and an Asian essence born of Confucianism (not withstanding the fact that the historicity of Confucian thought is, itself, a radically heterogeneous, transnational one). Even more problematically, he creates a literary men’s club that excludes women writers from this tradition. However, rather than reject what may appear to be an argument that has no place in a field that is fortunately aware of the importance of the feminist politics of women of colour, for what it’s worth, I want to salvage what Chin may have, if not intentionally, stumbled on: a discursively powerful concept that assumes a correspondence between genre as form and subjectivity. His argument, if misguided, is a symptom for something. Form is a technology of subjectivity, which is different from calling it its natural

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19 The Confucian tradition was born out of an era of competing schools of thought, generally known as the Hundred Schools Period. Therefore, it was a body of thought that was a synthesis of many of these contending epistemologies. And while, arguably, a select canon of classical texts have remained at the core of Confucian studies, its many revisions and renaissances, different scholarly interpretations and trends hardly make it a homogenous tradition. Its most noteworthy renaissance during the Song dynasty—today, dubbed neo-Confucianism—was a radically creative interpretation that emerged resembling a constellation of other traditions: Buddhism, Taoism, yin/yang theories, etc. This crude outline does not take into account the different “translations” that Confucianism underwent as it was adapted and continuously revised and reinterpreted by different kingdoms like Japan and Korea.
breeding grounds. And in a strange way, and against his intentions, Chin is correct about its having a historic and cultural specificity.

When Chin accuses Kingston of falsely appropriating the Fa Mulan ballad, he recovers the tale by producing a facsimile of the ballad: one written in Chinese ideographs and its corresponding English translation. He writes, “Here we offer the best proof, the corroborative fact of the ballad itself, in Chinese, and in the English translation:” (4). In this instance, the figure for historical cultural homogeneity is a facsimile and its translation. What is interesting about this instance of cultural authenticity is that it is provided in a language of “proof” and “fact,” made even more emphatic by the grammatical structure of the statement; the colon stands at the end and dramatically gestures to the reproduction as if to say “here it is” so as to demonstrate its self-evidence. For Chin, there is a clear distinction between Kingston’s “false” translation and Chin’s “faithful” one, and the language that he chooses goes hand in hand with the deeper accusation at hand—that Kingston has been unfaithful to her Asian American community. Chin insists on a frame of translation premised on a particular kind of testimonial truth. The translation demands an act of witness to truth that is founded on a schema of proof and fact, hence Chin’s unrelenting call for the phenomenal “real.” Chin refers to the autobiographical form as a “device for destroying history and literature” (3) because it represents “all that is false” (9). But, his corrective measure, ironically, uses the very language of proof: “The yellows were not sojourners. The proof: tongs. Chinese and Japanese culture are not more misogynistic than Western culture. The proof: Chinese and Japanese childhood literature, and history. Asian culture is more, not less, individualistic than Western culture. The proof: Asian childhood literature and history” (9). Utterly fascinating is that the latter half of his polemic piece is a curated series of declassified documents and the transcripts of hearing boards. Chin proudly
reveals the declassified scripts of a hearing where Heart Mountain Project Director Guy Robertson and Relocation Officer W.J. Carroll interrogate Frank Emi, an organizer of key resistance movements in the internment camps. Here, Chin offers “pertinent portions” of the interrogation, and he lauds Emi as a “martyr” hidden within the folds of a repressed history, an icon of the classical heroic tradition that he wishes to reserve as the exclusive genre of Chinese literature. Yet it is entirely impossible to read this section without drawing precisely on the Christian testimonies of martyrs. He adds, “the case for redress was not a matter of perspective but a matter of fact, lots of facts dug up by Japanese Americans who were inspired to make the difference between the real and the fake” (90). Here we have a theory of history as redress where Chin relies solely on an archive of facts and the inviolate different between the real and fake. Where then is the place of literature in the work of redress? He curates his own archive, one that has been snipped and woven together—a composite of “perintent portions”—and consists of, according to Chin, facts, proofs, and transcriptions. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the spirit of his contentious essay can be summed up by the dramatic and grammatical work of the colon as a mark of self-evidence. In opposition to the testimonial genre of autobiography, Chin relies on a legal language that is a subset of testimony. While Chin makes a sharp critical assessment of the European and testimonial roots of autobiography, he is less reflective about how his language and rhetoric reproduces this European tradition.

PART II: Narrating A Life and Hard Times

While writing this section, I found myself in my advisor’s office.20 And she asked me a question: Are all autobiographies “confessions”? Another way she recast this question was: what about Ben Franklin’s autobiography? Do we consider them guilty confessions? And she is right,

20 I am indebted to Shelley Wong for this rich, robust conversation, one of many that took place in her welcoming office.
the two are not of the same order. I think that the reason for this ambivalence or this division of labor could be traced back to what Foucault identifies, in “Christianity and Confession,” as the historic differences between confession and self-examination. Even while they are both part of the Christian tradition, he is clear that they have separate developments where the former belongs to the penitent’s public acts of self-admonition, usually done in a prostrate position, and the latter belongs to the administrative exercise of monastic monks as a way of keeping the soul pure. In an equally historic development, the two traditions that were once separate became conceptually fused, and yet the differences have been deployed strategically to invite selective inclusion with none of the benefits.

De Man, in “Autobiography as De-facement,” suggests that all writing, anything with a recognizable author, is autobiographical in some sense, and he deepens his reflections on the ontological question of autobiography through a reading of Wordsworth. In this famous essay, de Man warns that the figure of prosopopeia holds out a tantalizing proposal: the conferral of “the power of speech” (76). However, “prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography” by which the giving or conferring of a face is the operation of a simultaneous defacement and dis-figuration (76). The autobiography is not merely a literary genre; it is a technology of self-realization. But, according to de Man, the act of foundational selfhood is simultaneously the mark of its unraveling: “To the extent that language is figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute” (80). He continues, “the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause” (81). In delineating an image of speech, there is a way in which it shuts down other possibilities of
speech. It goes without saying that if autobiography comes to define the possibilities of speech, what speech looks like, and what the speaking subject looks like, there is the foundation of an index: certain subjects will look more or less like this ideal subject. Although de Man does not explicitly talk about race or gender, I believe that this particular essay calls out for it. Rather than see it as a gap that neglects questions of race and gender, I believe de Man’s text invites us to extend his argument about the autobiography. Let us imagine that someone had the incredible boldness to invent a fake currency and it “took off” so to speak: the fake currency shortchanges both the rich and the poor. Within a system that is already bankrupt, both the poor and the rich will experience the consequences of its collapse, but until then, the rich will live comfortably, and the dispossessed will suffer immensely.

Which leads me to the question: when we think of the autobiographical sections of Wordworth’s *Prelude*, do we think of them in the same terms as Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*? Neither the lyric poetry of William Wordsworth nor the autobiography of George Washington is at all equal to the genre of ethnic autobiography (it wouldn’t even be shelved in the same place at Barnes and Nobles), the latter having an entirely different set of expectations and conditions. Wordsworth and Washington can lay claim to the autonomous subject, an intrinsic part and product of the form of autobiography. Consequently, through a limited inclusion, the ethnic autobiography is made to function as the mark of a threshold and the beginning of a margin that consolidates the center. The autobiography has been an important site of American gatekeeping. The politics of appropriating these forms of recognition lead to regulated yields of empowerment that signal how autobiography is the site of accessibility, but one that comes with differentiated conditions for different subjects.

**PART III: Fatigue as a Political Question**
In the case of *The Woman Warrior* debate, the question of translation is relegated and delimited to one of correspondence. For example, when Kingston’s critics accuse her of intentionally mistranslating certain words, the “correspondence between word and thing is deemed so perfect that a Chinese term, *kuei*, is supposed to be translatable by only one English equivalent with all other overtones outlawed” (37). Wong writes, “recognition of a preexisting external reality, however, imposes a special obligation on the ethnic American autobiographer: to provide a positive portrayal of the ethnic community through one’s self-portrayal” (37). The Asian American woman autobiographer is tasked with a perfect translation that amounts to exact correspondence. The task and burden is heavy indeed. If autobiography demands an exacting price for historical *recognition*, the question is, what exactly is the price of limited accessibility? Wong writes that autobiography is “characterized by simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity, simultaneous expression and documentation (e.g., Stone 10-11; Sands 57), autobiography easily creates in its readers expectations of “privileged access” (Olney, “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment” 13) to the experience and vision of an entire people.” (42). The ethnic autobiography serves to provide a characteristically inoculated sample of an entire peoples and a culture. Autobiography as a form of accessibility is not exactly straightforward—it functions as a confusing, ambiguous revolving door where accessibility goes both ways, but it seems always to disadvantage the woman writer of colour. At the cost of having to do the work of providing a safe cultural sample, the Asian American woman as writer gains a limited access to a community of letters. But the terms of barter are not so equal or fair. Under the same banner of accessibility, one vector is immensely privileged and the other profoundly laborious and difficult. The labor of gaining entry, finding our way across a border, is particularly difficult for certain peoples while for others it is an exotic tourism.
It is from within this social milieu that Wong writes, “according to this logic, the ethnic woman autobiographer victimized by sexism must be ready to suppress potentially damaging (to the men, that is) material; to do less is to jeopardize the united front and *prostitute* one’s integrity for the sake of white approval” (37, my emphasis). What this means is that on top of everything else, the Asian American woman autobiographer must also shield her men, brace her community, against the racist white public. The coloured woman autobiographer must be both writer and fortified diplomat, and a crafty coordinator of public and private relations. It is more than enough to be exhausting. We are tired. So very tired because we are overworked, but the nature, the quality, and the dimensions of this ineffable fatigue are profound and profoundly political. When Wong, in a separate essay, writes that *The Woman Warrior*, immediately upon publication, got “entangled in various discourses” (*A Casebook*, 12), this is no passing comment. The ways in which this text got entangled in various discourses should call to mind the other valence of the word entangled, which is to become entrapped or held captive.

The Chin-Kingston controversy is a sprawling one that has spanned generations of Asian American literary criticism, and in a project that is concerned with the inter-generational narratives that bear witness to collective histories, this is no small point of interest. However, for the sake of brevity and expediency, I defer to Wong’s “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour” as shorthand. Wong outlines the two fundamental objections to *The Woman Warrior* that have been brought against it. The first has to do with its status as an autobiography “when so much of the book departs from the popular definition of autobiography as unadorned factual account of a person’s own life” (30). Wong points out that a certain camp of criticism “hold Kingston responsible for her readers’ failings” and they do so “from a set of assumptions about ethnic literature that are grounded in a keen awareness of the sociopolitical context of minority
literary creation” (31). For example, Kathryn Fong writes, “the problem is non-Chinese are reading your fiction as true accounts of Chinese and Chinese-American history” (Wong 30). In short, Kingston is held accountable for a white readership that may or may not misconstrue The Woman Warrior. A work like The Woman Warrior is especially exposed to the accusation of elaborate fictionalization because it is a highly subjective account that puts weight on an interior narrative as opposed to “the popular perception of autobiography as an ordered shaping of life events anchored in the so-called external world” (31). Kingston’s autobiography is “so engrossed with the inner life that the outer world becomes blurred (Pascal 9)” (Wong 31). To sum, as a purported autobiography, it fails to be adequately referential. The second charge has to do with the question of translation, but it is my suspicion that the two points are the same. Kingston is accused of loose or artful translation, a bad translation because she is “making things up” (32). But, the thrust of the accusation lies not in the error itself; it matters less that she was wrong in the end. It is her intention that her critics weigh against her. The problem, or the reason it is construed as a betrayal and not an error, extends past technical inaccuracy or lack of linguistic fluency because it is assumed that Kingston must have “knowingly selected the wrong term, the one with the “familiar exotic touristy flavor” relished by “whites checking out Chinese America” (“Critic of Admirer” 6)” (33). These two points are restrictive approaches to reading The Woman Warrior. Both the categories of autobiography and translation serve as a standard for referentiality that is extended into a question of fidelity versus betrayal. What does it mean that a Chinese American writer whose work has been marketed as an autobiography is asked to maintain a status quo of referentiality that is then read as the index of fidelity? But, perhaps the real question is, fidelity to what? Apparently, the woman writer of colour must maintain a clear relationship to external referentiality, but also keep her inner conscience clear. These demands
seem entirely at odds, and yet incredibly similar: it is her interiority that constitutes the threat. If she is “too engrossed with the inner life” or if she harbors dishonest intentions, this is improper. Both in terms of proper referentiality and her conscience, the woman writer must be absolutely transparent.

Wong quotes Chan’s express concerns about how *The Woman Warrior* “may mislead naïve white readers” (31). Why must an Asian American woman writer labor for and on behalf of a white readership? Why is the onus, the burden of proof with regard to an authentic and “correct understanding,” this immense *pedagogical* task, on the woman writer of colour? I am not suggesting that this labor, laborious though it is, should not be done. It should be done, but it is tiring. There is something to be said for calling it what it is: difficult, necessary, and without choice. But this responsibility is also one of translation, if not linguistic translation per se. The most perennial questions with regard to translation—fidelity to the original, assimilation to the host language, double-consciousness—have come together with the issue of Asian American literary autonomy and gender that both deepen these concerns. This controversy also demonstrates how this double labor is an anthropologic task. Both the physical bodies and textual bodies of coloured women have been aligned with organicity, as a point of reference to an external reality, authenticity, and an anthropological truth. As Wong aptly points out, “Chinese American autobiography has served as “anthropological guidebooks” (40).

Kingston’s detractors like Fong and Chan feel that a narrative “as personal as Kingston’s must be made safe for white consumption by means of a sobering dose of Chinese-American history” (34), and that without “such a corrective […] [,] Kingston will reinforce the white readers’ stereotype of Chinese Americans as eternally unassimilable aliens, “silent, mysterious, and devious” (34). Furthermore, the body of Chinese-American literature is small enough “to
justify a more stringent demand on the Chinese-American writer, especially the woman writer” (67)” (34, my emphasis). The italicized clause, “especially the woman writer,” is a complex reference to the particular travails of the woman of colour’s writing. Wong writes, “in the same way that language is considered a sort of sugarcoating on dry nuggets of fact, the autobiographer’s subjectivity is seen as having little or no constitutive power; rather, it is a Newtonian body moving about in a world of discrete, verifiable—and hence incontrovertible facts, its power being limited to the choice between faithfully recording or willfully distorting this external reality” (36). The coloured woman autobiographer is seen has having little or no constitutive power and Wong makes this point through the analogy of a Newtonian body moving about, or trapped, in a world of referential facts. What Wong describes as a model for language—one compared to the coating that covers the nuggets of fact—is, by extension, a reference to a communicative model of translation. I believe that in order to revitalize or reanimate autobiography as a form better suited for disenfranchised subjects, it must rethink translation against the grain of a communication model. Maybe then Asian American woman’s autobiography can be read as more than at best a faithful recording or at worst a willful distorting of external reality, because in the end, both are still referential.

Wong writes, “the projected reactions of the white audience are kept constantly in sight” (34). Women writers of colour must sustain the exhausting task of keeping a white audience constantly in sight. Autobiography, for certain subjects, takes place under surveillance. The accountability in testimony for certain subjects is synonymous with regulated surveillance. Pay close to attention to what Wong writes shortly after the aforementioned quote.

The collective history of the ethnic community—one does not speak of a history in this theoretical framework—provides the ultimate reference point for the ethnic
autobiographer. Here is where the Newtonian analogy breaks down, for the self proves, after all, to be subjective in the everyday sense of “biased” or “unreliable.” Handicapped by its interiority, it cannot be the equal of other “bodies” which can be summed up as a bundle of externally ascertainable properties” (37).

What Wong has struck upon is more than just a simple break down of an analogy that could no longer service her argument. The analogy breaks down to signify the inadequacy of our current ideas of subjectivity that work according to a binary: individual subjectivity versus collective objectivity. The two are assumed to be at odds. What quantum entanglement and the heteroglossia of shaman possession should flag, at the very least, is the possibility of collective testimony: to delink the individual subject from testimony. In other words, to de-individuate testimony while taking care that the embodied, material individual is not swallowed by an abstracted universal consciousness. Wong’s analogy falls apart at the seams and draws out the tension that is the very heart of the Kingston controversy: modern autobiography is inadequate to a collective, heteroglossic history. And the question: what purchase does the individuated subject have for us today?

The individual versus collective binary leads to the thinning and hyper-individuation of the subject. This epistemological frame doubly disenfranchises the woman writer of colour. She is tasked with having to deliver a collective history (at times an inoculation version of difference) through an autobiographical form that has been structured to uphold and affirm the Western, male individuated subject. Modern testimony and autobiography is a modern invention deployed as a way of affirming the male, individual subject. Without making any of the necessary changes
to a highly specified technology, it has been handed over the to the woman of colour to supply and provide another set of demands and requirements thereby subjecting them to a double labor.

PART IV: Autobiography and *Bildungsromane*: American Gatekeeping and Assimilation

There has been a significant and steadily growing literature on the relationship between the autobiographical form and American assimilationist ideology. Rob Wilson, in “Producing American Selves: The Form of American Biography,” writes that the biography feeds on the “subjectivity-effect of earlier genres of interiority such as the diary, examination, letter, and confession, has functioned since the Renaissance as a supreme technology of Western selfhood” (105). Wilson situates the framing of “self” in a consensus driven rhetoric of dominant American culture (106), thus the production of self is also a “representative American self” (106). Notably, Joseph R. Slaughter, in “Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The “Bildungsroman” and International Human Rights Law,” argues that international human rights and the *Bildungsroman* are mutually enabling fictions. These enabling fictions are also interlocking gears with a bourgeois, white male citizenship made equivalent with the “universal subject” (1407). According to Slaughter, the *Bildungsroman*, plotted according to the narrative of a young man’s socialization, is a reformist, normative, and assimilationist genre (1409). Key to his argument is the connection he makes between the *Bildungsroman* and the modern autobiography as a Eurocentric literary form. But, what is most interesting about his argument is that these genres can function as an applied technology:

Although it has allegedly ceased to have viable social work to perform for the Anglo-European white male (the ostensibly already incorporated and capacitated citizen), the *Bildungsroman* continues to serve, as Marianne Hirsch and others

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have recognized, as “the most salient genre for the literature of the social outsiders, primarily women or minority groups” (300). Part of a larger transnational “memoir boom” (Gilmore 2), the age of the “rise of published life narratives” is also not incidentally, the age in which human rights became the lingua franca of international affairs “ (1411).

Authoring an autobiography or the “life narrative” is, in turn, plotted according to a timeline of progress. And for minority groups, the autobiography then comes to serve as a kind of “outdated” technology that then constitutes its users as already backwards. It applies not simply a genre but a European evolutionary model of industrial progress. And there has, indeed, under the auspices of the American publishing industry, been a boom in personal life narratives from Asian American women writers.

There has been much debate in the field about the formal limitations of the autobiographical form for Asian American subjects, and how easily an Asian American woman’s autobiography can be made amenable to a master, Bildungsroman arc. A palatable genre for a neoliberal American readership, its assimilative ethos is crystallized within the form. Without disagreeing, I do have serious reservations about rejecting this body of literature wholesale. Similarly, Slaughter writes,

The genre provides the normative literary technology by which social outsiders narrate affirmative claims for inclusion in the franchise of the nation-state, the story form of incorporation through which the historically marginalized individual is capacitiated as a citizen-subject—that is, as a “person before the law.” However, as the canonical genre of human rights incorporation, the Bildungsroman has the
dual capacity to articulate claims of inclusion in the rights regime and to criticize those norms and their inegalitarian implementation” (1411).

Slaughter argues that as a technology of a nation-state franchise, it is also by the same token the very impression and trace of those inegalitarian norms. When a history, or the histories of a collective, accommodates itself to the genre, it bends to fit the genre, but the genre also yaws in response to that voice which yields a poetic movement that cannot be accounted for.

Slaughter makes a case for the postcolonial Bildungsroman by insisting that they are not merely copies of their European counterparts but a form that has a different transnational compass: “The topos of contemporary Bildungsroman imagines a geocultural and geopolitical alternative to the Westphalian model of national citizenship as the ultimate expression of human sociality and personality.” (1418). Not only do these postcolonial adaptations of the European genre refer to a transnational matrix, they reveal the exclusions and disparities enacted by the Bildungsroman. Ultimately, he argues, that the postcolonial Bildungsroman has the potential to project a “new international citizen-subjectivity” (1419). He warns against the legacy of Euro-centric genres, but also makes a case for them. The Bildungsroman, its particular formal qualities, make it a technology of assimilation, in other words it can produce subjects for and in turn incorporate them into the nation-state, an imagined construct and community. By the same token, perhaps it can also anticipate the members of a projected, imagined community. Within an international world order, it produced national subjects for a nation-state order. But, the reverse is possible. A form can create the subjects of an as-yet kingdom: wield a weak messianic power. It has the potential to operate in an anticipatory temporality; the force to create subjects for a community that has yet to be inaugurated fully, a form for an age of the overlap. Drawing on what is without a doubt a fundamentally optimistic reinterpretation (and maybe, today, we are
particularly parched for some optimism) of the *Bildungroman*, I want to make a case for Asian American women’s autobiographical fiction. I argue that the autobiographical-testimonial form also anticipates or projects an as-yet unnamed and unrealized heteroglossic community.

Wong, in “Autobiography as Guided Tour of Chinatown,” calls into question Chin’s generalizations about the exclusively Western origins of autobiography. In a striking passage, she writes that when “Chin links the genre with Christian self-accusation, he overlooks the possibility that the late medieval *breakdown* of Christian dogma might have been responsible for the emergence of autobiography as an autonomous literary tradition” (35). What I want to keep open as a provisional possibility is that the site of *break* or a breakdown as Wong puts it, can simultaneously be the site of a carry-over, a break that occasioned a significant revision, change, and reconfiguration. And in the spirit of modeling my own point, I want to re-use or revise Wong’s words to make a similar but also differently nuanced argument: the late medieval breakdown of Christian dogma might have been responsible for the emergence of autobiography as a literary tradition of autonomy. As Max Weber’s extraordinary work, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, demonstrates, the breakdown of Christian dogma was also recaptured or translated for a capitalist industry. Even while the Western autobiography could very well be considered an autonomous literary tradition, the breakdown released the fetters of that which had remained, in part, repressed, and consequently facilitated the carry-over, the fullness of individuated autonomy. It took a dogmatic breakdown since the idea of absolute autonomy would have been nothing short of heresy. The confession and self-accusatory bent of Christian testimony was in some part translated for a “new” neoliberal strain of modern autobiography that highlighted concepts of autonomy and self-realization. But, even within this
tradition, it is important to realize that the subjects, who are also the writers, of these autobiographies are varied and their claim to autonomy asymmetrical.

At the same time, Wong makes a very good point about the limitations of Chin’s aversion to Western genres: “Even if autobiography were an entirely Western phenomenon […] Chinese-American writers have a right to appropriate a genre not indigenous to the Chinese in China but indigenous to the Chinese in America” (36). The construction of Wong’s assertion is worth noting: what is the right to appropriate a genre? What does it mean to appropriate a non-indigenous genre? Bracketing for a moment the final clause where she makes a case for indigeneity, it is clear that the question at hand is one of translation. And while much of this chapter is a kind of homage to Wong’s “Autobiography as Chinatown Tour,” I disagree with the letter—if not the spirit—of this particular statement. It would be more productive to consider the right to appropriation without falling back into a notion of indigeneity. While they are diametrically opposed arguments, both Chin and Wong seem to put a similar premium on a right to appropriation where its authority stems from indigeneity and proximity. In order to deconstruct the value of indigeneity and authenticity, it is important that Asian American literary studies be in conversation with Asian literary studies. For example, if Chinese-Americans have the right to appropriate genres indigenous to Chinese in America, does it mean that an Asian writer could not adopt or adapt autobiography? But, what do we do then with the fact that “America” extends far beyond its own borders?

When Wong invokes the indigeneity or rather the right of the Asian American to adopt American genres, I am moved to think that she means to suggest a more radical notion of indigeneity altogether. I want to think that she proposes a notion of belonging or “being there” that is differentiated from origin or authenticity. What is clear, at the very least, is that Frank
Chin’s Chinese fraternity—imagined as distinctly male—held together by the fantastic concept of a culturally and literarily homogenous China is hardly sustainable. Change was already happening on those far shores. The opposition he creates between a hybrid, immigrant text and its authentic, Chinese counterpart makes emphatic why Asian American studies needs to court Asian studies. A transnational and translational frame offers ways of thinking beyond dichotomies like fake versus authentic, copy versus original.

During the early 80s, the hyphen between “Asian-American” was increasingly dropped because it was seen as suggesting dual loyalties rather than a single, integrated national identity. However, we can no longer discuss Asian American texts in a strictly national context. Lisa Lowe in “The Trans-Pacific Migrant and Area Studies” makes an important intervention in the field by arguing that Asian Studies, American Studies, and Asian American Studies must critically engage with each other and with transnational frames of study: the “multiple contexts of colonialism and its various extension within the uneven development of a neocolonial capitalism” (69). She argues that a study of the family and the domestic space as a gendered, politicized concept is much needed to help us understand how exploitation operates within transnational markets—i.e., the increasing use of Asian immigrant women labor in the global market, the history of Asian women and militarized sexual slavery, how a representation of motherhood has been deployed for nation-state ideology, the emergence of “Tiger Moms” in the Americas, etc. Such a study is necessary in order to begin to imagine a concept of social justice delinked from the national. An earnest scholarship on the violent histories of modernity and nationality cannot be done without taking into account the model of the modern family, the gendered separation of spaces and labor, and how this is crossed with issues of race within migrant communities but also “Asia.”
At a time when the concept of an Asian American subject was still malleable—when the discourse and discipline was still shifting and in the process of being constructed—the idea of an Asian American female subject and the female “domestic” autobiography is not merely a necessary pause in a larger narrative about Asian American studies. Given the explicit ways in which Asians, particularly Asian men, have been historically feminized, the ways in which Asian women have been exoticized, given that the genre of autobiography has functioned as an important genre to the very concept of an Asian American literature, the Asian American woman’s autobiography is arguably intrinsic to an Asian American studies. To be candid, I find it less interesting to debate the intentions of Kingston: whether or not she purposely or purposefully mistranslated certain Chinese words or classic folklore, thereby pandering to her white counterparts. The significance of this debate in Asian American literary studies is the status of ethnic autobiography and women’s writing. Is it merely coincidental that the genre, at least in Asian American studies, has been the main thoroughfare used by Asian women as entry point into American letters?

Autobiography, particularly ethnic autobiography, is a mode of accountability that erupts at the site of a struggle for recognition. And to be accountable to someone always assumes a certain relationship of surveillance and regulation. While for some, the form becomes a means to perform autonomy, even as it purports to be its measure, it is for others the site of that negotiation. The first chapter, “Techno-mediatic, Testimonial Modernity,” looked at how testimony is a technology of subjectivity and the means through which a subject goes about proving interiority and subjectivity. As the Rivière case suggests in unsettling ways, the testimony or autobiography is a form implicitly concerned with recognition. To drive the question further, what the question of ethnic autobiography suggests then is that for certain
subjects, technologies of self-making (the modes and genres of recognition) are not made accessible in the same way. To publish yourself is to prove yourself, that you are a self.

Wong refers to the fact that autobiography has been a critical genre for minority communities beyond the Asian American community. She cites James Olney’s “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment” which takes up the question of autobiography and its significance to early African American writers. Wong openly borrows a phrase from this essay, and in an unusual moment of quotation, she repurposes the quote intended to refer to African American writers and applies it to Chinese American writers: “Chinese-American writers “entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography” (Olney, “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment” 15). Autobiographies predominate in Chinese-American writing in English” (39). In a significant moment of quotation, she compares African American literary history to an Asian American one. She argues that autobiography, for both communities, has been deployed as a way of breaking into the hegemony of a racist, patriarchal institution. The metaphor is interesting in and of itself: a universal literary domain is likened to a house, and the autobiography as a door through which certain subjects must negotiate their entry. It designates an outside and inside, those who belong without question, and those who must find access across the threshold through a portal heavily guarded, narrow, and inhospitable.

PART V: Toward a Question of Complexity

As a way of beginning to consider this set of questions, it is important to pay attention to the fact that Sau-ling C. Wong devotes a significant portion to a discussion of Frederick Douglass and his autobiographies:

The differing versions of Frederick Douglass’s early life found in his autobiographies provide a classic example of how a black autobiographer might
feel compelled to edit “factual” details in the interest of anticipated social effect (e.g., Fates 98-124). It is worth noting that, while critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., justifies “crafting or making [of a fictive self] by design,” citing the urgent need to establish the black man’s right to speak for himself, he also finds […] “Almost never does Douglass allow us to see him as a human individual in all of his complexity. (39)

The fact that the problem of autobiography crops up again and again in a discussion of minority literatures in the United States should not lessen its relevance to the question of women writers of colour, but rather demonstrate how it has been a tried and tested method of American gatekeeping. Autobiography, if it has functioned for certain subjects as a technology of establishing a man’s right to speak for himself, has been selectively and strategically withheld from other subjects but this disenfranchisement goes further than simple barring. What I find so remarkable about Wong’s discussion of the issue and how she has selected her quotes is that without spelling it out, but through a strategic citation, she hits on the heart of the issue: complexity. If the ways in which Douglass is limited does not allow us to see him in all of his complexity, the question posed here is one, also, of feminine complexity and furthermore subjective complexity.

Why revisit the question of female autobiography in Asian American literature? It has, I believe, to do with what Barbara Johnson calls “feminine complexity” and the difficulty of a female autobiography. In Johnson’s short, brilliant essay “My Monster/My Self,” she writes about Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*: “For it is the fact of self-contradiction that is so vigorously repressed in women. While the story of a man who is haunted by his own contradictions is representable in an allegory about monstrous doubles, how indeed would it have been possible
for Mary to represent feminine contradiction from the point of view of its repression otherwise than precisely in the gap between angels of domesticity and uncompleted monsteress” (250). Johnson does not bring the question of feminine complexity to bear on the question of autobiography, it is not an apparatus of application. She argues that it is fundamentally intrinsic to the concept of self. The concept of self is a question of gender, and if I could add, race:

[T]he monstrousness of selfhood is intimately embedded within the question of female autobiography. Yet how could it be otherwise, since the very notion of self, the very shape of human stories, has always, from St. Augustine to Freud, been modeled on the man? [...] The problem for the female autobiographer is, on the one hand, to resist the pressure of masculine autobiography as the only literary genre available for her enterprise [...] (251)

Female inter-generational testimonies in Asian American literature warrant another reading, one that fully explores the history and historicity of testimony as a literary, but also epistemological and ontological category.

PART VI: Asian American Mothers

Partly as a result of this much-cited controversy between Chin and Kingston, there has been and remains an antipathy within Asian American literary criticism toward women’s autobiographical texts even as these types continue to be popular on the market. For example, erin Khue Ninh’s *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* is a very timely and necessary argument about the politics of the Asian American family as a capitalist enterprise, and she chooses to focus specifically on the mother-daughter relationship. In doing so, she responds to particular criticisms within Asian American studies and its reservations about intergenerational narratives. First, she cites Lisa Lowe’s criticism in “Heterogeneity, Hybridity,
“Multipliity” as a way of highlighting how Asian American literatures will often frame themselves as stories centrally about the dynamics of generational and cultural divide. Lowe’s essay then proceeds to caution against “interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the [se] master narratives” (7), i.e. to read them as tales of the timeless, personal, and familial struggle of assimilation. Ninh turns to David Palumbo-Liu and how he would call for a “political distinction between what he considers more historically materialist literary accounts of Asian American family dynamics […] and more “popular” (hegemony-friendly) texts such as *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior*” (7) which he believes “lend themselves to [model minority] readings” (Palumbo-Liu 413), by virtue of their inattention to the American sociopolitical context” (7). Certainly, the trope of inter-generational conflict in feminine Asian American literature has been “applied to conservative political ends” (6). This is where, I believe, Ninh—not withstanding her excellent diagnosis of capitalist formations in the Asian American family structure—might have misread Lowe. Lowe does begin by writing that “in many Asian American novels, the question of the loss or transmission of the “original” culture is frequently represented in a family narrative figured as generational conflict” (62). However, let us pay careful attention to how she proceeds: “one way to read the popular texts Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975) or Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) would be to understand them as versions of this generational model of culture, refigured in feminine terms, between mothers and daughters” (63, my emphasis). Lowe continues,

In this chapter, however, I argue that interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians. The
reduction of the cultural politics of racialized ethnic groups, like Asian Americans, to first-generation/second-generation struggles displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition. Such reductions contribute to the aestheticizing commodification of Asian American cultural differences, while denying the immigrant histories of material exclusion and differentiation. (63)

Lowe does not make the assumption that Kingston and Tan’s texts are versions of this generational modern of culture, but leaves the onus on the reader and the reading they engage in. Palumbo-Liu rejects the intergenerational narratives of women for fear it will lend themselves to model minority myths. This is a legitimate concern, and Palumbo-Liu is not wrong to be averse to it. However, Lowe suggests not that we reject this genre wholesale, but that we read against the grain of a reductive interpretation.

In the following chapters, I look at intergenerational, especially mother—daughter, texts that speak to a trans-pacific history of trauma. Scholars like Ninh are particularly wary of a conflation between a mother figure—often portrayed as vulnerable, helpless, and silent—with an assumedly vulnerable, endangered mother culture. If I am not mistaken, it becomes clearer that for Ninh, the silent, passive mother is also the mother of reductive nationalisms. I wonder if Ninh’s reading, while a powerful advocacy and close reading of second-generation daughters, is in the same proportion, lacking in sympathy for the mothers. While Ninh and Palumbo-Liu find the trope of the silent, nonfluent mother complicit with an essentialist notion of the Mother country, a wholesale aversion can also risk keeping those conflations intact. If the figure of the mother and the Mother country are yoked together in a longstanding association, there may be a way to use this figurative association to an advantage. By granting the mother feminine complexity, it may be one such way of reading Asian America’s relationship to its multiple
“mother” countries in more complex ways that open it up to a transnational and translational plane. If there is truth to the ways in which the mother has been sentimentalized and conflated with a nostalgic notion of the mother country, what are the politics of this sentimentalization?

Ninh puts forward an Asian American literary reading that is rooted in a different kind of native soil, a surprising reversal of Chin’s argument: “Like the immigrant community’s revised cultural customs, the immigrant family’s child-rearing practices are responses to present realities, and native to this soil” (21, my emphasis). Even while she is correct about the specificities of immigrant material reality, this kind of formulation prematurely closes off a study of Asian American conditions in relation to contemporary foreign relations and transpacific frames. I am well aware of what Ninh is trying to say by insisting on the “present” and the realities of “this native soil,” and what she is working against. However, if this argument has to be formulated in terms of what is native and on metaphors of earthly organicity, even if it is parodying or reappropriating a hegemonic discourse, it may be leading away from an essentialist reading only to rest in a positivistic claim about the Asian American condition that nevertheless operates according to familiar dichotomies. Certainly, the trope of inter-generational conflict in Asian American literatures has been “applied to conservative political ends” (Ninh 6). So, how can we wrest them back?

PART VII: The Mother and Politics

Gayatri Spivak in “Nationalism and the Imagination” recognizes that “public statecraft” is grounded in the most private of attachments (1). This can be seen in the ways that nationalism is tied to the circumstances of one’s birth. Not unrelatedly, the mother as a category becomes serviceable to the sphere of politics because of the ways in which it is naturalized and by the same token naturalizes citizenship. Thus, the mother is a political category insofar as she is
excluded from it. Spivak writes, “the nationalism I have been describing operates in the public sphere. But the subaltern affect where it finds its mobilizing is private […] And yet, metonymized as nothing but the birth-canal, woman is the most primitive instrument of nationalism” (8). Even though Spivak refers to the woman, what is metonymized as nothing but the birth-canal is, more specifically, the figure of the mother. I would argue that the mother is the most primitivized instrument of nationalism. Rather than reject intergenerational narratives that feature a dispossessed mother, it seems more productive to delink the latter from these schemas of representation. Motherhood is a social role, perhaps even a politics, that exceeds her sex, exceeds her gender and, most importantly, she exceeds the biological womb.

Evocatively, Spivak argues that since “it is usually our mothers who seem to bring us into temporalization, by giving birth, our temporizing often marks that particular intuition of origin by coding and recoding the mother, by computing possible futures through investing or manipulating womanspace” (86-7). On the other hand, Susan Koshy in “Neoliberal Family Matters,” like Ninh, argues for a reframing of motherhood and the nuclear family as the sites of reproductive citizenship “that harness heterosexuality to the productivity of knowledge work to enhance national competitiveness in a globalizing economy” (351). Koshy highlights that through the various provisions of the 1965 Immigration Act, “human capital, a defining feature of the emerging knowledge economy, is sourced internationally, but naturalized and domesticated through the family form” (351). The mother is the site of capitalist regulation and (re)production. She regulates human capital and resources and reproduces heteronormative structures. Michel Foucault, in “Right of Death and Power over Life,” a chapter in The History of Sexuality, discusses a “thematics of blood”:

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The thematics of blood was sometimes called on to lend its entire historical weight toward revitalizing the type of political power that was exercised through the devices of sexuality. Racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern “biologizing” statist form): it was then that a whole politics of settlement, family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of blood and ensuring the triumph of the race. (159)

The figure of the mother is crucial to an operation of state sponsored biopolitics because she stands at the crossroads of a symbolics of blood and an analytics of sexuality (148). She does the work of both symbol and instrument.

In Friederich A. Kittler’s *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, he introduces a provocative proposition about motherhood and discourse production. For Kittler, not only is the mother a part of a discourse of nature, but she plays a critical role in the very production of discourse as such. He writes, “Nature, in the discourse network of 1800, is The Woman. Her Function consists in getting people—that is, men—to speak…Nature therefore accomplishes a PRODUCTION OF DISCOURSES. She creates […] a primary orality” (25). In other words, the sacrosanct idea of the mother tongue is a modern invention. Since the 19th century, the mother has acted as primary instructor. What may seem like the most naturally accepted image of the mother teaching her child his first words, her role as primary language instructor, is the “input component of elementary acculturation techniques” (27) that operates through a system of equivalents: “Woman=Nature=Mother” (28). Woman, nature, mother became the conflated and uninterrupted
signifier for an “absolute origin.” From some of the earliest European primers is the naturalization of the alphabet through the Mother’s voice: “all arbitrariness [of the letter] disappeared in an inner sense called the Mother’s voice” (29). The Mother as absolute origin became the foundation for a significant change in primary education that moved away from “rote learning” to “understanding,” thus underlining the “spirit” of a linguistic act. The critical objective of primary language education was the standardization of national language and the exclusion of “deficient dialects” and all “provincialisms”: “the discourse of others, those who mistaken i for ü, is thus eradicated […] The mother’s pleasure is at once the methodical production and the methodical purification of sounds” (35). The Mother became the transcendental signifier for a “general, purified, homogenous medium” (36) and this, asserts Kittler, was “something new” (36). Motherhood became irrevocably associated with the “spirit” of a linguistic act, and consequently it was also the “spirit” of Truth that was simultaneously associated with an unchanging quality, motherhood and standardized language, motherhood and natural transparency. The discourse becomes thick with associations of motherhood, mother tongue, spirit, and an unchanging truth.

In the context of developing a standard national language, “traditional language acquisition was thereby held to be denaturing because […] [t]radition produces copies of copies of copies and so on endlessly, until even the concept of the original is lost. A transcendental Mother’s Voice, however, is inalienably identical with its oral experience” (26). Kittler writes:

In 1800 linguistic analysis was not allowed to approach the two forbidden borders of the word and the letter. Instead, analysis was confined within the concept of the root, as instituted by a new science of language. Roots lead whole words back to an original historical significance that binds all Indo-European languages in a
proper nuclear-family affection and makes them daughters of one mother […] the origin of all meaning. (43-4, my emphasis)

Within this modern discursive shift that hinges on a nation-state community, the mother-son relationship is figured as the training grounds for civil service. A son’s relationship to his mother serves as a figural prototype for his role as a grown, civil servant. However, the daughter-mother relationship is figured differently—daughters are copies that through a paradigm of rootedness must, in a sense, reproduce, effect a repetition of, the origin. Unlike the son, whose civic duty is to grow-up, the daughter answers to an imperative to be the same. The sons follow an arc of bildung and plotted development, but daughters are called to remain the same, authentic, and pure. Kittler writes, “it became a duty to produce authoritative producers of discourse. The state of Bildung turned biological reproduction, that bare recurrence of the same, into cultural production” (55-6). Thus, the discourse of reproduction had also to produce its producers: the Mother is the producer of discourse, but is also discursively produced. Thus, a civil society was thus built on the exclusion of the mother. The image of the Mother can only be sustained if she is produced as an exclusion to the state: “The exclusion of women from state power and its bureaucratic discourses did not leave the determination of women vague or their achievements unused. The very exclusion of women from offices summons women to their official capacity, as mothers, to elicit discourses generally and magically to transmute them into Nature” (57). Kittler writes, “the exclusion [of Mother from the civil sphere] was not an excommunication; it contributed to a relationship of productive complementarity between the new determination of women and a civil service that was becoming the very foundation of the state. In the Mother the

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22 According to Kittler, the state soon took over the bureaucratization of language education, but this was not a disruption between the maternal producer of discourses and pedagogical discourse—rather, it was its uninterrupted continuation: “The alma mater or Mother…became concretized in a bureaucratic and therefore textual apparatus that was at once its caricature and its serial continuation” (55).
state founds it Other, without whom it could not exist” (58). The Mother becomes the affective bind that gives nationalism its “feeling” of unity, but because of her political exclusion, this sentiment is made to feel like something that comes from the outside, primordial and transcendental.

In a similar strain, Ninh’s work interrogates the Asian American family as a unit of capitalist production, and we can begin to see the structural pressures that are exerted on the parents, what sorts of demands are internalized and in turn demanded from their children, and at what psychological cost. Ninh’s project, more specifically, is provocative because it refuses “a false binary”: “As if authority that is not malicious in intent must then be inert, indifferent to power and incapable of harm” (8). Ninh explores how an authority, the mother, may be caring and yet harmful, that she may mean well and also be “deeply invested in power” (8). Thus, Ninh does not flinch from interrogating power in the familial context. She refuses to sentimentalize the mother in ways that obscure her interpellation in a nexus of power and capital. Ninh refuses to “idealize the mother-daughter relation as one of natural alliance” (18). Ninh also declines to see the mother as naturally “motherly” (8). Ingratitude is an example of how we might begin to think of the complexity of the mother. Ninh actively works against the trope of the old, Asian mother—quiet, passive, helpless, and the object of our most sentimental pathos. Ninh is, I believe, right to criticize a rhetoric of sentiment that obfuscates the mother, the family’s, place in structures of violence. However, not against but rather alongside Ninh, while maintaining a distance from a naturalized image of the mother, I hope to be attentive to the ways in which this ideological image has made it impossible to attend to the mother’s complexities. In a more sympathetic reading of the mother, while remaining for the most part in agreement with Ninh, I
try to read into the particular disenfranchisement of the mother of colour, even as, or perhaps because, she is interpellated in a nexus of power.

If I have been particularly ungenerous to Ninh, it is because, ultimately, I find her reading of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* to be among the most compelling. The section of Ninh’s chapter that is particularly relevant for a discussion about intergenerational trauma concerns her reading of Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race* which, in Ninh’s own words, confronts “intangible injury in the familial-ethnic spaces and relations of the immigrant home” (63). Ninh continues,

Cheng’s reading of Kingston takes the not uncommon perspective that Maxine’s suffering is a vertically transmitted trauma, wherein the original material and cultural losses Brave Orchid endures devolve into what is sometimes called “secondary” or “intergenerational” traumatization: “the immigrant trauma of the mother (surely not even fully registered by the mother herself) has been passed down to the daughter as inherited trauma, trauma without an origin” (Cheng, 88) (63)

Ninh criticizes the “problematic effect of implying that the daughter’s troubles are fundamentally not her own” (63). Indeed, she highlights and quotes Cheng’s suggestion that “the daughter’s account of selfhood may be read as “an ongoing ventriloquy of the mother” (88), of whom she is a “‘telescoped’ extension, and [… has no direct claim. In casting the narrator’s pain as a function of the inability (first her mother’s, then her own) to come to terms with the mother’s experiences” (63). And Ninh turns to making emphatic the daughter’s own experiences, which lines up with her argument about an Asian American context, but in order to do this Ninh has to reroute what seems to be an entangled experience into the daughter’s own possession. Cheng and
Ninh operate within the limitations of “an account of selfhood” (63) that must find an
appropriative and possessive subject: the daughter’s or the mother’s account of selfhood. And
yet, there are moments in Ninh’s reading where she seems to shift toward the idea of a shared
subject in transit: “weaving back and forth between differences and similarities, Maxine speaks
at times with a voice distinct from her aunt’s at others with a subjectivity folded into hers” (77).
In the concluding moments of this section, she writes, “The Woman Warrior’s experimental
structure implies a certain incommensurability to Maxine’s subjectivity. Its many stories, each a
fable of origin, each an explanation of self, insist that no solitary structure can subsume the
diverse fragments into a single logic” (79). The transitional subject, the subject in transit, is
suggestive of a different kind of history. The traumatic history of erasure—both embodied and
discursive—is the expression of a non-individuated enunciative position. It is as Ninh suggests,
“one knows a daughter by the suffering they share: her sheer vulnerability—active even in the
seemingly mildest circumstances—to that […] discursive exercise which is erasure from
discourse” (70). Mother-daughter narratives deserve to be read through the framework of the
subject in transit and collective histories of resonant trauma.

PART VIII: Without Self, The Work of Melancholia

But, how can we begin to understand or even theorize the phenomenon of a relation or
mode of identity that is expressed through an entangled relation? I propose that an early
intimation of such a theory can be read in Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia.” Asian
American literary theory has taken up the question of race and melancholia in the last decade, and
this term occurs and reoccurs specifically around the question of Asian American
intergenerational relations. Melancholia, as described by Freud, was itself a condition defined by
its “borrowed” qualities: “Melancholia, therefore, borrow some of its features from mourning,

23 Most notably David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, Anne Anlin Cheng, among others.
and the others from the process of regression from narcissistic object-choice to narcissism” (258). Melancholia was, from its earliest theorization, a composite condition but one that, interestingly, hinges on a process of regression with regard to the love of self.24 “Mourning and Melancholia,” as the title suggests, parses through the difference between mourning and melancholia where in melancholia, “one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either […] This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness” (254). On the other hand, in mourning, “there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.” (254). Melancholia then is distinct from mourning in that the loss or some aspect of the loss is not consciously felt. It is on this point specifically, hand in hand with the self-deprecation that belongs to melancholia, that a theory of melancholia has been useful for those thinking about Asian American intergenerational loss and internalized racism.

Even as melancholia borrows some of its features from mourning, this ‘resemblance’ is overcome through an important distinction: ambivalence. Melancholia’s unique quality is attributed to the ambivalence it holds toward the lost-love object. Nothing short of ambivalence is instituted here at the instance of a profound ambivalence found within Freud’ text. “Mourning and Melancholia” is a paper about the similarities and differences between mourning and melancholia, an ambivalence that stems from resemblance. I believe that Freud’s own ambivalence regarding melancholia is symptomatic of how difficult it is to hold together resemblance and ambivalence. In short, when we encounter resemblance, how do we identity with that which is also discontinuous? How do you identify with contradiction and difference? When questions of identification and identity-formation have come to the fore in Asian

24 I want to suggest that what Freud has discussed in terms of an individual pathology can be translated for a more general state of modernity and its dominant technologies.
American studies through a discussion of psychological pathology, it is important to ask, can resemblance and ambivalence come together within a single identification? Can two (or more) women, separated in space, in time, can two separate traumatic histories come together in resemblance and difference? Can identification define itself apart from self-identification?

In the much-cited essay by David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” they apply a theory of melancholia to the racialized Asian American minority. They argue that melancholia provides a useful model to consider processes of assimilation and the psychic consequences for the Asian American minority. The experience of immigration is compared to a structure of mourning, and they make the case that in the face of a disproportionate rise in the suicides rates of Asian American women, it is urgent to look at how the children of these migrants inherit and inhabit these losses. In this argument, the parent generation is mapped onto a structure of mourning, and their children onto one of melancholia. Eng and Han suggest that if the “losses suffered by the first generation are not resolved and mourned in the process of assimilation—if libido is not replenished by the investment in new objects, new communities, new ideals—then melancholia that ensues from this condition can be transferred to the second generation” (63). But most importantly, in a discussion of intergenerational melancholia, Eng and Han explicitly state, “this mother-daughter predicament has been widely debated in feminist circles. Here, the question is how racial difference comes to intersect what is a strongly gendered formation” (64). Without commenting further on what seems an important intersection between race and gender, they go on to elaborate on how “the daughters’ bodies and voices become substitutes for those of the mother—not just the mothers’ bodies and voices but also something that is unconsciously lost in them […] [their narratives] are not their own histories. These daughters have absorbed and been saturated by their mothers’
losses. The mothers’ voices haunt the daughters” (65). But, as I’ve mentioned before, there are limitations to a model of substitution. And, as I will go on to discuss later, the limitations of a model of substitution are extensive of Freud’s own model of substitution in “Mourning and Melancholia.”

Eng and Han’s formulation of the substitutive model share distinct similarities to Anne Anlin Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race*, where she also emphasizes how “as a model of ego-formation (the incorporation as self of an excluded other), melancholia provides a provocative metaphor for how race in American, or more specifically how the act of racialization, works” (50). For Cheng then, it is not only an intergenerational model but also a triangulation that exists between parent, child, and a hegemonic American narrative. In a sense, it is a double figure because it functions as the model of identity formation between two generations but also for America at large with regard to other minorities (here, America becomes a parental figure). The latter is making explicit comparisons to the internalized racial identity for minority subjects. And while my understanding departs in certain ways from Cheng’s reading, her evocative model is very useful because it collapses subject and object: “Melancholia can be quite contagious. After all, it designates a condition of identity disorder where subject and object become indistinguishable from one another” (Cheng 51). The concept of melancholia and other similar key terms condense around the idea of Asian American intergenerational women’s narratives. How can we begin to work through this motif, this resemblance amongst texts?

First, I want to propose that melancholia, at least for a bracketed moment, be discussed as something other than a pathology. In the third chapter of *The Ego and the Id*, a later return to the question of melancholia and internalized identification, Freud revokes what he believed to be the uniquely pathological turn in melancholia and admits that at the time of writing “Mourning and
Melancholia” he did not know how “common and how typical it is” (23). For a later Freud, internalized identification does not hold an exceptional status at all, and in fact will go on to become the grounds for proposing the Oedipus complex. Throughout the chapter, he traces the earliest instances of the son’s internalized identification with the father in the Oedipal complex. In this discussion of the father-son relationship, there is only brief mention of its mother-daughter counterpart as “preciously analogous” (27). Interestingly enough, the earliest discussion of parent-child identification (internalization of the object into the ego) stems from a theory of melancholia. But, more importantly, the encounter between Freud’s theory on melancholia and the Oedipal complex, in some sense, represses the mother-daughter relationship, or relegates it through analogy to the father-son relation. By tracing the history of melancholia as a concept from within Freudian thought, we see another story unfold: the intergenerational traumas of a mother-daughter relation, through its erasure in the text, speaks to the unevenly difficult labor of writing and the genres of narrative and theory.

What I find most useful to a theory of subjects in transit is that a reading of Freud’s seminal texts on melancholia is suggestive of, rather than a pathology of the ego, a disturbance in the representation of the ego. Freud, in what is arguably one of his most evocative texts, quite singular in its beautiful poeticism, writes, “in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (254). Beyond what it seems to be saying, I wonder if it couldn’t also be read as the discovery of the limitations of the category of an individuated ego. I believe such an argument can be made based on a close reading of the text

25 Freud later completely revises this analogy in “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes” and will go on to explore feminine sexuality and psychology. Without going into the details of this later shift, it is still interesting that in this exploration of the difference in the sexes, Freud suggests that unlike boys, for girls, an inferiority complex is primary and even precedes the Oedipal complex.
because the utter depletion and emptiness in the ego, as impoverished as it is, is certainly not alone. It is its dialectical quality that defines it as melancholic:

[W]e perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a love object which has been shifted away from it on to the patient’s own ego […] the reactions expressed in their behavior still proceed from a mental constellation of revolt […] An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. (257)

In what Freud frames as a pathology of identification, the love-object comes face to face with a relation to the love-object that is no longer sustainable. The melancholic ego takes within itself not the object, but its relationship to the object. Freud’s description suggests that the loss of the ego is simultaneous with the internalization of the love-object where subject and object change places. The fact that, for Freud, this blurring of lines between a subject and object would register immediately as a pathology is worth thinking about. In any case, for Freud, the object takes possession of the ego-space, and it can easily be likened to a kind of possession. The logic is not hard to follow: in the ego there is only space for one, either subject or object. The self-deprecation of the melancholic can be explained by an internalization of the object, where what should properly be an object becomes the subject. Even as Freud’s argument is premised on this assumption, the confusion that riddles this text, at the same time, traces something else. Despite his own conclusions, within Freud’s text is a radical revision of the subject position.

So what if we were to reframe his formulation just slightly? Faced with impoverished social conditions that cannot sustain relationality itself, what if the possibility and the power to make and sustain relations, the conditions needed to relate to others, to listen and be listened to,
what if this fundamental part of sociality, is destroyed? What if it is this, in part, what one wishes to attest to? The symbolic order of the unconscious has its own traces, its own language, and its own strange strategies. In the face of an empty and poor sociality, what if it, from a deep constellation of revolt, found a way not simply to maintain a relationship with the other, but also to, through its symptoms of pathology, also translate the very conditions of its impossibility?

Freud further describes the economy of loss by suggesting that, in melancholia, “the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus, the shadow of the object fell upon the ego” (258). In what Freud refers to as the “substitution of identification,” I propose a more radical rendition of identification that eschews the structure of substitution. Here, my revision lies in arguing that what appears like a substitution is an expression of that “constellation of revolt.” What could be understood as the ego’s preserving its relationship to the love object by bringing it inwards through identification, I argue that it salvages nothing: rather, in this movement, it re-inscribes why this relationship failed in the first place. Or, it does preserve its relationship to the love object, by recounting a history of the ways it was not made possible. In this way, it performs a social criticism. But, a structure of a relationality that is born out of its very impoverishment is qualified by this collapsing of subject and object where, indeed, the shadow of the object falls upon the ego. Thus, what Freud describes as a regression from one type of object-choice to original narcissism, is not in fact a regression to original narcissism but something that, at the expense of being controversial, I would argue precedes the self, precedes narcissism: relationality. And in this reading of Freud is distilled the ethos of my entire dissertation—to undo the frames of narcissism for a reading of relationality. What Freud describes as the “oral or cannibalistic phase” and this
force of identification that “wants to do so by devouring it” (258) is the index for this yawning need for relationality, one made all the more intense in the context of its poverty. Freud says it best, “the complex of melancholia is like an open wound […] emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished” (262).

Therefore, while “Mourning and Melancholia” remains uncertain about the work of melancholia (as opposed to the more defined and apparent work of mourning), the first hints at what this work might look like can be seen if we read the theory of melancholia alongside a concept of entangled testimony that consists of not one but the many. Freud writes that in the symptoms of melancholia that include disparagement, denigration, and a struggle that could result in the death of the ego itself, “it is possible for the process in the unconscious to come to an end, either after the fury has spent itself or after the object has been abandoned as valueless” (267). The curious moment where melancholia, for reasons that frustratingly elude Freud, gives itself over to the work of mourning takes place either because 1) the fury has spent itself or 2) the object has been abandoned as valueless. For me, the more intriguing is the first. What might a work of melancholia look like? Here, Freud speaks of a fury spent. Without immediately going to a discussion of catharsis, what might it take for a fury to testify to itself, to spend itself?

PART IX: Compounded Impossibilities

The framing question of The Woman Warrior is, “how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories?” (5). How do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, and the mother of your childhood, and the fact that you are a woman of colour? To begin then with complexity, feminine complexity and subjective complexity, might give us a place to
examine these overlapping conditions of alienation and exclusion. Hannah Arendt writes that German-Jewish writers lived with three impossibilities:

“[T]he impossibility of not writing” as they could get rid of their inspiration only by writing; “the impossibility of writing in German”—self-tormenting usurpation of an alien property, which has not been acquired but stolen, (relatively) quickly picked up, and which remains someone else’s possession even if not a single linguistic mistake can be pointed out”; and finally, “the impossibility of writing differently,” since no other language was available. (*Illuminations* 31)²⁶

How does one bear up under the weight of compounded impossibilities? Thus, the linguistic divide that exists between most of the mother-daughter relationships, featured in so many Asian American texts, is both a metonymic extension of a larger ontological question, but it is also a material condition. The linguistic divide, the fact that the mother-daughter relationship is inflected by a politics of fluency, bears witness to the entangled circumstances that create many conditions of impossibility: the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in English, the impossibility of writing differently, the impossibility of writing about an experience that is not cognitively available, the impossibility of writing across the breach of trauma, the impossibility of writing as a woman of colour, etc., etc., etc. I believe that Asian American women writers rose to the challenge with wit, with resourceful intuition, strategic literary imaginations—forms of resistance that, without a doubt, come with certain measures of complicated complicity. I am talking then about the politics of witnessing, about the particular burden that lies on the shoulders of those who survived, and those who continue to negotiate

²⁶ I am indebted to my advisor Shelley Wong for bringing this particular quote to my attention. It was part of the syllabus for the first class I ever took with her entitled, “20th Century Women Writers of Color.”
their social existence through frames of inclusion that, in some essential respects, marginalize and dispossess them.
In Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, the exigency for, the painful weight of a responsibility to, testimony and the testing for an adequate form are robustly illustrated in the narrator’s relationship with her mother:

Maybe because I was the one with the tongue cut loose, I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat [...] the Mexican and Filipino girls at school who went to “confession,” and how I envied them their white dresses and their chance each Sunday to tell even thoughts that were sinful. If only I could let my mother know the list, she—and the world—would become more like me, and I would never be alone again. I would pick a time of day when my mother was alone and tell her one item a day; I’d be finished in less than a year. (197)

Testimony, even in the ascetic form of Sunday confession, is preferable to being unknown and being unheard. And the task of testimony becomes something of a compulsion: “I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me” (197). So powerful is the conditional phrase: “If only I could let my mother know” (197). If only she could let her mother know, then she would be known, and she would never be alone again. However, it comes in the form of an overwhelming list slowly eked out in portions. The logic is that if she can control and manage the testimony in quantitative terms, she could guarantee its reception. However, she concludes,
“But I had talked, and she acted as if she hadn’t heard” (199). She adds, “Perhaps she hadn’t understood. I had to be more explicit. I hated this.” (199). Her serial autobiography is met with silence, and she attributes this to her lack of explicitness. If only she could say it right, say it accurately, be more explicit, then maybe it would reach her mother. However, her mother, eventually frustrated by the girl’s interminable and overwhelming autobiography, replies, “Senseless gabbings every night. I wish you would stop. Go away and work. Whispering, whispering, making no sense. Madness. I don’t feel like hearing your craziness” (200). What is very sad and ironic about this is that earlier the narrator explains, “I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves” (186). The epistemological assumption that a very young girl comes to accept very quickly is that there is a relationship between the ability to explain yourself and your wholeness as a person. And it is only on the basis of a personality that she can be known and understood. At what point did the concept of relationality, of relationships, become equal to inter-personal ones?

This straight line between giving an account of yourself and the concept of a personality is schematized in another scene that takes place between the narrator and a younger, quiet Chinese girl that she corners in the restroom:

“Why won’t you talk?” I started to cry. […]

“You’re going to pay for this. I want to know why. And you’re going to tell me why. You don’t see I’m trying to help you out, do you? Do you want to be like this, dumb (do you know what dumb means?), your whole life? Don’t you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompon girl? What are you going to do for a
living? […] And you, you are a plant. Do you know that? That’s all you are if you don’t talk. If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality. (180, my emphasis)

Interestingly enough, this is an instance of heteroglossic discourse. Thus, my argument about heteroglossic discourse is not strictly a program of espousal, but works to recognize it where it is operative—for better or for worse. The turns of phrase, the way the questions are worded, the assumptions that underlie her string of questions, they are not simply her own. There is a distinct echo of a larger, social discourse that stems from various sources: mainstream America (Don’t you ever want to be a cheerleader?), her peers, the elders in her Chinese American community, her own family, etc. But the stream of questions narrows into one prominent concern: if you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality. It is against the backdrop of these epistemological assumptions and the conditions of confession that she gives up on her own autobiographical list, “So I had to stop, relieved in some ways. I shut my mouth, but I felt something alive tearing at my throat, bite by bite, from the inside. Soon there would be three hundred things, and too late to get them out before my mother grew old and died” (200). The incredibly high stakes make giving up both a matter of relief and mounting anxiety. But, regardless of failure, what remains is that an address was made. What remains in a failed address?

In the very next section is the momentous occasion of an argument between the narrator and her mother, but it is an important instance of communication and understanding. The narrator tells her mother,

“And I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won’t tell me a story and then say, “This is a true story,” or ‘This is just a story.’ I can’t tell the difference. I don’t even know what your real names are. I can’t tell what’s real and what you make
up. Ha! You can’t stop me from talking. You tried to cut off my tongue, but it
didn’t work.” So I told the hardest ten or twelve things on my list all in one
outburst. (202)

This time, for whatever reason, despite the fact that the narrator took less care and did not parse
out the items on her list and instead just flung several at her mother at one time, her mother is
listening and responds, “I cut it to make you talk more, not less, you dummy. You’re still stupid.
You can’t listen right.” (202). Further on in the argument, the narrator suggests that her mother
considered her too ugly to get married, and what follows is this:

“I didn’t say you were ugly.”

“You say that all the time.”

“That’s what we’re supposed to say. That’s what Chinese say. We like to say the
opposite.”

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

We are made aware of a misunderstanding – when the narrator’s mother cut her sternum, she had
grown up believing it was to silence her but she later finds out that her mother wished her added
freedom and mobility, a wider berth to her speech. The moment of that clears up a
misunderstanding between the mother and the narrator is, ironically, the moment the daughter
realizes there can be no perfect transfer or testimony. She realizes its limitations precisely at the
moment that she experiences its, if limited, possibility. Of course, how much of this aching
moment between a child and her mother, the multitude of misunderstandings that happen in spite
of love, is unique to an Asian American context? Isn’t it native to any intergenerational strife?
This may be true, but the stakes of testimony, the drive to be understood, when compounded by a larger social and political backdrop that heightens these issues, cannot be universalized. What underlines this conversation and the conclusion that the narrator draws is a sharp loneliness that is founded on finding that there is no higher listener: no listener. However, this marks a complicated moment because it is fundamentally ambivalent. The excerpt is a plea for an interlocutor, and highlights the importance of being in relation to another, to have someone listen to you. But, at the same time, it needs also to be read as an expression of relief—to have circumvented the ear of a higher figure to whom one is expected to give an account. Thus, the questions of autonomous self-representation, literary autonomy, and the exigencies of recognition, are wed to a particular circumstance. It becomes a point of incredible craft and craftiness to negotiate this ambivalent demand and desire.

Moon Orchid is the narrator’s maternal aunt, and Moon Orchid’s move to America is followed by a traumatic encounter with her estranged husband, and she quickly begins to fade—her mental and physical decline is steep. There comes a point when Brave Orchid sees there is nothing she can do for her confused sister, and Moon Orchid is sent to an all women’s mental ward. Earlier in “At the Western Palace,” at Brave Orchid’s behest, Moon Orchid confronts her estranged husband. Though they had been wed at a young age in China, he soon leaves for America where he begins a new family. When Moon and her husband are finally reunited, he tells her she would never fit into an American household. He drives this point home by telling her she could never entertain American guests: “You can’t talk to them. You can barely talk to me” (153). The concept of housekeeping—but, also, a certain social viability—is highlighted as a question of fluency in a way that bears the stamp of a specifically Asian American, and
diasporic, social landscape. Brave Orchid explains the “difference between mad people and sane people” (159): “sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over” (159). Unlike the regular repertoire of paranoia that Moon Orchid maintains throughout her mental decline, the story of the mental ward is different: “Sure enough, the women smiled back at her and reached out to touch her as she went by. She had a new story, and yet she slipped entirely away, not waking up one morning” (186). Moon Orchid’s final story about this community of women holds a different status. According to Brave, mad people have only one story that they tell over and over again—not unlike the repetition compulsion of the structure of trauma—but, what is the status of Moon Orchid’s new story? A new story that could not save her but also cannot be accounted for by our traditional concepts of sanity or insanity? What is the quality, the newness, of this story? As Brave says, sane people have variety when they talk-story, and mad people have only one story. Moon’s final story is somewhere in between. And if this story stems from a subject that cannot be determined as either simply sane or insane, what kind of subject does it suggest?

From within the women’s mental ward, Moon Orchid envisions a different community, and the qualities of this community tell and intimate the shape of her particular melancholia, her mental constellation of revolt. Before Moon Orchid dies, Brave visits her at the ward and Moon Orchid tells her, “We are all women here…we understand one another here. We speak the same language, the very same. They understand me, and I understand them” (160). Against the force of her husband’s rebuff, she rewrites a community of women who share the same language, who understand each other where this mutual understanding is embodied or made evident through a laying on of hands, a conversation of caress. Moon Orchid imagines complete reciprocity amongst a community of women, and the point is not its possibility but the terms of the want
itself. Interestingly enough, Moon Orchid refers to the women in the ward as her daughters. A diverse group of women are brought together in this psychiatric ward, and she adopts them as daughters. Within an ethnically heterogeneous community of unrelated women, they forge an imagined and as yet indeterminate community where the common idiom, this language that they share, seems to be extralinguistic and suggestive of a different kind of texture and textuality. Nevertheless, these visions do not come from a place apart from dispossession. They do not suggest a place of empowerment. They come from within the dispossession that refuses to be bound up by a dichotomous structure of agency versus non-agency, sanity versus insanity, real versus imagined. I do not want to suggest that there was something redeemable about Moon Orchid’s conditions or to suggest that this all women’s community is something to uphold as a standard of resistance: there is something dishonest about saying that. Moon Orchid is in a psychiatric ward, she is ill, and she is dying—there is nothing empowering about her circumstances.

In an earlier section, “Shaman,” we are introduced to a different version of this community: different but there is a textual resonance between the two. “Shaman” is about Brave Orchid’s life in China and predominantly about her studies at the To Keung School of Midwifery and medicine founded by European missionaries: “The students at the To Keung School of Midwifery were new women, scientists who changed the rituals” (75). The story leads up to an eventful night of shamanic purging where the mother exorcises a haunted room. During the battle between Brave Orchid and the ghost, the women must call Brave Orchid’s soul back to the school safely:

When she got scared as a child, one of my mother’s three mothers had held her and chanted their descent line, reeling the frightened spirit back from the farthest
deserts. A relative would know personal and secrets about husbands, babies, renegades, and decide which ones were lucky in a chant, but these women had to build a path from scraps. No blood bonded friend to friend [...] and they had to figure out how to help my mother’s spirit locate the To Keung School as “home.”
The calling out of her real descent line would have led her to the wrong place, the village. These strangers had to make her come back to them. They called out their own names, women’s pretty names, haphazard names, horizontal names of one generation. They pieced together new directions, and my mother’s spirit followed them instead of the old footprints. (75)

These two textual instances of a women’s community are a clear pair, they are an entangled moment. In some respects, these two stories are as different and as similar as a mirror-image or a pair of images that have inverted colours. In Moon Orchid’s story, for all the understanding that exists between the women, they cannot stop her from slipping away. In Brave Orchid successful exorcism, she is called back to her “new” village that consists of haphazard, horizontal names pieced together by new directions. At the same time, both Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid’s stories are “talk-stories” because they hold extra-ordinary status and straddles an indeterminate overlap between what is real and what is fiction. Even while these two talk-stories are textual echoes of each other, there is an intended order that lends an unusual tenor of uncertainty to the paired stories: the triumph of Brave Orchid’s story is followed by Moon Orchid’s story. The sequence of events undermines the bravado of Brave’s talk-story. In Brave’s story of the To Keung School of Midwifery, she is a powerful and crafty shaman who is successfully called back to the living with the help of her sisters. But, for all her love for Moon Orchid, she is unable to call her sister back to her: “Rest. I’ll be here beside you. I’ll help your spirit find the place to
come back to. I’ll call it for you…Don’t go away, Little Sister. Don’t go any further. Come back to us” (183). Several pages later, we learn, “And so Brave Orchid gave up” (185). Brave Orchid, through this intimate relationship with her younger sister, sees her story told back to her without the uplifting tones and the successful end. Brave Orchid’s opinions and thoughts are constantly cited throughout the story of Moon Orchid’s coming to America. Brave Orchid’s lines, her endless stream of advice and berating, are many and even overwhelming. But in the final visit to her sister, the narrative is surprisingly silent with regard to Brave, and a strange hush other than Moon Orchid’s own uncharacteristic gregariousness envelops the scene. And yet, Brave’s presence is felt all the more strongly because of her silence. The reader is left without an explicit impression of what Brave thought or felt in what is quite obviously a very troubling, final moment with her sister.

The textual knot gets thicker because while the “Shaman” section appears to be a story about the exorcism of a notorious “sitting ghost” and her mother’s shamanic powers, upon closer reading, it acts as a narrative link to another story:

My mother was not crazy for seeing ghosts nor was she one of those the women teased for “longing” after men. She was a capable exorcist; she did not “long” (“mong” in Cantonese). The village crazy lady was someone else, an inappropriate woman whom the people stoned. (92)

Some years have passed since her mother graduated from the To Keung School of Midwifery. By 1939, the Japanese had taken much of the land along the Kwoo river, and the narrator’s mother was living in the mountains with other refugees. The villagers scanned the sky everyday for Japanese airplanes that would strafe the mountainside. That day, the village crazy lady put on her headdress full of tiny mirrors and knelt, singing, at the river to fill her cup with water:
She dipped her fingertips into the water and flung droplets into grass and air. Then she set the cup down and pulled out the long white undersleeves of her old-fashioned dress. She began to move in fanning circles, now flying the sleeves in the air, now trailing them on the grass, dancing in the middle of the light. The little mirrors in her headdress show rainbows into the green, glinted off the water cup, caught water drops. (95)

The villagers begin to whisper, “She’s signaling the planes,” and despite her mother’s insisting that the crazy village woman was harmless (if crazy), the villagers stone the woman: “some villagers remained at the body beating her head and face, smashing the little mirrors into silver splinters” (96). What makes this scene difficult to read is that there is so much beauty. The woman’s long, white undersleeves fan out, her circular movement echoes the fanning out of her sleeves. The light glances off the mirrors in her headdress, making small rainbows, which is echoed again in the water droplets that catch the light. The moment is all light and movement and echo. But, the threatened villagers, they cannot see the beauty of the moment—threatened people rarely do.

The formal construction of the paragraph on the narrator’s mother can be reduced to: my mother was not crazy for seeing ghosts; the crazy lady was someone else. But according to the structure of substitution that pervades the text, it suggests that the crazy village lady has the powerful potential to take a substitute or to insinuate a disruptive similarity between herself and the mother or herself and the narrator. The first section of The Woman Warrior ends with a warning about ghosts and their desire for substitutes: “The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute” (16). Similarly, in the haunted room, the mother confronts the
ghost, and as a consequence her spirit is displaced and made to wander in foreign lands. Her mother’s spirit returns only when her female colleagues perform a ritual of shepherding her spirit back to the school. The moment of wandering introduces a moment of suspension or bracketing, and illustrates the possibility of a displacement. Even while her mother’s spirit is successfully called back to her spirit, it introduces the possibility of subjective flux and the threat of possession. Her mother’s story of shamanic exorcism is the story of survival: how she was called back from the land of the dead by her friends and their chant of created, invented, horizontal names. But, strangely enough this story of revival acts as the social link for a chain of stories where nameless, women accused of being, at different times, crazy or international spies, did not survive. The narrator describes her local Chinatown as an “unspeaking” village full of “crazy girls and women” (216):

Perhaps the sane people stayed in China to build the new, sane society. Or perhaps our little village had become odd in its isolation. No other Chinese, neither the ones in Sacramento, nor the ones in San Francisco, nor Hawaii speak like us. Within a few blocks of our house were half a dozen crazy women and all girls, all belonging to village families.

The crazy woman next door was from China, her husband had gone to China “where he had bought her and married her” (217) and later locked away in an asylum. Later, she “disappeared […] When a woman disappeared or reappeared after an absence, people whispered, “Napa.” “Agnew.”” (217). Then there was Crazy Mary who had been left behind in China while her parents immigrated to America, and by the time “they had made enough money to send for her …she was almost twenty and crazy” (217). There is Pee-Ah-Nah, her name has “no meaning,” and she is the village idiot, called witch-woman by the children, whose past is not even legible at
all. Apart from the rumours of “her witchdeeds” and “unspeakable boilings and tearings apart and transformations,” there is no biographical information, and eventually she is never seen again: “She had probably been locked up in the crazyhouse too” (220). What the narrator has inherited from her mother’s talk-story is not only the content of a warning, but in fact, the call to witness. And this community of witness also models the possibility of a community of unrelated women, a community of strangers, that together create their own discursive milieu of words that are haphazard, horizontal, and of new directions.

But, there is the question of the other aunt. Moon Orchid’s story comes later on in a narrative that begins with the unforgettable story of the narrator’s nameless paternal aunt. The story of the nameless aunt, a suicide, is one of the many proverbial “talk-stories” that her mother tells the young narrator. And like most stories that serve a proverbial purpose, it comes with a warning, and the force of these stories does not lie in their being told exactly from beginning to end, but their repetition. The story was not told in linear fashion, but as little precautionary snippets throughout the child’s life. The warning is structured, therefore, through repetition and not a narration of events of facts that follows a clear arc of beginning, middle, and end. Consequently, it is full of gaps, questions, and unraveling ends, but the story’s punctum lies in its suggestiveness. The beginnings of the story split off into various hypotheses and guesses about what might have really happened. Other than the bare facts of how an aunt drowned herself in the family well along with her newborn child, the story unfolds within a conditional tense: “It could very well have been…” (8). Prefaced by the frame of the “could have been,” the quoted dialogue, all of its purported reported speech or any suggestion of a subjective interiority is thrown open to conjecture. Every time dialogue occurs, it occupies a space of non-attribution or at most a conjectural one. But, when the quotation marks seem to belong to a collective voice, its
status is incredibly unstable. For example, the chanted refrain, “Ghost! Dead ghost! Ghost! You’ve never been born” (14) issues from no one in particular since it mouths a collective, social voice of angry village raiders. But, does this belong to the mother’s retelling? We know she was not present at the village raid, she could not have known exactly what the villagers said. Is this false testimony? Is it hearsay? But the very nature of a collective voice is an imbibed understanding of a certain social code. Regardless of her having actually been there, her “guess” as to what they might have chanted cannot simply be relegated to an imagination or a false filling in of gaps. Therefore, even as it treads the line of the “could have been,” true to the ambiguity of such a conditional phrase, this collective voice is both more than and less than imagined. We are told that, “She ran out into the fields, far enough from the house so she could no longer hear their voices” (14). Narrated from the third perspective, the narrator, however, occupies the interiority of the nameless aunt. In a focalization that is so much more than a layering of voices, a sense of the aunt’s inner speech is both responding to the violence of the mob, but channeled through an unreliable narrator where it is impossible to tell how much of it issues from the mother’s talk-story or the narrator’s own creative license. However, this creative voice is not an individuated, romantic voice. The condition of possibility for this creative voice is a polyglossic milieu, and already in response to a voice inflected by a homogenized many. The voice of the mob, though composed of many, is homogeneous. I will argue for a different kind of heteroglossic community that must be differentiated from a mob. But, for the moment, it does not change the fact that the poetics of these narrative links does not stem from the individuated, romantic notion of a writer, but in response to a scene of entangled history and trauma.

These chain of events that figure a crazy woman all occur separately, but their re-tellings structure a relation between them. It is only from within the social link of a textual moment that
we can begin to read the stoning as a traumatic event for the mother that plays out in the
daughter’s own nightmares. In a story that begins with the villagers scanning the skies for
Japanese fighter jets, it turns to:

I was born in the middle of World War II. From earliest awareness, my mother’s
stories always timely, I watched for three airplanes parting […] I dream that the
sky is covered from horizon to horizon with rows of airplanes, dirigibles, rocket
ships, flying bombs, their formations as even as stitches. When the sky seems
clear in my dreams and I would fly, if I look closely, there so silent, far away, and
faint in the daylight that people who do not know about them do not see them, are
shiny silver machines, some not yet invented, being moved, fleets *always being
moved from one continent to another, one planet to another*. *I must figure out a
way to fly between them.* (96, my emphasis)

The collage of voiceless, crazy, dancing women, can be traced back to a scene that takes place on
the bare side of a mountain where refugees, displaced peoples, scan the sky for fighter planes.
While speaking to their own particular histories of dispossession, they also address the
implicated histories of a transpacific space that triangulates China, America and Japan. It cannot
be read without bringing to mind the legacy of colonial and imperial interests in the Asia Pacific
region. The textually knotted image of the different madwomen in *The Woman Warrior* hails a
transnational community of women, women outcast from their own villages, whose stories come
through a textualized network that reaches across time and space. Within this textual space, their
membership is not premised on nationality but on some other quality that can only be described
as an entangled history of trauma. It is in the narrator’s dreamscape, a space of the “not yet” (96),
a space that is “faint in the daylight” and effectively operates outside of what people can “know”
or “see,” that a movement of translation occurs from one continent to another, from one planet to another. Here, through a powerful poetics, technologies of destruction are turned into “shiny silver machines” that have not been invented yet. In “No Name Woman,” right before the villagers raid the home, the narrator explains how the equilibrium of the village structure is broken:

In the village structure, spirits shimmered among the live creatures, balanced and held in equilibrium by time and land. But one human being flaring up into violence could open up a black hole, a maelstrom that pulled in the sky. The frightened villagers, who depended on one another to maintain the real, went to my aunt to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she made in the “roundness.” (12)

The spirits that shimmer among the living do not hover above or exist on the margins of life; they shimmer among them. I would argue that this shimmering fabric and the dreamscape of the silver machines that are “faint in the daylight” are describing the fabric, the texture of a ghostly history that is simultaneously “among them” and is also a projected, messianic future. It is no coincidence that a history that brings together Japanese colonial violence, a history of Chinese patriarchy, and American assimilationist gatekeeping, are all entangled together in this planetary model. This visionary, lyrical moment introduces the narrator’s Asian American reality through the frame of heteroglossic, transnational histories and issues a demand: to “figure out a way to fly between them” (96). To trace the sites of unspeakability in the text, it requires one to learn the particular trappings of the Asian American history of deportation (strategies of flying under the radar), the disconnect between a changing, shifting political scene in China, and a particular community of unspeakables and “disappeared” crazy women whose porous,
transpacific histories mark both the trauma of their life in China but also America, or precisely the trauma that opens up in between that movement.

In the final section, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” the Rexall delivery boy makes a mistake and delivers a package meant for another Chinese family (a pale blue box of pills for “Crazy Mary’s family”). A package that gets delivered to the wrong doorstep holds a box of pills meant for Crazy Mary, and we know that these pills will do her little good. A package, from within the omniscient perspective of the narrator and the readers, that will do no good and delivered to the wrong door—offense upon offense. The narrator’s family runs a Laundromat and the narrator’s mother is fuming at the mistake amidst the steam and heat of the hissing press, and she says, “Revenge. We’ve got to avenge this wrong on our future, on our health, and on our lives. Nobody’s going to sicken my children and get away with it” (169). This wonderfully cinematic scene, full of both literal and figurative steam, names the theme of The Woman Warrior: the female avenger. But, as we will see, Kingston’s novel masterfully names certain concepts and figures, pushes particular scenes to the fore, in order to indirectly get at a different, but related, question. The mother, in her quest for revenge, does not set out for the drugstore herself, but sends Maxine: “They know he made a wrong delivery. I want you to make them rectify their crime […] You get reparation candy” (170). When something is not transmitted properly, or does not reach the right place, an error of delivery, what can we do to rectify this crime? What deliverance remains? Maxine is appalled and she points out, “they don’t understand stuff like that. I won’t be able to say it right? He’ll call us beggars” (170). To this, her mother authors a powerful imperative: “You just translate” (170). The comedy of the scene is not lost, and yet there is a demanding gravitas. The comedy and levity of the error, the bathos of the mother’s fury and quest, are weighted down by the significance of the adjectival qualification:
reparation candy. A highly charged historical word; it could not have been missed during the years of the redress movement. It is what gives the scene its anecdotal sensibility. The story appears to be about a female avenger who hails from a Laundromat on a quest for candy, but of course it is not. Most importantly, it is about a translation. The text brings together the question of translation and redress. What does translation have to do with redress and reparation? By highlighting linguistic translation, it simultaneously highlights the problem of reparation and therefore histories of redress. The kid eventually goes to the drugstore, and the clerk gives her candy. In fact, the drugstore gives them candy all year round: “But I knew they did not understand. They thought we were beggars without a home who lived in back of the laundry. They felt sorry for us. I did not eat their candy” (171). Something beyond getting the candy is at issue with regard to the question of redress, and it is through a mode of translation that the contradictions and limitations of a pseudo-juridical exchange are revealed.

The memoir ends with a final “talk-story,” and while the bulk of literary criticism that has taken up this section tends to focus on the story of Ts’ai Yen, I want to make emphatic the frame narrative and the mixed, complex focalization. The section begins: Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk-story. The beginning is hers, the ending mine” (206). It is, amongst other talk stories, the only one where its reception takes place in adulthood. No longer a part of her girlhood, it takes place somewhere outside the apparent parameters of a memoir subtitled, Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts. Even though it comes near the end, it is a kind of template or analogue to the mode of talk stories that precede it. Therefore, its exceptional status outside the parameters of childhood does not highlight its newness, even if it is easy to do so according to a logic of chronology: whatever comes last is newest. But rather, at the very end, it retrospectively provides the guiding narrative frame. This
retrospective vector goes hand in hand with the fact that this last story is crafted together, mother and daughter, only to focalize the story of the narrator’s grandmother. This particular talk-story is narrated in multiply stacked quotation marks: the mother’s story speaks through the daughter’s story; the grandmother’s story speaks through the mother’s story; all the while, the borders are indefinite. This careful weave of threads—a knotting—traces a lineage of women in the reverse. It inverts linear and genetic temporality, and instead unfolds according to a retrospective frame. But, the story of the grandmother is not simply of the past per se because it is an imaginary past that is guided by the directive, “I like to think that…” (207). Hence, without being held to an account of historical facts, it is suggestive of a creative form of history that can retrospectively do the work of redress. This movement is different from the “roundness” of a community closed off to the shimmering dimension of spirits that live amongst them, looking for a disruptive gap through which to interpolate their histories. Instead, this is the spiraled, concentric circles of a spring that trace the shape of a return but instead, never, close off. If you can imagine a spiraling movement, like that of a spring or coil, recall that even while it traces the shape of a circle, at no point does it close off. It mimes repetition only to pull away, thus departing at the same time. Those who lay claim to the story multiply and increase, and the result is an ample, multiplication that formally tries to avoid culmination. And while the final lines of the memoir, “It translated well” (209) provides all the literary trappings of the dramatic sense of an ending, I would argue that it would be a mistake to understand this as a conclusion. It comes at the end of a memoir that constantly and repeatedly thematizes the difficulty of translation and carries the affective charge of that young girl at the drug store counter asking for reparation candy, under the impossible imperative: “You just translate” (170). Knowing that this is a fictionalized space, analogous to
the shimmering land of shiny, silver machines, it is the messianic message of a responsibility yet
to be fulfilled, and is uttered with the sense of hope, irony, and the wisdom of proverbial tales.

The talk-story about the grandmother begins: “In China my grandmother loved the theater” (206). The concluding tale is about the love of theater. And when the actors come to the village and set up their scaffolding, the grandmother buys enough room for the entire family, staying for days at a time, “not missing even the repeating scenes” (206). The family protests, “the danger was that the bandits would make raids on households thinned out during performances” (207). The village mob reappears this time in the form of bandits making a raid on the poetic performance of theater. But grandmother replies, “I want every last one of you at the theater […] I don’t want to watch that play by myself. How can I laugh all by myself?” (207). The grandmother’s reason is simple: she does not want to watch by herself. What fun is laughing by yourself? And she tells her family to let the bandits come: “[L]eave the doors open. Leave the windows open. Leave the house wide open. I order the doors open. We are going to the theater without worries” (207). Her counterintuitive orders are to throw open the doors and the windows to the house. Sure enough, the family leaves for the theater and the bandits strike—the theater. Thankfully, no one is harmed, they return home, and “they went to many plays after that” (207). This simple but enigmatic talk-story leaves the facts of the event wide open: there is nothing particularly hard to understand about exactly what happened. But, the mystery that belongs to the genre and tone of proverbial tales is that it leaves the force of the wisdom open to interpretation, and the wisdom is perhaps in misdirection. By leaving the house wide open, it must indeed have been confusing for the bandits. And I believe that the point, the point not to miss, is that there is no joy in watching a performance alone. There are those that would make raids on those spaces that structure our relation to each other, whether it is the home or the
theater. The point is that we not miss the repeating scenes, and to remember that we can only laugh in company. Kingston, in a personal statement that prefaces the edited volume of *Approaches to Teaching Kingston’s The Woman Warrior*, writes, “‘I’ am nothing but who ‘I’ am in relation to other people” (Lim 23). The narrator tells us, “Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, a rope into bellpulls. There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it anymore. If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker” (190). The narrator compares her storytelling to China’s outlaw knot-makers, one that is, structurally and subjectively, entangled.
CHAPTER 6
Murmuring in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s DICTEE

*The collective assemblage is always like a murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices [...] To write is perhaps to bring this assemblage of the unconscious to the light of day, to select the whispering voices, to gather the tribes and secret idioms from which I extract something I call my self*
— Deleuze and Claire Parent, *Dialogues* (84)

The frontispiece for Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTEE* is the grainy image of a crude inscription. Only from having done research would the reader know that it was the photographic reproduction of Korean phrases etched into the wall of a coalmine in Japan (Shelley Wong 107). Attributed to a Korean indentured laborer of the early 1900s, later accused of being the ruse of Korean activists, it translates into: “Mother/ I miss you/ I am hungry/ I want to go home” (Wong 107). Written vertically, and meant to be read from right to left, Shelley Sunn Wong notes that the “frontispiece functions not to forward the narrative, but rather, to forestall it” and “proceeds by way of non-identity, by way of insisting on critical difference” (107). She adds that by “having the Korean sign virtually move off the page and out of the textual composition, Cha signals the instability of the Korean sign within the larger narrative framework of American life. The gesture cracks open what I would call a discourse of wholeness [...]” (108). This movement that seems to push the reading off the page and out of the textual composition is reflective of a retroactivity that structures the entirety of *DICTEE*. The frontispiece, unorthodox though it is, in fact fulfills its formal task by being instructional in some sense: it remarks upon how this text should be read or how it should not be read.

What is even more remarkable is that while the inscription features an address, a plea, a cry that can be translated into the English, what is missed in the English translation is its radical inconsistency and ambiguity. The section, “Mother/ I miss you” could, like it has been
interpreted, be a direct address to the mother, but not necessarily. It is not uncommon to use the informal register with your mum. For example, 엄마 which could loosely be translated to “mum” is inflected differently from the more formal 어머니, “mother.” The inscription opens with the latter, a markedly formal address, but then is followed by an informal construction of “I miss you.” While there is nothing technically incorrect about this particular construction, it is strikingly idiosyncratic. The uneven, almost clunky, weaving of high and low registers is suggestive of an uncertainty that does not come through in the English. It could be an address to the mother, but it could also reasonably be argued that the writer addresses a third, unnamed figure, and is saying, instead, “I miss Mother.” What is more, Korean as a rule, often leaves out the subject, therefore the section is actually “Mother/ yearn to see.” In the Korean construction, there is no guarantee of a subject or object. Therefore, it could be “Mother, I miss you” but it could also be separate radicals “Mother / Missing” that are indicative of self-reflective meditation rather than a direct address. To complicate things, the following statement “I am hungry” is in a formal register unlike the earlier statement. The third section, “I want to go home,” is written according to a self-reflexive construct that is highly stylized and poetic. The poetics of the phrase stems from a structural reversal that makes it slightly less than idiomatic. Loosely translated, it reads, “Want to go/ home.” What cannot be evenly translated is that for the phrase to be more idiomatic, less poetic, the second part should come before the first. The grammatical structure of Korean is such that, usually, in an English translation, one has to reverse the subject and object. Therefore, ironically, when translated into the English, the grammatical structure ends up being quite idiomatic, more so than in the original Korean. In the Korean, it might read more like: “Home/ I want go to.” The writer has chosen to ignore the more grammatically common sequence in order to have the word “home” highlighted. It results in an
incredibly powerfully inflected statement of longing, an undoubtedly poetic turn of phrase. What is more, this final phrase uses a self-reflexive register that one would use when addressing oneself, as in a diary for example. Thus, the subject positions are constantly shifting and not entirely without question. Given the complexities and inconsistencies in register, tone, and voice, the addressee and the addresser could be multiple. What kind of autobiography, what kind of form, what modes of witness, could account for these voices of inconsistency?

_The Big Aiiieee!_ contains translations of Chinese poetry that were etched on the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Station by detained Chinese migrants. In a longer collection of these poems, the translators write, “a word for word literal translation would have been unfeasible in light of the fact that we are dealing with two distinctly different languages, both of which possess their own inherent idiosyncratic differences…[T]he reader should bear in mind that the process of poetic translation must involve a certain compromise…The form [of the poems] is oftentimes compromised in order to retain the content, which we for historic reasons feel is our priority” (Lee 137). It is worth considering a mode of testimony that arises from a poetics. Rather than evacuate poetry of its idiomaticity by privileging historical content, what would it mean to consider a history that arises from the poetic experience of language? The frontispiece, an extraordinary form of reported speech, heralds a reader and a reading that requires of us to shed our expectations about the address and to anticipate, to make complex, our ideas of subject positions before reading further.

_DICTEE_ is a multimedia and multilingual text that features several different languages, misattributed quotations, unnamed muses, full of a fragmented poetry and photography. _DICTEE_ deploys a self-reflexive parody of the testimonial (autobiographical), and documentary form that goes hand in hand with the narrator’s relationship to her mother and her mother’s history in
Korea during Japanese colonial rule. Therefore, the narrator’s relationship to Korea’s colonial and modern history is structured through a poetics of quotation, what others have called recitation or parody, that form a versatile critique of hegemonic forms of history and narration. But, *DICTEE* proposes something beyond a critique. Through the patterns and the poetics of quotation, I argue that *DICTEE* puts forth a theory of hospitality, performs this mode of generosity to a host of voices and therefore anticipates a different mode of witness. While evocative of a specific history, *DICTEE* takes up history through taking up the question of history. *DICTEE* foregrounds the figure of the witness and the relationship she bears to a history that comes to her through various broken sources, including her mother. But this act of witness must be formed through (per-form) a crooked discourse of the forms of reported speech—dictation, quotation, recitation—and translation. Cha does not disavow the suspect forms of reported speech, she performs them. It is noteworthy that the first classical quote, attributed to Sappho, is a false one.

The section “CLIO—HISTORY” introduces us to an enlarged, photographic reproduction of an iconic Korean figure. The following page identifies her name, Yu Guan Soon, her birth date and her death date. This particular photograph and the features of her profile have been deeply engrained in the national imagination of South Koreans. Interestingly enough, Cha’s introduction to Yu addresses the remarkability of Yu: “Guan Soon is the only daughter born of

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27 Shelley Sunn Wong writes in “Unnaming the Same,” “The primary vehicle of unnaming in *Dictée* is driven by the tropes of translation and dictation. In *Dictée*, the act of translation is never simply a matter of finding the “right” or “equivalent” words in French to accommodate the original words in English. Always more than and less than such repetition, the process of translation, no less than the strategy of parody, involves cleaving—that is to say, translation always proposes an original only to insist on a simultaneous departure from the original. To engage in translation is to engage in “the repetition that will not return as the same” (Bhabha 312), a simultaneous process of constitution and de-constitution” (119). For more on how *DICTEE* addresses the question of translation and subjectivity, refer to Naoki Sakai’s chapter, “Distinguishing Literature and the Work of Translation: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* and Repetition without Return” in *Translation and Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism.*

28 I am indebted to my advisor, Shelley Sunn Wong, for bringing this to my attention.
four children to her patriot father and mother. From an early age her actions are marked exceptional. History records the biography of her short and intensely-lived existence. Actions separate her path from the others. The identity of such a path is exchangeable with any other heroine in history, their names, dates, actions which require not definition in the devotion to generosity and self-sacrifice” (30). The impossibility is not unrelated to a status of remarkability that is so amenable to genres like the autobiography and the obituary, which ironically cannot be distinguished from other stories of heroism and greatness. A narrative of remarkability cannot make room for difference, and consequently a form for distinction that makes these histories indistinguishable: exceptional and exchangeable.

The section is a patchwork of non-identified quotes pulled from different sections of Frederick Arthur McKenzie’s *The Tragedy of Korea* (1908) and *Korea’s Fight for Freedom* (1920) and also includes the petition from the Koreans of Hawaii to President Roosevelt in 1905. In a section that apes genres of history—history books, documents, letters, facsimiles, autobiography—that are structured by a logic of reported speech, *DICTEE* gestures to the limitations of reported speech as a mode of witness and history. The documents, posing as primary sources, are, in fact, pulled from Mckenzie’s book, and therefore reaches us through the quotation of a quotation of a quotation. We would like to assume that reported speech, like recorded speech, withstands the test of mediation. It represents the illusion of a direct transmission. *DICTEE*, while criticizing the forms and genres of reported speech, remarks upon the impossibility of witness:

To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology…to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew, expressions, for
this experience, for this outcome, that does not cease to continue. To the others, these accounts are about (one more) distant land, like (any other) distant land, without any discernable features in the narrative, (all the same) distant like any other. This document is transmitted through, by the same means, the same channel without distinction the content is delivered in the same style: the word. […]The response is precoded to perform predictably however passively possible. Neutralized to achieve the no-response, to make absorb, to submit to the uni-directional correspondence. (32-33)

Some forms are inadequate to certain experiences, and it becomes necessary to invent anew. Some forms are precoded in certain ways, and have a homogenizing effect. However, DICTEE goes beyond challenging these forms and models a notion of writing that reverses and suspends a precoded, uni-directional correspondence. The text is structured according to a pattern of repetition that writes itself against the grain of sense, sequence, the self-evident, and the documentary.

This pattern of repetition is what gives DICTEE its particular quality of movement not unlike a tessellation that illustrates a repetition with a difference. DICTEE returns again and again to the scene of translation as dictation. It thematizes translation as a site of contestation, not assimilation. And it is within this contested space a spirit of history emerges. While foregrounding the difficulty of narrating certain experiences through assimilative narratives, but DICTEE then adds, to an already thick problem, the problem of a linguistic gap. DICTEE deliberately highlights translation as dictation and embeds this in a Korean history of colonialism and diaspora. DICTEE highlights how a problem of

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29 For more on the anti-documentary, refer to Anne Anlin Cheng’s formidable paper “Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictée.”
30 This idea of a repetition with difference comes from a constellation of sources: Sunn Shelley Wong, Naoki Sakai, Cathy Caruth, and Homi Bhabha.
communication and representation is, necessarily, also a question of history and race. On the first page, there is a paragraph written in French and what appears to be its English translation. Both an exercise of dictation and an exercise in the techniques of written reported speech, the French and its English translation clumsily transcribe the scaffoldings of grammar: “aller a la ligne,” “open paragraph,” “ouvre les guillements,” “open quotation marks”. DICTEE engages with the formal aspects of reported speech explicitly and parodically. When we “report speech,” we aren’t supposed to transcribe the form, the channel, the grammar—the content should come to us clean and unfettered. By letting the form show through, DICTEE commits a double mistranslation.

Even between the French and the English, the translation is full of “errors” and misalignment. What it also demonstrates is that every piece of writing comes to us wrapped in quotation marks whether they are visible or not. And if every piece of writing is sealed within quotation marks, it also designates a speaker-subject. But, what kind of speaker-subject can host the multiple discourses, histories, and languages of a text like DICTEE?

Through the production of a DISEUSE, a narrative voice and enunciative position, that hosts multiple, non-attributable voices, the text models a mode of witness that cannot be traced back to a single, discrete subject. The DISEUSE is a kind of “figure of speech,” a rhetorical figure, who draws on the structures of reported speech in a way that does not coincide with traditional expectations. At the same time, the DISEUSE also performs the idea that there are certain histories and subjects that are difficult to account for within our current forms of reported speech and the genres of biography. The task of how to tell a life, even one’s own life, becomes impossible to de-strand from the particular difficulties of a traumatic history, immigration and mourning, and of race and gender. Shelley Sunn Wong in “Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictée” writes,
Dictée’s insistence on the narrator’s multiple positionalities, as woman as colonial and postcolonial subject, as religious subject, and as Korean, problematizes the work in relation to a cultural nationalist sense of representative Asian American status. At the same time, that insistence also functions to refuse the dominant culture’s demand to represent (and by implication, to establish a formal identity with), and thereby legitimate an ideology of cultural assimilation. (105)

Wong takes up a discussion of how this legitimization of cultural assimilation occurs through developmental narratives:

Cha’s formal practices throw into relief the ways in which Asian American women writers are caught up in the politics of genre. In working outside of genres such as the autobiography or the Bildungsroman which are predicated on developmental narratives, Cha writes against interpellative narratives of assimilation and incorporation. (106, my emphasis)

Wong is clear that a problematic of narrative, of positionalities versus personalities, is a question of form: what forms could host a complex, intersectional subject? The Korean American writer must contend with a unique bind: how can she bear witness to a colonial and postcolonial history that is not simply Korean or simply American, not simply Asian American? How can she bear witness to a story that is not simply hers, not simply her mothers, not simply collective? But, most importantly, how does she work from within the formal constructs that are complicit with the processes of ideological production? The question of writing, for a Korean American woman, is the problem of having to write without falling into a very wide trap.

The DISEUSE speaks. But, it is and is not speech because the speaking takes place only in so far as it is a performance: “She mimicks the speaking” (3). The performance of speech
hinges on a wariness: “Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking gestures with the mouth” (3). In the place of, for fear of, measuring the accuracy, the DISEUSE chooses instead to mime the gestures of speech. In a section separated out by a turn to italics, the text reads:

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

Witness to a murmuring inside, the DISEUSE contends with the pain of speaking, and the pain of not speaking. This double bind bespeaks the problematic of testimony for traumatized subjects. According to trauma theory, within the experience of having missed something, there is a fundamental break between an experience and consolidating it in language. However, the murmuring that will not cease inside cannot be attributed to a single person. The enunciative position is given over to the murmuring itself: “It augments. To such a pitch. Endless drone, refueling itself. Autonomous. Self-generating. Swallows with last efforts last wills against the pain that wishes it to speak.” (3). There is an impossibility that arises between the pain of having to speak and the pain of having not to speak. DICTEE illustrates how it is the relation of pain that nevertheless remarks upon this impossibility. If we look again at the aforementioned section, it is the wound itself that speaks: “It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. It fester inside.” (3). If it is the wound that murmurs, the wound has its own idiom. Those drawn to it share this idiom in some way. The pain finds its speakers; the pain will find its own witnesses. It is the wound itself that calls and invites the encounter. In this way, the enunciative position is one that is expansive but not universalized. When I talk about a shared
idiom of pain, I am not referring to a universalization of pain that undermines the specificity, the material and embodied circumstances, of traumatic histories. Any theory of a shared idiom, I am aware, must recognize that pain is absolutely unshareable, undialectical, impossible to possess, and untranslatable. But, I want to institute a slim wedge between the impossibility of testimony and a shared language that speaks to the specific conditions of this impossibility. The murmuring that festers inside the DISEUSE is not just pain, but more specifically the pain to say and to not say.

Brought together through a relation of quotation, the quotation marks become non-attributable in its multiple attributions. Within this model, ideas of self-possession, property, and a strict relation between speaker and utterance, are fundamentally reconfigured. Similarly, the concept of ventriloquism no longer has any significance. The act of speaking takes place in a space of radical hospitality:

She allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm. All barren cavities to make swollen. The others each occupying her. Tumorous layers, expel all excesses until in all cavities she is flesh. (4)

She offers herself as a gift. She is the site of recitation and evocation through which others can find translation. This space of radical hospitality is a wound, but also strangely evocative of a womb. The cavities filled with flesh draw upon the idea of a kind of impregnation, although I want to distance the argument from falling back on a notion of biological maternity. Cha suggests that from a non-ascriptable murmuring, one that cannot be traced back to subject of origin, it extends an invitation, and it is from this common ground of restlessness that a structure of relationality forms. A structure that stems from seizing punctuation:
She would take on their punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs.


Deliver it. Deliver.


Before her. Before them.

The DISEUSE becomes the very structure of relay that does not abide by a “uni-directional correspondence” (33).

Later in the text, we are given another image of “contents housed in membranes” (64) where a nurse draws blood from her arm, and the contents spill and stain the cotton square. The blood that spills out from the site of the wound is transformed suddenly, in the text, to drawn black ink:

Should it happen that the near-black liquid link draws the link from point mark gravity follow (inevitably, suddenly) in one line down the arm on the table in one long spill, exhale of a spill.

It takes her seconds less to break the needle off its body in an attempt to collect the loss directly from the wound.

Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on.

She pushes hard the cotton square against the mark.

Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on. (64-5)

From within the parameters of a poetic text, the image of a wound is transformed and translated into black ink on a page. The direction of absorption is reversed, however. It is not simply the cotton or the paper, the material spilled on, that absorbs the ink-liquid, but the ink-liquid that
absorbs the material spilled on.\textsuperscript{31} From within this space of dialogic correspondence, the DISEUSE seeks to sooth and to appease:

No end in sight. No ending and not a satisfactory one. One that might appease. If to appease was too much to ask for, then, sooth. Painless, at least numb. To keep pain from translating itself into memory…She begins the search the words of equivalence to that of her feeling. Or the absence of it. Synonym, simile, metaphor, byword, byname, ghostword, phatomnation. (140)

DICTEE is irreverent of the strictures of grammar, and turns the disregard for idiomaticity into a poetics. But this loosening of grammar is what allows new positions to emerge:

She allows herself caught in their threading, anonymously in their thick motion in the weight of utterance. When the amplification stops there might be an echo. She might make the attempt then. The echo part. At the pause. (4)

The DISEUSE allows herself to be caught in the threading. She deliberately gives way to a thick entanglement. What takes place in the pause, a loosening, is the space for an echo, a form of repetition. In the amplification and threading of multiple utterances she waits for a pause, and in the pause there might be an echo—a poietic, poetic repetition.

Later, in ERATO—LOVE POETRY, we see the reversal of a uni-directional correspondence take the form of a relation between two women. The autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux, Story of a Soul, is interwoven with an unidentified woman on screen. The interweaving of text becomes so thick that the two become bound in a strange doubling: “Softly and slowly. For a second time. For another time. Two times. Together. Twofold. Again. And again. Separately, together. Different place. Same times. Same day. Same year. Delays, by hours. By night and day. At the same time. to the time. twice. At the same hour. Same time. All the

\textsuperscript{31} I am indebted to Shelley Wong for pointing this out.
same time.” (99). While to some degree it is, at first, possible to distinguish between the two figures, from within the space of a literary meeting ground (on a page that is unnumbered no less), they meet:

She moves now, Quickly. You trace her steps just after, as soon as, she leaves the frame. She leaves them empty. You are following her. Inside the mist. Close. She is buried there. You lose her. It occurs to you, her name. Suddenly. Snow. The mist envelops her she appears from it. Far. On top of the hill. You have seen her there many times […]

The two figures inside the mist mass shifting in constant motion. (page number missing, but found between 113-5)

The section ends by revisiting this scene of mist and snow:

In the whiteness

no distinction her body invariable no dissonance

synonymous her body all the time de composes

eclipses to be come yours.

The two figures are eclipsed by each other, and they are enshrouded by a mist and snow that I can only read as relief. Separate but together, something else emerges from behind the screen and within the generous patches of blank space in the text.

Many scholars have already published work on the theme of fragmented subjectivity and identity in DICTEE. Cheng writes that DICTEE hosts “a multitude of women who embody, in various contexts, cultural mythologies” (128), but that they exist as “fragments in the text, alienated from the very cultural contexts that fantasized about them” (129). She concludes, “making their appearances through bits of letters, confessions, and images, these “heroines” confound rather than confirm their privileged status as ‘originals’” (129). Cheng makes a
compelling case for the confounding of originals. Cheng argues, “the desire to know and to bear witness as some kind of “redemptive act” is precisely what is criticized in Cha’s Dictée” (120). She adds that Dictée “effects a historical and cultural reconstruction that enacts, simultaneously, a critique of that reconstruction” (120). But on the other hand, I wonder if it is worth retaining a more complicated tension between the anti-documentary impulse and the responsibility of witness. Even as the figures are not revived as screens of identification, DICTEE does revive something, even if it is to revive the missing as missing. DICTEE leaves behind the traces of desire for revival through moments of recitation as performativity. We can be critical of something, but sometimes the heart wants what it wants. DICTEE has a critical bent that problematizes forms of witness and it shrewdly reveals the fantasy of redemption but in some space also longs for witness as redemption. A moment of critical performativity both highlights the problem of reconstruction, but can also reinscribe the desire without effecting a work of documentation. To be fair, Cheng writes that DICTEE “deters us from reading the fragment as either reified value or as pure disconnection […] but rather suggests that the collection and erasure that is that ‘fragment’ may be the only kind of history which can memorialize without reappropriation” (123). DICTEE effects a history that can memorialize without reappropriation through repetition as performativity and entanglement.

Repetition as performativity is a remembrance that remembers it has forgotten. We are all familiar with the profound desire to remember something we’ve forgotten: What was his name again? What was that word again? What were the next lines to that song? But what would it mean to arrest this moment and to linger within the remembrance of forgetfulness—to abstain from recalling that which is forgotten, to suspend the rote movement onto the next verse. Such a remembrance is a double movement of memory and forgetting because the moment of
remembrance stops at the memory of having forgotten. Derrida, in his essay “Living On/Border Lines” quotes Maurice Blanchot: “survivre, living […] [is not] a movement of supplementing life, but rather stopping the dying, a stopping that does not stop it, that on the contrary makes it go on” (“Living On” 107). He explains further that whenever there is a reiteration, a recitation, there is a “regular submerging of the shore” (81) and “when a text quotes and requotes, with or without quotation marks, when it is written on the brink, you start, or indeed have already started, to lose your footing. You lose sight of any line of demarcation between a text and what is outside it” (82). Similarly, in the “CLIO—HISTORY” section, the Cha-narrator makes a strange distinction between one kind of image versus another: “Their image, the memory of them is not given to deterioration, unlike the captured image that extracts from the soul precisely by reproducing, multiplying itself. Their countenance evokes not the hallowed beauty, beauty from seasonal decay, evokes not the inevitable, not death, but the dy-ing” (37). The distinction between the image of dy-ing, left purposely in the present participle, and the image of death is a difficult and extremely oblique one. On the next page, it continues, “Would-be-said remnant, memory. But the remnant is the whole. The memory is the entire. The longing in the face of the lost. Maintains the missing. Fixed between the wax and wane indefinite not a sign of progress. All else age, in time. Except. Some are without” (38). In the second section “Calliope—Epic Poetry,” Cha’s mother witnesses her parents’ death. However, they are “dying while uttering the words” of regret (47, my emphasis). Their regret stems from not having seen with their own eyes the emancipation of Korea from Japanese rule. The moment of longing for a missed event “maintains the missing”—the moment evokes the missed event as a missed event. But most notably, this moment of recitation as parody inscribes a moment “dy-ing.” They are forever dy-ing. Recitation as performativity revives the absent referent as an absent referent. This is,
according to the text, somehow different from the extraction of multiplication and reproduction, and thus the referent lives on in a strange, suspended afterlife.

In a chain of endless doubling, the correspondence between two unnamed female figures resurfaces as a mother-daughter relationship but in a way that reconsiders the significance of this relationship. MELPOMENE—TRAGEDY, focuses on the narrator’s mother and her history that takes place from within a Korean colonial history:

> From another epic another history. From the
> missing narrative. From the multitude of narratives. Missing. From the chronicles. For another
telling for other recitations.

The DISEUSE attempts to pull from a multitude of narratives, from the chronicles, the thread of her mother’s history. The mother’s history is not equal to but also not separate from the multitude. In Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, he discusses the singularity of the Winter Garden Photograph—the extraordinary photograph that, for him, captured the spirit of his late mother. It, despite the many photographs featured in the slim edition of *Camera Lucida*, is not included: “(I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the “ordinary”” (202). He writes, “the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother” (75) and “To the Mother-as-Good, she added that grace of being an individual soul” (75). What Barthes dubs the irreducible core of his mother is not equal to the image of the Mother, and yet cannot be separated out from the fact that this individual soul was also his mother. We see Barthes struggle earnestly with the question of how to separate out the irreducible quality that is his mother,
without giving himself over to an iconography, the figures for representation, so pervasively embedded within the psyche:

It is said that mourning, by its gradual labor, slowly erases pain; I could not, I cannot believe this; because for me, Time eliminates the emotion of loss (I do not weep), that is all. For the rest, everything has remained motionless. For what I have lost is not a Figure (The Mother), but a being; and not a being, but a quality (a soul); not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable. I could live with the Mother (as we all do, sooner or later); but what life remained would be absolutely and entirely unqualifiable (without quality). (203)

If what he has lost is neither a figure nor even a being, but an irreplaceable quality, it is never simply that we miss someone else, and thus cannot be adequately defined by an inter-subjective model. Mourning becomes a much more diffuse concept here that is not separate from but also not equal to the being. Within his meditations of mourning about his mother, Barthes offers a theory of pain and grief that complicates our schemas of relationality that operate within a strict model of inter-subjectivity. By shifting his grief onto the plane of a quality rather than a being, Barthes anticipates a theory of relationality that can be done without subjects, or at least the kind we envision as discrete, autonomous ones.

Similarly, DICTEE maintains a taut tension that stretches out between the mother and the Mother, the individual and the image. The Cha-narrator writes,

You take the train home. Mother […] you call her already, from the gate. Mother, you cannot wait. She leaves everything to greet you […] You are home now your mother your home. Mother inseparable from which is her identity, her presence […] No death will take them, Mother, I dream you just to be able to see you.
Heaven falls nearer in sleep. Mother, my first sound. The first utter. The first concept. (50)

The Cha-narrator confesses to the conflation between mother as individual and the figure of Mother. In an interesting scene where the narrator writers her own mother into a scene of reunion with the mother’s mother, she puts into relief the question of home, of going home. Her mother and the figure of the Mother become conceptually entwined with the essence of home, and of belonging. In what could appear like a move toward a simple model of mother=home, the Cha-narrator complicates this equation. Instead of trying to disentangle the threads of association, to rescue her mother from the concept, she further complicates the knot; she adds her mother’s specific history of migration and her return to Korea:

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

Described here at the border is a logic of replacement, a defacement, by the figures of representation: “One day you raise your right hand and you are American” to “Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph” (56). Cha’s mother returns to Korea (as much as it can be called a return since Cha’s mother was born in China): “You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference” (56). Had her mother’s “return” been an experience of a smooth and undisturbed reintegration, the grafting of the figure
of the mother/Mother onto Motherland might have been complete: the desire for home and mother finally consummated in the return of the mother-Mother to the Motherland. However, all such expectations are suspended when Cha’s mother is questioned by the Korean border officers: “They ask you identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you say. As if you didn’t know who you were […] Every ten feet they demand to know who and what you are, who is represented.” (57). A subject should be able to speak, should be able to self-identity. The demand to know who and what you are is highlighted in this interrogatory scene. But, at the very moment when her mother is asked to identify herself, the narrator institutes a confusion of pronouns. While discussing her mother’s receiving her American passport, there is a sudden shift from “you” to “I”: “One day you raise your right hand and you are American. They give you an American passport. The United States of America. Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph.” (56). In describing her mother’s initiation into the nation-state, the line, “somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph,” feels as if it should be attributable to the mother. The attribution, at the very least, wouldn’t be unreasonable. But, the complex and unorthodox construction of the text makes it possible to attribute these lines to either the narrator or her mother, or even an ambiguous, collective narrator who is neither the Cha-narrator or the mother. Even while the line precipitates from within the mother’s history, in a text that features many photographs, it rings with multiple meanings.

There is an adverb in Korean, “seoriseori.” It describes the shape of a movement that winds itself around and around. It is the shape you make when you take a piece of twine and wrap it around your fingers or a stool; the coil of a snake at rest; the way the smoke will
sometimes rise from the rooftops; the knot of emotions; the tangle of roots. It follows the movement of a repetition and an entanglement, but also a way of being side by side. The DISEUSE deconstructs the homeliness of home but she does this not by taking it apart, or by separating out the different threads, but the mode or movement she deploys is something I can only describe as seoriseori. She takes the reader through distorted flashes of violent protests, police brutality, and she finds herself back in what can be assumed is Korea: “Eighteen years pass. I am here for the first time in eighteen years, Mother. We left here in this memory still fresh, still new. I speak another tongue, a second tongue. This is how distant I am. From them. From that time” (85). The narrator returns to South Korea and she sees soldiers: “Always the green uniforms” (85). This return to Korea, the return of the soldiers, is transformed into a poetic riffing on uniforms, guns, and imaginary borders that illustrate the knot between the past and the present. The significance of continued, compounded structural violence and surveillance, its traumatic effect, can only be understood in the structure of a return, and the relationship between these two moments. This relationship between past and present is fused together with the mother–daughter relationship that then also acquires a literary and poetic aspect.

By naming Demeter and Sibyl, which, in this section, is quite literally mapped onto the 38th parallel that separates the two Koreas, the DISEUSE weaves an anticipatory thread for a later section in which the classical goddesses will reappear: “Nation against nation multiplied nations against nations against themselves. Own. Repels her rejects her expels her from her own. Her own is, in, of, through, all others, hers. Her own who is offspring and mother, Demeter and Sibyl” (88). In ELITERE—LYRIC POETRY, the motif of day and night develops into a recognizable reference to Sibyl and Demeter:

*Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in*

Past. Let the one who is diseuse, one who is mother
who waits nine days and nine nights be found.

Restore memory. Let the one who is diseuse, one
who is daughter restore spring with her each appear-
ce from beneath the earth.

The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it
stops writing at all. (133)

The DISEUSE is both mother, and she is daughter. She is both the site of radical hospitality, and
the product, the reproduction, of it. At the time that I was writing this, I had the pleasure of
reading an excerpt of Nicolette Bragg’s unpublished dissertation, *Creature of Theory: Maternity
and the Touch of Language* where she “recasts the relationship among embodiment, care, and
ethos” (Bragg). Through a reading of Derrida’s *Of Hospitality*, she theorizes maternity as a site
of co-implication and “the risk of generosity to the other” (Bragg) where maternity is a politics
of radical hospitality. 32 *DICTEE* is full of images that are so clearly drawing on a motif of the
womb, “Earth is made porous. Earth heeds. Inward. Inception in darkness” (160). But rather than
read these images through an organic or biological schema of maternity, the text invites a reading
that treats maternity as a safe space—one that is perhaps, above all, literary:

Earth is dark. Darker. Earth is a blue-black stone

[...] You induce the stone by offering exchange of your own.

Own flesh. Cry supplication wail resound song to the

God to barter you, your sight. For the lenience. Make

Lenient, the immobility of sediment. Entreat with

32 I have cited Nici’s work here with her permission.
Prayer to the god his eloquence. To conduct to stone.

Thawing of the knotted flesh. Your speech as ransom […] (159)

Following this section is the outbreak of broken speech, broken tongues, pidgin tongues, that culminates in the “new sign of moisture” that appears in the “barren column” (161). On the following unnumbered page, the water that inhabits the stone resonates, resounds, and repeats over the same sounds while “other melodies, whole, suspended between song and speech in still the silence.” A formal space appears between the words “in” and “still” and thus wavers not only between song and speech, between other melodies, but also between, and thus trills with multiple meanings: instill, to remain still and to still remain. This space of hospitality, this radical opening up, coincides with the figure of the witness: “Open to the view. Come forth. Witness bound to no length no width no depth. Witness sees that which contains the witness in its view.” (160). There is a way to thaw the stone, and that is ironically to ransom your own speech and in turn become mute. However, the muteness is principled—it was bartered away but for nothing in return.

Instead of operating within an economy of representation where one displaces or replaces another, the speaker offers herself as a gift. And in offering herself, what is illustrated is an extraordinary reciprocity where the “witness looks at that which contains the witness its view” (160).

In Shelley Sunn Wong’s “Unnaming the Same,” she cites an interesting anecdote. She remembers a Modern Language Association Convention she attended where a paper was being delivered on DICTEE. From my understanding, it seems that what played out at this panel was an extension of the debate that surrounds this work: should it be read through the critical perspective of colonial theory or poststructuralist theory? She writes,
[While] invoking concepts of “hybridity,” “alterity” and “difference,” the critic was often unable to bind these concepts to the specific and material historical conditions out of which Cha attempted to speak the difference of the Korean American immigrant woman. In not doing so, the critic risked colonizing difference itself and rending alterity for alterity’s sake. What became apparent during the course of the presentation was the way in which radical critical paradigms (particularly those of colonial discourse theory) could be emptied of the historical and material specificity which grounds their critiques of colonial power, and subsequently introduced into circulation within an institutional setting as the currency of new critical orthodoxy. (135)

This powerful anecdote has nagged and followed me around for years. A large part of my critical training is in a poststructuralist strain—although, even then, it isn’t exactly a straightforward lineage. How could I reconcile what I felt was a deep resonance with poststructuralist thinking and the urgency of a material, specific history of redress that had become the topic of my dissertation? First, I had to commit myself to not losing sight of, as Wong writes, the material historical conditions out of which Cha attempted to speak the difference of the Korean American immigrant woman. DICTEE is and is not an Asian American text. It is not a traditional Asian American text if we try to file it away neatly in a canon of popular and popularized Asian American themes; however, if “Asian American” becomes the measure of distance from any easily accessible point of origin, whether that is Asian or America, and hosts the very questions of Asian American women’s writing that have haunted the field, it is absolutely Asian American. It is about the specific, material difference of the Korean American immigrant woman. But, I see that there is a way to hold onto this despite my theoretical training. It is my suspicion, in fact,
that the reason I was drawn to poststructuralist thought and deconstruction is not in spite of specific marginalized histories but through them. What some have criticized as a the white-washed universalism of critical theory (not withstanding the grain of truth in this), this history of thought authored largely by white men, if at times unwittingly, have developed the ontological and epistemological stakes of a question that is rendered more urgent and immediate for certain subjects, in this case a Korean American immigrant woman writer. Furthermore, these questions are beautifully distilled in the poetics of relation in *DICTEE*. What has become a widely interpreted trope for an assimilationist narrative about intergenerational cultural divides—the mother and daughter—, in *DICTEE*, becomes the figure for relationality that is, as Wong puts it, the site of a contestation: “outside of that discourse, contestation and home can be located in a simultaneous emergence—that is to say, the contested and the contesting terrain *is* home. Home in this sense, neither is nor even can be a settled space” (109).

*DICTEE* is an incredibly difficult text to write about. I thought about why this might be the case, and it has to do with its non-segmental structure. Our practices of citation and quotation privilege and also produce segmental readings—splicing a textual moment in text, and doing an analysis of this segmental section in order to support a point. The clearer the relationship between the point and the textual example, the better. Thus, the point and the textual example form a kind of one to one relationship. However, *DICTEE* is a text that performs the politics of a structure that is more thoroughly relational, where the different parts cannot be read in sequence or by themselves because the bloom of their significance is rendered through their relationship to each other, with no regard for reference points like beginning and end. In a more traditional mode of reading, we expect our understanding of a text to develop and to build accordingly and cumulatively. The reader cannot be expected to know what comes later, so their grasp of
meaning must be facilitated through a buildup of significance, making sure to frontload information that will be necessary to understanding what comes after it. We write as if a text could only be read once, or from beginning to end without backtrack or pause. *Dictee* does not function according to a linear reading. The parts in the “earlier half” inform the “later half,” but the latter parts retroactively inform the earlier sections as well. Similarly, Erato—Love Poetry, the entire section, looks like a bizarre puzzle because of the way the text is broken up to provide the impression that the text on the left page and the text on the right page are meant to fit into each other. Assumedly, when the book is closed, they come together into a full page of text. The unusual formal construct of this section speaks to a vector of retroactivity. At the very least, it confounds the idea that the page on the left comes first, and the following page comes next. This spatial arrangement is suggestive of a temporal, non-sequential “simultaneity” that structures the book as a whole.

In the final section, Polyhnia—Sacred Poetry, begins with a scene of remembrance: “She remembered that she had once drank from this well” (167). In a desert landscape, the narrator, a “little girl,” wears the white kerchief that her mother had given her to avoid the strong, arid rays of desert sun. From a distance she sees the approaching figure of a woman who, repeatedly, lowers a bucket into the well. The woman offers her cool relief and the child drinks quickly:

The young woman asked her what she was doing so far away from home. The child answered simply that she was one [sic] her way home from the neighboring village to take back remedies for her mother who was very ill. She had been walking from daybreak and although she did not want to stop she was very tired and thirsty, so she had come to the well. (169)
The young woman then brings out a basket of ten pockets and offers them as gifts—remedies for her sick mother. Along with instructions on how to prepare them, she sends the girl off with the medicine. The little girl is told to use the nine as medicine, but to keep the tenth pocket for herself “as a gift” (169). The young woman then warns the girl not to stop on her way home, and to remember all that she had told her. The story ends as the girl nears the house and she sees the light of a small candle flickering behind the paper screen door of her home. We cannot be sure of whether or not the girl remembered all that the woman told her, and whether or not her gifts and her instructions did indeed result in the mother’s recovery, her revival. What is remembered is its possibility. In a reversal of the burden of care, it is the daughter who cares for her mother, who burdens the responsibility of remembrance and the possibility of recovery. But she finds cool relief, and a gift, from a maternal figure that does not coincide with her biological mother.

The Korean song recited in “Calliope—Epic Poetry,” composed by Hong Nanpa, is titled “Bong Sun Hwa,” or “Bong Sun Flower.” As Elaine Kim also wrote in “Poised on the In-between,” “Bong Sun Hwa” was adopted as a kind of nationalist anthem during the Occupation and the “flower symbolizes Korea under Japanese colonial rule” (Kim 4). She notes that singing the song was considered an act of resistance by Japanese authorities (Kim 4). The first verse of the song is already translated by Cha in DICTEE. What follows is my rough understanding and translation of the final, unsung verse. The entire song is made up of three verses, and the first and second trace the failing form of the flower in the onslaught of the cold autumn breeze. Then, there is a definite turn in the final verse (what I assume was what made the song particularly defiant to colonial rule). Addressed to the flower, here is the final verse: If your form were to disappear in the harsh winter wind and snow, since your spirit that dreams of peace remains
here, one brilliant spring day I hope for your resurrection. But, we must remember that DICTEE does not name the resurrection of the bongsun flower—these final verses are omitted from the text. The recitation of the first verse of “Bong Sun Hwa” in DICTEE is a moment of performativity that only alludes to the silent echo of the final verse without naming it. At the risk of naming something that should remain unnamed, I did undertake a quotation and translation of the final verse because it unfolds within a temporality of “if” and hope. In DICTEE, the final verse is preserved in a silence, if not redeemed from oblivion, placed toward a messianic anticipation. The very verse that remains unspoken in DICTEE names the possibility of hope. The recitation of the first verse creates a channel of remembrance that remains open: a remembrance that is carried out in the remembrance that something is not there. And yet, nevertheless, a fragment—the remembrance of having forgotten something—longs for a brilliant resurrection.

Byun Young Joo is a Korean, feminist film director, well known both in Korea but internationally as the creator of the formidable documentary trilogy on the Korean comfort women. The first of the series is titled, Murmuring (1995). Byun’s documentaries are formally and methodologically striking, especially in the ways that she brings out the complexities of these women. Byun documents, while living with them, the women swearing, singing, telling dirty jokes, disagreeing, and in several instances Byun turns the camera over to them entirely. As I continued to do my own research, it was strange how many times I came across the term murmur in different places. It’s a funny looking and funny sounding word. It looks almost like two words, in fact. Or rather, the same word repeated twice. Its etymological origins are multiple, but it borrows at least partly from the French murmure. According to the Oxford English dictionary, it means “the indistinct expression of feeling by a number of people” (“murmur,” my emphasis). Alternatively, it can also mean an expression of discontent or even the sound of a
light breeze. It also borrows from the Latin *murmur*, defined as the low, continuous sound, a subdued or indistinct utterance, one that indicates anger or resentment, but also a *reduplicated imitative formation*” (“murmur,” my emphasis). The official English title is ‘murmuring,’ but to provide a clunkier word-for-word translation, it is something like ‘low voice.’ Historically, the word for *voice* in Korean did not have the strong association with speech it does today. More literally, the Korean equivalent for ‘voice’ is “the sound from the throat.” *Between* the translations, what becomes displaced is speech, and what remains is the murmuring—the multiple low voices of anger, resentment, discontent, and the indistinct expression of feeling by a number of people.
CHAPTER 7
Comfort Women Studies and the Testimonial Form

PART I: Comfort Women and The Redress Movement

The Japanese military network of comfort women and comfort stations was operative from 1932 to 1945 during the Pacific Wars. Leaving aside the many Japanese military documents that detail the operations of an institutionalized system of sexual slavery, the American military had also documented Japanese colonial sexual slavery. Yet, the facts of systemic sexual slavery were never addressed during the military tribunals or during the period of decolonization (Yang 82). The history of the comfort woman issue is marked by a tribunal and a recognition that did not take place. Even well into the 90s, the Korean government, fueled by an uneven, patriotic commitment to Korean independence that had a particularly patriarchal tenor, ignored the survivors of the comfort camps in the name of saving face or covering up a “shameful” history. In effect, the problem of the comfort women surfaced half a century later. Today, the Japanese government continues to refuse the survivors’ testimony as legitimate evidence of the comfort stations. Initial testimonial studies, then, tended to serve the terms set out by this refusal, and the earliest attempts at testimonial research worked in order to prove that the comfort stations were an example of administrative, systemic sexual slavery deployed by the Japanese government. The idioms of testimony had been and continue to be determined by a system of violence where the burden of proof lies with the survivors and their allies. Therefore, necessarily, the comfort women movement began as a movement of redress, and if we look at its early beginnings as a part of public awareness, it revolved around the testimony of Kim Hak Soon and the class-action lawsuit that Kim and two other comfort women filed against the Japanese government in 1991. From its inception, the movement was working with a set of terms that belong to a legalistic framework.
The most notable landmark event for the comfort women redress movement was the testimony of Kim Hak Soon, the first survivor-victim to speak out publicly in August of 1991. Prior to this, there was a relative lack of awareness about this history. The event is acknowledged as having opened up a new epoch of global activism with regard to militarized sexuality. Not long after this first testimony, testimonial research began in earnest and a series of testimonial books have been compiled and published by The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (here on in shortened to The Korean Council). The testimony books, Forcefully Drafted Korean Military Comfort Women, total six volumes and were published between 1992 and 2005 (hereafter cited as Testimony Books). The movement was birthed with a testimony and the force of the movement, its defining project, was the compilation of the testimonial series. The testimonial form has been defining for the movement, its value has hinged largely on its being able prove something—facts, histories, but also the very personhood of these women. Testimony, as a form, is underwritten by the demand to prove your subjectivity. If this is the case, it is a cruel form for the women whose very plight is that their personhood was never recognized in the first place. It is why, for a truly radical reconceptualization of testimony to be possible, it needs to be decoupled from a schema of proof and individualism. Twenty-five years after this landmark event, there is no dearth of testimonies and documents, and still the Japanese government has not made a public state apology or offered legal reparations. It is perhaps time, not against, but on the shoulders of the admirable work that these movements of resistance and redress have already built up, to reflect on the limitations of our modes of resistance and representation. What I want to review is not the efficacy or value of such a movement, but rather to consider what terms and expectations delimit it.
The first volume of the testimonial series published by The Korean Council begins with a pithy but powerful introduction that opens up not only this particular volume, but also a new wave of anti-colonial redress within South Korea. Anytime that Japan—Korean relations come to a point of crisis, the issue of the comfort women is accented and highlighted in shifting, inconsistent, and therefore interesting ways. Its prominence in the Korean news at this precise juncture of history as the two nations juggle and calibrate their relations with each other but also within larger, fraught tensions between China and the United States, should indicate how the issue has become inseparable from East-Pacific politics at large. But to return to the introduction of the first volume, here is my loose translation of a selected excerpt:

The root of this problem lies in our lack of national consciousness. The women became military sex slaves simply because they were Korean women. Japan’s systemic militarized sexual slavery was part of its colonial domination of Korea, and as such it can be said that the comfort women bore the entire yoke of colonial oppression on the part of Koreans at large. Yet, to this day we have refused to take responsibility for their pain and their humiliation. This can be attributed to a profound and deeply rooted ideology of feminine purity. In light of this, I believe that finding the truth is more urgent than ever. In an effort to establish the truth, archival evidence and the discovery of declassified documents are, undoubtedly, important. However, equally important are the testimonies of the women themselves. The comfort women are living proof, living documents. Today, they live as victims of that era.

[...]
As a project of recording history, we present this compilation of the comfort women testimonies. I have no doubt that the testimonial volumes will continue to be published. The first volume of that larger effort might be incomplete or imperfect, but as much as it is a first, it is significant. We hope that this single volume will be an opportunity for us as well as the international community to glimpse humanity. (*Testimony Book 17*)

What is worth noting here is also the heavy tone of nationalistic rhetoric; from its very beginnings, the terms of the movement’s inclusion in public discourse was governed by its ability to use a nationalistic frame. What I’ve translated poorly here, if deliberately, as ‘humanity’ is a Korean word, 이면. If you look at the ‘i-myeon’ of something, it means to look past the surface, and to look at the core. It can refer to the inside of something, the heart of the matter. The introduction proposes that its testimonies offer the heart of the matter, the “human” aspect of the issue. The writer goes so far as to refer to the halmonis as “living” documents. The inference here is that living, human documents can reveal the human valence of an issue in a way nonhuman documents cannot.

The introduction is followed by a separate piece on The Korean Council’s methodology. Here is, again, my translation of an excerpt:

For the past few years, the problem of the comfort women is slowly coming to the fore thanks to the victims’ testimonies and the declassified military documents that have been unearthed to date. However, the testimonies and the documentary evidence have not been sufficient in revealing the realities of this issue. Because most of the documents were drafted by the Japanese government, in order to approach this issue from the Korean perspective, it is urgent and necessary to
reawaken the memories of the victims. Their real experiences not only supplement and verify the facts provided by documentary evidence, they also reveal new historical truths that will lend an urgency to the project of excavating new documents. (*Testimony Book I* 10)

If the introduction set up an opposition between nonhuman documents and human testimony, a more intimate relation between the two becomes apparent in the piece on methodologies. Even while testimony is prioritized, it has a supplementary role: it verifies fact, and it can fuel the project of a documentary archaeology. The Korean Council went forth and contacted forty women who had been comfort women in the past, but only nineteen were selected to be included in the volume:

During our research, the women who were reluctant to tell us their experiences, those whose testimonies were too confused or contradictory, so much so that interviewing proved difficult, were excluded from further research. The nineteen included in this volume were the ones we were able to carry to completion during our research. [...] In order to draw forth more accurate memories, The researchers, in tandem with conducting the interviews with the women, cross-referenced the testimonies with historical scholarship and reviewed related military documents. In order to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the testimonial material, the researchers interviewed their respective interviewees upward of ten separate times.

(*Testimony Book I* 16)

In the name of accuracy, a number of testimonies were disqualified for publication: those that were confused, too contradictory, or even too reluctant. To ensure the integrity of the testimonies, the women selected for compilation were interviewed upward of ten times. All ten instances of
were cross-referenced and scanned for inconsistencies or contradictions. The standard applied here is none other than commensurability. Ideally, all ten times, the information should be in accord with each other, they should be like each other. In the process of editing and compiling, what appear to be single testimonies are, in fact, derived from multiple, separate tellings. The testimonies are divorced from the context of their telling, and divorced from their multiplicity. But, I argue that the act of testimony is a performative one that is also bound by the circumstances of its telling.

Intuitively, I understand why the researchers may have taken issue with contradictory or confused content. But, why omit a reluctant testimony? If a testimony is contradictory or confused, we assume that the subject is confused, and ultimately incapable of reproducing an accurate testimony. But a reluctant testimony is rejected on terms that are incongruent with a framework of incapacity; here, what the researchers fear is a controlled withholding. The idea is that if given unwillingly, it would compromise credibility and transparency. While they seem to be at opposite ends, nevertheless, it defines what an ideal testimony looks like: accurate, consistent, and willing. The subject must be capable and also willing to be truthful. Assuming that the subject is in possession of a will, the will to be truthful is, intrinsically, the very condition of possibility for truth. And if this should sound like good common sense, it flags how narrowly we have come to define truth and its necessary conditions. In order to highlight the validity of these testimonies, the introduction makes an appeal that is couched in terms of precision and cross-examination. The comfort women had been interviewed multiple times in order to prevent contradiction, and in the editing process any information that seemed unnecessary, contradictory, or wayward was deleted or evened out. Above all, there were times when the women confused something that happened to someone else, often a friend who had not
survived the camps, with something that had happened to them. These parts were, of course, deleted. The individuated model of testimony could not accommodate this other material—the voice of the dead. The methodological outline reveals how a certain standard began to take form: testimony must be objective, consistent, referential, and must belong to the person who professes it. Could our current iterations or forms of testimony be flattening out the representational possibilities for these women? Especially when that testimony is in some sense collective? Or, could our current forms of individuated testimony prove inadequate to bearing witness to conditions that annihilated their personhood? Is it possible, or is it even just, to ask someone to bear witness to the destruction of their personhood through the very techniques and forms of personhood?

This first volume was translated into English with the help of Keith Howard, a professor of music who specializes in Korean folk music and the foremost Western scholar on Korean Shamanism. Repackaged with a new introduction by Keith Howard, it includes an extended/revised version of the The Korean Council’s methodology. In the academy, we take for granted that new editions and translated editions are not just repeated transmissions. The translated edition enters a newly constellated community of scholarship with a changed audience, changing trends, and to reflect this, they come with new introductions or addendums. In translated first volume of the Testimony Books, the chapter on its methodology is revised; it comes with entirely new sections, and a significant rearrangement of structure in order to frontload particular parts. The revisions and changes reflect the volume’s new international, English readership. No one in the academy is unfamiliar with how citations and quotations function in our work: though they appear to be direct transmissions, we know that when they are imported into our work, it takes on new meaning, and quotations depend on framing. The
subjects who conduct scholarship are afforded a fluidity of thought and address. However, when it comes to the objects of our study, the anthropological subject, we demand that they be selfsame, yielding commensurate and quantifiably selfsame results each and very time. There is an epistemological separation between interviewer and interviewee, the scholar and the object of study. And this colonial division of labor can be further mapped onto a separate but not unrelated discussion carried on elsewhere by scholars like Naoki Sakai and Nishitani Osamu on the disciplinary divide between humanitas and anthropos.

The idea that testimony should repeat without variation or departure is not unrelated to the question of trauma. Often we assume that the traumatized subject, when providing testimony about their traumatic experience, should maintain the first, or their original, relationship to it. Why are all the memorial statues of comfort women of little girls? However, Cathy Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience addresses the characteristic latency in trauma, what she calls its “peculiar structure”:

Freud’s temporal definition of trauma in Beyond the Pleasure Principle seems to be an extension of his early understanding of the trauma as being locatable not in one moment alone but in the relation between two moments (note 8, p. 121) […] How can we think of a history thus constituted, multiply and heterogeneously, around the site of a wound? This is the enigma, I would argue, at the heart of Freud’s notion of traumatic repetition, and of the nature of the deferred experience that is central to it. Paramount to Freud’s speculation concerning the temporality of trauma (an idea that is key to this particular formulation of traumatic experience) is the peculiar notion of an event that is constituted by its
later occurrence, the unfolding of a history within the apparent singularity of what we ordinarily think of as an “event”. (121)

Caruth develops the idea of a relation between two moments through a reading of the Freudian case of Emma. Emma is groped in a store, but the trauma is constituted as such after puberty—she comes to see the event in a different light because she has come to understand it differently. Within a structure of trauma, the “second” event is by no means subordinate to the first one. Also, what the case of Emma suggests, simply, is that we learn, or rather that we change. We learn new ways of understanding the things that happened to us. The comfort women, they are survivors, and they continued to live; they have found different ways of representing what happened to themselves and to others. A theory of trauma completely deconstructs the notion of linear time and experience. A mistaken understanding of trauma precludes any kind of learning or any sense of change for the traumatized subject: we imagine them as “frozen” in time. A relationship to trauma, as trauma, even as it remains a traumatic relationship, can change (not to be confused with a framework of progress or improvement or cure.). And while within the last 5 years, creative modes of talking about the comfort women have markedly increased—musicals, children’s books, performance art, music, movies—, I am unsure that the women themselves have, at hand, such a flux, such a legion of modes available to them.

PART II: Comfort Women Studies

Hyunah Yang and several other graduate women from diverse disciplinary fields were part of a team that, in cooperation with The Korean Council, compiled the first four of the Testimony Books. In particular, the fourth volume, was compiled specifically for the occasion of the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal 2000 for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery (hereafter, Tokyo Women’s Tribunal). In April 1999, a testimony team made up of
volunteers from across the disciplines was established in order to conduct research that would yield a portfolio of evidence to submit to the Tokyo Women’s Tribunal. Organized by The Violence Against Women in War Network (VAWW-NET), the tribunal was held in Japan, December of 2000. Delegates from North and South Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Netherlands, East Timor, and Japan were part of the team. Its final report, though it did not carry legal consequence, was acknowledged as having tremendous moral authority and served as a sentence of indictment from an international community. The final statement, issued in The Hague, charged several individuals, including Emperor Hirohito, and the nation-state of Japan for crimes against humanity.

The testimonies cited in Yang’s article “Finding the “Map of Memory”: Testimony of the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery Survivors” are from this monumental fourth volume. The fourth volume, in particular, marks from within the redress movement itself, a methodological shift that is at the same time a theory of testimony. What we see is a unique history that can be read within and between the different volumes in an edited series where the points of revision, especially in a project of redress, are worth reading closely. The methodological difference between the first volume and the fourth is an interesting commentary on what happens when we continue to hold dialogue. When we are in relation to another person, a memory, a concept, a project, over time, we can be moved to change, to revise, and to relate to it differently. Yang and her team rethink testimonial value, and this can be seen most clearly when Yang distinguishes between self-framing and the “dominant approaches that assume the existence of an unmediated, uncontaminated “pure voice” as such” (82). Hand in hand with a suspicion for a concept of pure voice, she criticizes positivist modes of testimonial research where the women are informants, while “experts” (historians, scholars, writers) determine the framework through which these
testimonies are heard and are published (86). Even as Yang and her team undertake a project of testimony, it also doubles as a criticism of these very forms of testimony:

That is, to simply speak is not enough, and furthermore, what does it mean to truly speak, and who is it that is actually doing the speaking? To simply enter into a discursive framework, or network, while potentially self-empowering, is only one avenue out of the aporia that is the subaltern […] The narrative of otherness, when so consciously produced in the theater of civic and political articulations, risks becoming singular, fetishized as authentic, and being subjugated by more dominating discourses—if it has not already been. The point here, however, is not to foreclose discourse but to insist it be recognized as such, and hence to also acknowledge the instability of speech as it relates to truth. (729)

In an unprecedented criticism of the form of testimony from within the movement, Yang marks the instability of speech as it relates to truth. In essence, she decouples them and introduces an epistemological pause between their conceptual conflation. Furthermore, Yang cites Lyotard’s differend when she argues, “the truth-value of testimony has been reduced to “the facts regarding when, where, and by whom a crime was committed” (86). A legal context has extended into a general concept of testimony that applies to work done in the fields of history, social sciences, and politics. Yang argues that, as a consequence, the comfort women were “deprived of any authorship regarding terms and concepts in representing the sexual slavery system and were rendered passive recipients of the final text” (86). In complete agreement with Yang’s argument, I would like to push it further because perhaps what we require, at this juncture, is a different concept of authorship altogether.
Yang recognizes the limitations of a legal idiom that extends beyond the courtroom, and her argument is among the most nuanced within comfort women studies. She writes,

Editing was the final and the most painful process through which we attempted to render the story sensible to the public without discarding affect and subjectivity. In this process we maintained a firm principle of not rewriting or adding anything to the text to make the testimony easy to follow. Instead, we used many parentheses and footnotes to help readers understand nonverbal expressions, specific styles of talking, and the context of interviews. Even with such contextualization, however, we feel that the greater effort in making the testimony sensible must lie with the audience rather than with the survivor-victims. (94)

Even as Yang insists that nothing was added or rewritten, elsewhere in the article she finds it necessary to include a disclaimer about translation from the Korean to the English including the fact that this translation elides the vernacular or regional register of the testimonies. This insistence on how the testimony was not tampered with marks a certain anxiety that is, by no means, unique to Yang’s particular methodology of the Testimony Books. Yang is, of course, right to attempt to take into account the gestures, the tone, the importance of understanding nonlinguistic cues, and the gaps that precipitate from within an oral transmission. However, the parenthetical supplements and the footnotes reinforce the idea of authorship wherein a subject-led narrative is prioritized: “each survivor’s testimony is a narrative of self-representation in which each woman looked at herself and her experiences reflectively with their own powers of interpretation.” (95, my emphasis). Her incredibly sharp argument takes place within a framework that has been shifted from silence versus speech onto representation versus self-representation. To be honest, I would not have it otherwise. But, this, at the same time, assumes
that in order for testimony to take place it must be grounded in the subject, an empowered subject. I am not against empowering the dispossessed, what I am taking issue with is the idea that only an agential subject can bear witness. I am convinced that according to this logic, it is inevitable that so-called non-agential subjects, those most desperate for forms of witness, have to face a difficult choice. But, instead of naming this choice here, I will return to it in a later section of this chapter. I am not in opposition of Yang’s project. On the contrary, I underline it by suggesting that perhaps the project of self-representation should necessarily see itself as provisional, and to recognize that a concept of subjective agency has nothing to offer it, and furthermore that a concept of representation, even self-representation, may be more deleterious than it is helpful. Yang, in the spirit of Spivak, recognizes that within a colonial, hegemonic discourse, even a “speaking” subaltern is fundamentally silent. I am merely asking that we extend this criticism to an equally colonial and hegemonic epistemology of the subject. Even as she emphasizes the inter-subjective and collective nature of the Testimony books, the argument operates within a paradigm wherein individuated subjectivity is still the common denominator. Even a concept of “inter-subjectivity” must first assume the sovereignty of a subject. If placed in Yang’s shoes, I would, and do, advocate for her team’s method. Right now, it is right to emphasize the role of self-representation for these women. But, if we were to turn a blind eye to what is more fundamentally problematic with a framework of self-representation, I believe it would be a disservice to the work of testimony.

What should not be glossed over, however, is that Yang and her team’s methodology anticipate a performative concept of testimony. In the earlier years, Yang and her team worked with an archive of interviews and transcriptions of taped records. But, it became clear for her and
her researchers that they could not depend on these records of transcription. Yet, they do become a kind of point of departure:

The researchers, as listeners, through interviews and transcription of the taped record, came to share the memory with the narrator as if the researchers had also been present at the time of the events. As time went on and the listener’s own memory of the events became more detailed, so did the narrator’s. Survivors became energized, as if they were meeting someone for the first time who treated their story as something that deserved to be listened to and remembered. (96)

Below is a transcript of a session between a comfort woman and the researcher. What we have to remember, and what makes the scene peculiar and different from our traditional understanding of interview, is that the dialogue marks a long, sustained rapport between the two women. They already share a unique archive of previous interviews, transcriptions, conversations, etc. From this shared archive, something not unlike friendship, this conversation ensues:

Yi: Wasn’t the Siyoko club close to the downtown? And the Shonan hotel was nearby?

Ahn: Yes, it was, yes.

Yi: When many soldiers came to you (for sexual gratification). Did you stay there?

Ahn: (Gesturing with both arms as if drawing the location of each building) At the far left side, there were Daito and Geizo (the place where she was).

Yang and her team describe the “map of memory,” a methodology that prioritizes the rhythms, emphases, and an idiomatic vocabulary that arises from out of the testimony itself. The team was careful to make sure that it was the structure of the testimony itself that served as guide for the “most significant experiences,” deduced by paying attention to which words recurred often and to discover the “sequence of association” unique to the witness-survivor. The center of gravity
was decided by marking out the episodes that appeared central to the women’s testimonies:
“From these central episodes, other smaller episodes were relayed, until the constellation of stories evolved into the narrative of an entire life. We called this order of memory and its structural features the map of memory of each survivor” (97). But, I do want to make a distinction that Yang does not seem to make. Yang recognizes that the two women “share memory” in some sense, because they have, together, curated this archive of memory. However, Yang suggests that the “research and survivor-victim engaged in a description dialogue, as if the researcher were in the location of the comfort station alongside Ahn and shared the memory with her” (96). Yang suggests that it is as if the researcher were in the location of the comfort station. This prioritizes an original memory, and an original location: one opens a gateway for another to travel back in time to that place and see, like a cinematic unfolding, the location of trauma. However, by creating the conditions for such a sharing, memory becomes a relational act that changes according to how and with whom we share our stories. A kind of virtuosity can be glimpsed here. What is created between the two women is a shared, characteristic assemblage of idioms, symbols, and associations. The listener’s role is not primarily in unlocking a door to a recorded past that lies subterraneous in the speaker’s subconscious. This becomes even more important with regard to trauma where the memory is, precisely, not stored in the subconscious. Together, both addresser and listener, work to recreate a set, a staged set. If we can bring ourselves to recognize this process as a legitimate act of memory, perhaps trauma and witness can be thought together. This recreation not only sets the stage for two people to relate to each other but, together, they bring the props in relation to each other to create a meaningful scene. Aware of its staged character, they learn to relate to this historical set. We are not in a time machine that will take us back to a point of origin; we are in a meaningful reproduction, where
the present relates to an image of the past. But, to be fair, Yang’s formulation unfolds under the sponsorship of “as if”: “as if the researcher were in the location of the comfort station alongside Ahn and shared the memory with her” (96). Even as she is suggestive of one thing, the “as if” resonates with a concept of meaningful reproduction. And indeed, Yang writes,

Dori Laub argues that the victim’s narrative begins with a speaker who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet occurred. The listener, then, is part and parcel to the creation of knowledge de novo. The narrative of a survivor who has suffered life-long agony and who may still be in pain emerges via processes of speaking, listening, interpreting, and transcribing. Storytelling itself is an event, the result of a conversation. In the case of Korean comfort women, the formative nature of the testimonial process was even more so. (87)

If I have been unfair to Yang and her team, it is only because on a whole I admire their work tremendously. My nitpicking at some moments here and there will not, I hope, detract from the larger argument that conceives of storytelling as an event and the result of a conversation. Despite the selective passages I have deliberately chosen to make my point, the project proceeds as an act of radical listening. Yang and her team develop a methodology that does not focus exclusively on the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, rather it is a study embedded in an understanding of community. For example, Yang and her team prioritized nonverbal forms of communication:

Our team did not discard such expressions, but tried to remember and record every sign of orality and physicality: nonverbal expressions, strange expressions, and the rhythm, tone, and style of each woman’s narrative. We did this not to preserve a pure and vivid voice but because it was through such expressions that
readers of the testimony, including our own team members, could feel each
narrator’s spirit, her subjectivity, such that sympathy and dialogue could begin in
the witnessing community. (91)

Yang explains that “seen this way, there were always three subject positions imaginarily present
in the testimonial works: the testifier, the researcher, and the various audiences.” (94). Thus,
Yang concludes that the testimony book represents a “communal work in the fullest sense” (94).
According to what Yang describes as her team’s “principles of quotation” (94, my emphasis), it
foregrounds not an individual but a triangulated network of people that involves creating “a link
between the two parties, allowing the testifier and audience to encounter one another.” (94).
What made such an approach possible for Yang and her team was a theory of memory as an
entangled structure:

Although the map of memory was less structured for some survivors than for
others, we could see that each survivor recalled one central episode that in turn
brought others into the discussion, as if they were threads intertwined with each
other in memory. In other words, memory is structured as a system in which many
small and large episodes are organically related, ultimately built into a tree of
memory…Memory has multiple truths, so to judge a memory by only limited
criteria amounts to cutting entangled threads with scissors. (98-100, my emphasis)

What Yang and her researchers, during the span of time required to publish four volumes in a
serial collection of testimonies, undertake is a kind of redress in its own right. It is this
movement from within a political movement that bears witness not only to a history but its very
structure of repetition and redress.

PART III: An Age of Post-Silence, Can the Subaltern Be Silent?
David J. Kim’s article “Critical Meditations: Haewon Chinhon Kut, a Shamanic Ritual for Korean “Comfort Women,” is helpful as a point of reference because it clearly lays out the stakes of comfort women studies today:

Gayatri Spivak asked the enormously difficult question “can the subaltern speak?” to which the answer was a silent and rhetorically anguished “no.” In relation to comfort women, one wonders if the question can still be raised in this current stage of postsilence, as their voices are now indeed vociferous, if not singular.

(729)

We live in a time of remarkable increase in awareness with regard to the issue, both in academia and the public domain through activism, the media, the appointment of a new Minister of Foreign Affairs who has publicly declared her commitment to the issue, etc. Even the pop culture scene has caught on to what is a kind of “vociferousness” about the issue.33 Thus, in this era of “post-silence,” how can we rethink testimony if we are no longer dealing with the imperative to break the silence? What, beyond speech, can we imagine that would make multiple, make more heterogeneous, a conversation that is already thickening? We no longer have a choice but to rethink some of the core idioms, paradigms, and imperatives that have been critical to the beginnings of this movement. The beginnings of this movement and the form of activism that burgeoned in an era of denial from the Japanese administration, compounded by a domestic rhetoric of shame and silence, had to be what it was. But, we remind ourselves that the comfort

33 Snowy Road (2015) directed by Lee Na-jeong. Spirit’s Homecoming (2016) was a crowd-sourced feature length film directed by Cho Jung-rae. The highly anticipated blockbuster and all-star cast film Battleship Island (2017), directed by Ryoo Seung-wan, about Korean indentured laborers during the colonial period features a comfort woman figure. I Can Speak (2017), directed by Kim Hyeon-Seok, is also a widely well-received feature length film about comfort women and their activism. The South Korean diva, Lee Hyori, recently released a new song titled “Diamond” that she interviewed on JTBC news as being about the comfort women.
women and the early activist groups were responding to a threat—and our responses to a threat are, always, limited by the terms of the threat.

Both Kim and Yang’s works continue to wrestle with the question of the subaltern. Is it appropriate to discuss the subaltern in relation to a group of dispossessed women who have published numerous volumes of testimonies? Yang continues to find traces of the subaltern in the gaps of silence within the testimonials, the women’s inconsistent memories, and most significantly what she refers to as an attempt to “render an impossible representation possible” (729). Yang is concerned with the act of “giving voice” to comfort women in which “the problem of silence is in fact reinforced as a necessary binary for representation to even take place, particularly when these women are spoken for by artists, scholars, and activists.” (729). I want to suggest that even this forward thinking argument, remarkable in its acuity and critical insight, reinforces in some way the very binary, speech versus silence, it criticizes. Yang’s argument resists a structure of co-opting, the structure of taking their place. But, still, it underscores the subaltern’s association with silence where silence is always the stand in for their dispossession. Our image of the dispossessed is silence. Spivak has already dismantled the idea that all speech is created equal. She suggests that the language of scholarship and the operative terms of discourse are controlled by a hegemonic, colonial division of labor. Spivak and Yang conceive of a problematic of co-opting, but only to reinforce the binary relationship between speech and silence. Even when Yang considers the importance of silence—the caesuras and gaps within the comfort women testimonies—they can only be understood as an extension of silence, or a more fundamental silence found within speech. Yang makes an important critical point when she suggests that even when the subaltern speaks, if their modes of speech are delimited, the subaltern is silent. A subaltern that speaks can still be a subaltern. As much as I agree with
this, such a framework does not take into account what the silence might be saying. Yes, our modes of expression and authorship belong to and maintain colonial and imperial structures, but the act of violence leaves behind its signature. Spivak concludes her famous essay by writing, “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more in the shadow […]” (28). And while the shadows do not represent a place of privilege, it is also not simply a vacuum. In a sense, Yang argues that the speaking subaltern is still fundamentally silent. I don’t disagree with her, in fact, I fully agree. Yang asks: can a speaking subject still be silent? Can a speaking subject still be subaltern? And she says yes, but only because they are fundamentally silent. Not by way of a challenge, but in a spirit of extension, I want to ask, can the subaltern be silent? When Spivak asked whether it is possible for the subaltern to speak, the condition of their silence is already assumed. To ask whether the subaltern can be silent, is practically redundant and feels suspiciously stupid. Isn’t the subaltern already silent? Silence is their very condition of impossibility. But this question provokes other questions: can that silence be evocative, nevertheless, of specific, embodied histories? If the subaltern’s silence speaks in some way, is she still subaltern? Can we imagine a silent subaltern who speaks through silence?

It seems to me that the dispossessed are trapped within a double impossibility: to prove their dispossession they must use given modes of speech, but to speak is to prove that they are no longer dispossessed. Their success will unravel their claims. Speech is a privilege, but so is silence. There are some who cannot afford to be silent, and therefore must adopt the modes of speech awarded to them—they have no choice. This is what I anticipated earlier as a “difficult choice,” but the wording is not entirely honest because it is not a choice at all. Others, have the privilege of not having to speak under coercion, others have the privilege of not being
interrogated, of not having to deal with the impossible task of defending and proving themselves. However, even when we are trapped in discourse, there are ways that the gaps and instances of silence interrupt that discourse, create a different rhythm from inside that discourse. This silence by no means fails to say something (and I have to fall back on verbs like “say” for lack of better alternatives). At the same time, these pauses and caesuras and embodied lengths of silence are more than part and parcel of dispossession (even while they absolutely are expressions of dispossession); they are also, simultaneously, the very trace of this dispossession. But, this does not mean we should be quick to jump on the agency bandwagon. Rather than wish for agency, agency for all, I believe it is time to interrogate what purchase the concept of agency holds for us, after all. We have trouble, once anyone begins to talk, of imagining that they are still dispossessed. If they can speak, they must not be in very much danger. Thus, the only way to imagine them as being, still, dispossessed, we have to imagine them as still silent. Yang finds a way to align the subaltern with silence, even if it means finding the silence within speech. What it would mean to find the speech in silence? To find the speech in silence and still recognize these women as dispossessed in some way? Because they are. Trauma theory is incredibly helpful in thinking about a history that arises within silence because, according to trauma theory, the silence of trauma is not just a symptom of pathology, but also the trace of history. At the same time, it is a theory that is not quick to assign the traumatized subject badges of agency. Its critical force makes itself felt in the way that it destabilizes assumptions about the speaking subject. To the question “can the subaltern speak?” I want to, carefully, say yes, but in a way that is not simple. Revisit the earlier quote from David J. Kim’s work: “Gayatri Spivak asked the enormously difficult question “can the subaltern speak?” to which the answer was a silent and
rhetorically anguished “no.” (720). Note here that the answer—regardless of whether it is yes or no—is rhetorical but silent. Rhetorical and silent.

PART IV: Haewon Chinhon Kut

In David J. Kim’s article, “Critical Meditations: Haewon Chinhon Kut, a Shamanic Ritual for Korean “Comfort Women,” looks at the role that Korean shaman communities have played within the comfort women redress movement. As Kim explains, the haewon chinhon kut for Korean comfort women began in the late 80s when a group of shaman women (The Association for the Preservation of Hwanghae-do Shamanic Ritual) decided that they should participate in something “socially meaningful” (726). The head of the group had learned about the issue of the comfort women from activists who were just beginning to receive attention in the press. Not long after, the group held a public kut on July 13, 1990, and since then the haewon chinhon kut has become a regular, annual event. The kut is a jointly held event between The Association for the Preservation of Hwangaedo Shamanic Ritual and The Korean Council. The comfort women have been in attendance at each of the performances. It is no secret that the two communities have come together, regularly, in very public and publicized ways. Often, on their deathbeds, the victim-survivors will ask that a kut be done—they speak of an aggrieved spirit, of as yet untold stories. But, beyond these very private deathbed pleas, the relationship between the comfort women community and the shaman community has been a much more public affair. Kim writes,

Shamanic performance becomes an allegorical rite of passage through han, which can be described as an existential term for collective anguish and resentment. It is at once a mark of resilience and heartbreak, both past and present, which has its own reductive logic and partakes in a highly nationalized discourse […] This
strategically ambiguous and paradigmatic portrayal certainly fits well within nationalist framework [...] (743)

The shamanic *kuts* have contributed in significant ways to a state project that sought to enframe the comfort women issue as a national one, and this became one platform from which to leverage the nation’s position in terms of its international relations with Japan. But above all, the testimonies—the “autobiographical” quality of these testimonies—are recaptured and reincorporated for a story about the nation, a nation’s autobiography. The ease of reincorporation is no coincidence since the form of autobiography, its particular arc, has been used to express, and therefore also discursively produce, the individual and the nation-state. The concept of the individual and the modern nation-state share a historical genealogy. Kim’s article, however, also queries how the *kut*, under state sponsorship, still operates in excess of it. It is worth taking the time here to look closely at this quality of excess because it addresses what is possible with regard to traditionally assimilationist forms. When all is said and done, is there something that remains, even within these assimilationist forms? Where is the trace of dispossessed histories? What I am perhaps looking for is a flightline that is not the same as freedom; are there ways of dismantling the violence of entanglement that do not rest with breaking free or fleeing? To answer this question is to argue for the value of some of these assimilationist forms, albeit on different terms. We idolize freedom fighters, but fail to look closely at the stakes, the wisdom, of survival—survivals that necessarily had to share something with the spirit of assimilation and incorporation. But if we can see assimilationist forms differently, perhaps we can also envision something not unlike an attitude of kindness, gentleness, for those who survived.

*Haewon chinhon* (解冤鎮魂) is a combinatory word composed of four *hanja* characters where *hae* means “to solve” or “to untie,” the *won* means grief, vexation, and *chin* can mean to
calm or to placate but, as Kim points out, can also suggest suppression or repression. The *hon* stands for spirit or ghost, and “together, they translate into the “untying of vexed or restless spirits” and the “calming or suppression of restless ghosts.”” (728). The first two characters, and therefore the meaning of the compound word, are at odds with each other. While *hae* means to untie or to let unravel, *chin* is associated with suppression or repression precisely because it gestures to the act of evening out, to filling the gaps, to closing a breach—to tie up. There is a certain unevenness about the terms that are brought together to create a vocabulary for this particular *kut*, and while it does in fact mean something like either the “untying of vexed spirits” or “calming or suppression of restless ghosts,” the term cannot seem to make up its mind about whether it is unraveling or tying up. Kim comments on the ambivalence of the *kut* as a schema for both suppression and repression in his remarkable endnote:

> The ritual, in effect, operates not only via a means of containing or calming spiritual energies but, as always in any schematic of repression, also demands a release of such energies […] What happens during the course of this event, as will be detailed, is that placation will ultimately fail or be incomplete, as spirits will return to haunt the scene, as a form of uncontrolled mimesis that refuses to remain repressed. (726)

In a discussion of the contending operations of the *kut*, by setting it up as a failed ritual of suppression and cathartic release, Kim names the very operations of shamanic performance. The performance is not simply placating or cathartic, but is the performance of its impossibility. Put differently, will comfort for these women, especially when the word comfort itself is a loaded one, mean remembrance or a gracious forgetfulness? What does the *kut* mark? Are we trying to forget, or remember? The encounter between the issue of redress and the shamanic *kut*
should suggest that the techniques of remembering can also participate in a form of forgetting, an erasure. But, by the same token, the sites of forgetting can evoke a form of embodied remembrance. In short, the act of remembrance and forgetting share a similar terrain where one does not necessarily preclude the other. The significance of history and memory is made even more complicated when we consider that the troubling, ambivalent character, *chin*, means also *to protect*.

*Still Hear the Wound*, a collection of essays about performance art as an embodied mode of remembering the comfort women issue, proposes an approach that goes “beyond the conventional writing and rewriting known as history” (xxxii):

Rather than fashioning itself as a contribution to the now voluminous body of scholarly, historical writing addressing questions of Japan’s responsibility for colonial violence and war crimes, that is, the Asia, Politics, Art project seeks precisely to enact and activate a response that resonates on multiple registers and in multiple expressive modalities […] (xxxii)

The emphasis on multiple registers and multiple expressive modalities is key to the project. In a conference that was part of the *Still Hear the Wound* project, Lee Chonghwa argues:

I want to make bold, however, to ask the question of how, in fact, our thinking about the *harumoni* developed during the time and what path it took. What I want to ask is whether certain possibilities for thinking about the *harumoni* may have actually been closed down during this process. As Gayatri Spivak observed in a lecture she gave in Tokyo in 2007, there exists a certain conception of “struggle” and because of the way this conception constrained our thinking, the *harumoni*
have constantly been forced to speak more and more about themselves. In the
course of this, it has become impossible to imagine the harumoni. (Lee)

How might the juridical model of testimony forestall or flatten out representational possibilities?

We can no longer rely on any naïve understanding of what it will take to imagine the halmonis as opposed to representing them.

PART V: Silence Quoted in Silence Broken

In November of 1992, almost exactly a year after the class-action lawsuit against the Japanese government, Dai Shil Kim was asked by a Korean American activist group in the Washington D.C. area to translate at a public speaking event for Hwang Keum Ju, a surviving comfort woman. During the event, she realizes: “I was no longer just putting her story into English words” (1). Flagged by the construction “no longer,” what Kim offers is a theory of translation. She attributes it to her being drawn into Hwang’s past, and she describes having tears roll down inside of her for Korean women, for women everywhere, and for humanity. A moving description though this is, I am persuaded to think that there is something more going on here than what could mistakenly be read as heightened sentimentality. In the description that came before this retrospective explanation, she describes her experience of translation: “Then, the tremors stopped and her voice, tainted with a regional Korean accent, shook, drawing my attention. She said, “This Japanese officer took his thing out and wanted me to lick it like a dog.” I yelled, “I would rather die than do that, you son of a dog!” (1). What began as a narrative of reported speech, “she said,” is interrupted by an “I yelled.” Instead of using a construction like “she said and I translated” or “I yelled while translating” it is simply “I yelled.” It is unclear who is speaking and the status of the “I” becomes unstable. But, isn’t there something improper about this? Should she be allowed to possess this testimony without the qualification of a “she said,”
the distance of a translator? How can you share a testimony? Is this a moment of appropriation? Does this moment belong to what Yang criticizes as one of co-option?

In spite of what Kim’s title announces as its purported subject, I believe that the work actually attests not to a silence broken but a silence quoted. To be honest, when I first read *Silence Broken*, I found Kim’s melodramatic language distasteful. I was, initially, offput by the “I yelled” moment in the text. But, I have since changed my position. There was something about Kim’s prose that, at the time, bothered me beyond personal taste, and it required considerable unlearning on my part. I wanted Kim’s text to be more stoic and reserved; I wanted it to be written in a tone without sentiment because I thought such a tone would lend to the content an air of measured, regulated credence. My dislike for her prose was, in part, based on a set of preconceptions about what testimony should sound like. Kim writes:

> The stories they told me, which are neither neutral nor objective. Anyone knows that human memories are by nature limited and subjective. Oral history is a subjective recollection of the past. Further, as I listened to these grandmas’ stories, I quickly became aware that these women had learned how to adjust their stories to be more politically compelling. That too, is expected. Clearly, nobody can swear by the truth and accuracy of a single story in its entirety, yet bound together individual accounts can form a collective truth. (8)

Kim brings attention to how the testimonies of the comfort women have been criticized by people both outside and within the movement because they sound too “political,” because they use terms and turns of phrase that ring with the rhetoric of activism. The comfort women have been accused of utilizing a learned rhetoric and register, one that isn’t so-called native. The inference is that political activists are using them as mouthpieces, and thus the testimonies are
tainted with political interest or even a personal agenda. At work here are assumptions about what is natural to the discourse of uneducated elderly women, what is native and non-native to their ways of expression, what constitutes an authentic testimony, etc. Between being “too traumatized” to provide an accurate testimony, and not being “traumatized enough” that the account is accused of interest or a political agenda, what exactly should these testimonies look like in order to satisfy our expectations of it?

Kim pointedly argues that the comfort women testimonies need not fulfill our expectations of objectivity and neutrality. Why should they? But, Kim makes a very interesting concession or confession:

What’s more, I make no pretense that my response was or is objective. I listened and responded to their stories as a woman born in Korea, and with overflowing sorrow, outraged by the violations inflicted by the Japanese on Koreans, by men on women, by the rich on the poor, and by the powerful on the weak. At times, my response may have been even more subjective than their stories. No one can deny a streak of self-righteous indignation in people with passion. I am no exception. (9)

She then backtracks a little,

None of this, however, means that I was totally incapable of disengaging myself whenever needed in pursuit of truth; to do justice to their stories. I am simply admitting a strong connection—intellectual as well as emotional—between myself as a listener/writer and the reality represented in this book. (9)

Kim tells her readers that her response was, also, not objective or neutral. Kim describes being overinvested in the stories but reassures us that she was able to “disengage” in the pursuit of
truth. She refers to a movement between over-engagement and disengagement as a “double subjectivity” (9). The spirit of her scholarship, she reports, could be found in the constant swing between two subjectivities (or, what she really means is the pendulum swing between subjectivity and objectivity):

This book is, then, a product of double subjectivity. These are their stories which I could not hear without fumbling on occasion in the welter of my emotions, nor report from a neutral position. The stories of these women frequently made me a captive of unruly and turbulent feelings. I often felt my entire personal history becoming entangled with the history of my land of birth, Korea, coupled with that of humankind. I include myself in the story in order to remind the reader of the double subjectivity. If you are distressed by this, I urge you to think about all those carefully selected “objective” accounts written as “official” histories in the Japanese text books. And think of all those conceptual frameworks imposed on their stories in the name of scholarship. (9-10, my emphasis)

When we hear a story and are fundamentally moved by it, how do we separate out the different discursive idioms that make up that tremendous body of feeling? As a way of echoing an earlier quote from Kingston: what part of it belongs to my understanding of certain histories, what part of it belongs to something I picked up in my childhood from my mother, which part stems from an ideological rhetoric that has become an inextricable part of my psyche, etc.? When we come across something or encounter someone to whom we feel an unshakeable strong connection, what does this connection consist of?

Kim explicitly uses the language of entanglement to describe the frustrations of her “research”: 
Talking with these women, frequently our feelings were entangled, pure shock vibrating in my raised voice. I had such emotional battles with Grandma Bae Gok Gan when she told me over and over again that she would prefer marrying a Japanese. […] I am glad that I was unable to make her an object of my study but rather wrestled with her person to person. (9, my emphasis)

What Kim began to theorize as a double subjectivity may be an index for something else: the heteroglossia of testimony, the entanglement that cannot be defined as harmonious, complementary, or even supplementary. To return to the question of propriety, is the “I yelled” moment improper in some way? Yes, and no. The site is a potential site for co-option. I think it could have been if not for the very hyperbolic, dramatic tone that I disliked so much. If, in line with the general tone of her writing, Kim was just as expressive, dramatic, and theatrical during her translation, the “I yelled” is a moment of dramatized quotation, a quotable gesture. I believe, now, that Kim institutes a theatrical and performative gesture of quotation at the site of her translation.

Acts of historical revision and negation are very, powerfully, proactive. The very proliferation of negationism and revisionism, their flexibility, should suggest that these political acts must be considered in the realm of the performative. Derrida asks,

[T]he searing figures of revisionism and negationism. These figures proliferate endlessly […] How is one to fight them, which is to say, first of all, refute them, dispute them, recall them to the truth of their negationist and disavowed relentlessness? How to prove by bearing witness, if testimony remains irreducibly heterogeneous to proof? (52)
Can we resist these perversions by referring back to the schema of proof as justification? Especially when the state curates its source of legitimacy through violence and force? In how many critical instances of political and social justice has the indisputable demonstration of a species of proof succeeded in a dramatic coup for justice (aside from the most popular detective novels)? Within this remarkable text on the problematic of testimony, Derrida cites Prime Minister Murayama’s 1995 apology. Murayama, in what would hitherto be cited as the Murayama Statement of 1995, apologizes for Japan’s crimes during the Second World War and signs an apology addressed to the comfort women. Derrida is incredibly moved by this official apology:

[T]here, then, and probably for the first time in history, someone dares dissociate the concept of the state or nation from what had always characterized it, in a constitutive and structural fashion, namely good conscience. However confused this event may be, and however impure its motivation remains, however calculated and conjunctural the strategy, there is here a progress in the history of humanity and its international law, of its science and its conscience. (47-8)

Of course, what Derrida could never have accounted for is how in March of 2007, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, the longest serving Prime Minister in the history of Japan, would release an official statement that amounted to denying that the Japanese government had ever instituted militarized sexual slavery. Abe stated, “The fact is, there is no evidence to prove there was coercion.” In 2014, Abe confirmed that he had no intention of retracting this statement. What is the status of a negated apology? Does it mean it never happened? How can we understand the fact that the Japanese government has released statements in contradiction to the apology and simultaneously cited it in order to abscond from making a proper one? To simultaneously
sidestep an apology and to insist that they have already apologized? Derrida refers to Murayama’s declaration of apology as a monumental moment “whose every word and whole pragmatic structure would have to be evaluated” (47). But, twelve years later, this event is no longer an isolated moment but tethered to a chain of events that all but annuls it. More specifically, it is now irrevocably coupled with a statement, released twelve years later, that deserves equal attention. In the light of this surprising pair of statements, issued by the same office (if by different men), I echo Derrida’s question: “How can a state from now on ask for forgiveness or excuse? And what does this imply about an international political conscience? In what way does it depend on a transformation of international law, for example, in the creation of an absolutely new concept, crime against humanity, and the new judicial agencies, the new tribunals it calls for?” (47). What is immediately striking is how differently the quotation sounds because it is now inflected by Abe’s statement that came twelve years after Derrida asked it. In its original context, it grasped at a wary hope for the future, but today it echoes with a deep, profound disappointment. Quotations are never stable.
CHAPTER 8
Possession and Hospitality in Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman

...hurry up and come in, “come inside,” “come within me,” not only toward me, but within me: occupy me, take place in me, which means, by the same token, also take my place”—Jacques Derrida, Of Hospitality (123)

Comfort Woman is a novel about a surviving comfort woman who immigrates to the Cold War America of the 1960s. The narrative shuttles back and forth from the daughter, a second-generation Korean American, and her mother, a shaman who performs rituals of possession throughout the novel. The novel is many things but it is written foremost as an exchange between Beccah and her mother—a portrait of their relationship, embedded within entangled histories. Throughout the novel, the story of a frog is told and retold, both a bedtime story and a proverbial warning. It was both strange and familiar to encounter this popular Korean folktale in Comfort Woman because it was told and retold to me in my own childhood. The story is about the well-known, proverbial young, green frog that, to his mother’s great aggravation, never failed to do exactly the opposite of what he was told. The story always begins this way, and ends in pretty much the same way: his mother passes away, and in anticipation of his characteristic disobedience, she asks to be buried in the river. She believes that if told to feed her to the river, the naughty young frog would give her a proper burial on the mountainside. Against her expectations, the green frog obeys his mother’s dying request. And it is said that on rainy nights, the little frog can be heard, crying and crying, worried that her poor restless shell might wash up on the banks.

When the story was told to me, the beginning and the end were always the same, like staunch bookends, but the episodes of misbehavior and disobedience always varied—suspiciously similar to whatever misconduct or mischief I happened to be responsible for that
day. I want to say that I never understood the lesson of the tale: hadn’t the little frog, ultimately, been faithful to his mother? Did it matter where she was buried as long as he had been obedient? Would a proper burial mean much if it was done in the spirit of disobedience? What kind of mother would prefer the fulfillment of a ritual to sincerity? I also remember going to bed with a broken heart because the story was so very sad. Such a profound misunderstanding between the frog and his mother, and there was no way to disentangle it since it yawned over the realms of life and death. I had thought that the story was about punishment (as many fables are). My guess, at the time, was that the little frog had to pay the price for a lifetime of disobedience. In all those years of childhood, I felt like it wasn’t fair to the little frog; the punishment was somehow incommensurate to his crime. Wasn’t it enough that the green frog had lost his mother? It seemed to me superfluous, unnecessary and cruel to add to a sadness so deep and profound already. Even now, there is something about the tale that is at odds with what seems its strange logic. I asked my mother about this later while writing this section, and she told me there is something I had missed.

*What kind of mother would prefer the fulfillment of a ritual to sincerity?*

She tells me that I am wrong. The mother-frog does not prefer the fulfillment of a ritual to sincerity. The mother-frog does not care for his obedience or his disobedience. That matters so very little when you are faced with having to leave behind a loved one. What matters is that the burial mound on the mountainside, resolute and sealed, would have comforted the little frog. A watery, fluid grave meant that with every rainfall, an unbearable sadness, and the restlessness of longing, would resurface again and again. The instructions were not about the letter or even the
spirit of a burial rite, but a sad hope that the little frog would continue to live, and that his sadness would be, if persistent, lightened. The mother-frog knows what mourning is, that it is for the living and not for the dead. The story of the little frog is not about punishment but perhaps about the unavoidable instances of misunderstanding, its consequences, and despite this, love. Across an irrevocable misunderstanding, one that may never be corrected or undone, across missed and good intentions, is the address of love itself. Therefore, it foregrounds a philosophy of, not obedience, but listening: “Once upon a time, there was a little frog who never listened to its mother” (170). At least in the way it is told in Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman, the story is about listening, and about how to remember a life: “Now I wonder if I had been remembering the wrong story, if every time my mother said, “Remember the toad,” she meant, “Remember the frog.” And I wonder if that changes anything. I find myself second-guessing my interpretations of her stories, and wonder now that she is dead how I should remember her life” (Keller 171).

Comfort Woman is narrated alternately through Beccah and her mother, Akiko. The first section, notably, begins with Beccah. The alternating narrative finds its point of departure from within the daughter’s narrative, and the novel opens up onto a scene where the mother and daughter are peeling shrimp shells together. Beccah confesses, “Most of the time my mother seemed normal” (2). Enrolled at Ala Wai Elementary, she is taught that if she is ever in trouble, she should tell the teachers or the police. But, “in real life, I knew none of these people would understand, that they might even hurt my mother. I was on my own” (5). For a second-generation immigrant child, the usual institutions of protection can offer her nothing. In her “real life,” the young Beccah, at such a young age, understands that some things are beyond translation, and this quickly turns into a lonely responsibility: “I was on my own” (5). Beccah describes those
moments when her mother would “slip inside herself, to somewhere I could not and did not want to follow” (4):

During these times in which she shouted and punched at the air above her head, dancing as if to duck return jabs, I was afraid to let her out of the house, both because she might never come back and because—like a wandering yongsan ghost finding its way back to its birthplace—she might. After roaming the streets, she could have led everyone back to me, the one who would have to explain my mother’s insanity. (5)

Beccah is a child-translator. In this hypothetical scenario, she must explain her mother’s insanity in an intelligible way, in a way that the authorities will understand, and necessarily in English. The task of the translator that falls on second-generation immigrant children changes the “normal” mother-daughter dynamic. The child assumes a protective role, and thus reverses this social relationship in certain ways. This particular quote highlights the problem of a linguistic and cultural gap through an instance of translation, and thereby effectively illustrates how the problem reaches beyond the peculiarities that are true of any dysfunctional family. There is an unmistakable dimension of race, if compounded by the problems of insanity and of class. The question of translation is no longer simply about a facility or a rounded, full expression but about survival. If Beccah fails to “get it right,” the consequences and the stakes are incredibly high. The question of a biography, a testimony, to get the story of her mother’s life “right,” is both a task and a trial with the highest of stakes. What shapes a mother-daughter relationship? Comfort Woman is the portrait of the history and histories that shape the relationship between a mother and daughter, but what other constraints and critical factors come into play? What gendered, economic, cultural, ableist, and racial factors shaped the mother-daughter relationship in this
case? How do you separate out how much of it is a question of gender, class, or the singularities of immigration? How do you make sense of any of this when you are a child? What is it like to have everyone led back to me to have to explain my mother’s insanity? When a person is or is not in possession of herself and cannot provide a proper autobiography, to whom does this responsibility fall? Where do you begin to tell the story of your own mother’s insanity? Especially when that insanity goes well beyond the lexicon of an individual psychopathology?

Beccah is not unfamiliar with the work of summarizing a life. Interestingly enough, she employs her biographical craft in the service of the dead. She works at the Honolulu Star Bulletin as a writer of obituaries:

I record the lives of the dead…The first thing I do each day after I log on is to count how many inches I have to fill, computing how many names and death dates need to be processed. I have recorded so many deaths that the formula is template in my brain: name, age, date of death, survivors, services. And yes, when it came time for me to write my own mother’s obituary, as I held a copy of her death certificate in my hand, I found that I did not have the facts for even the most basic, skeletal obituary. And I found I did not know how to start imagining her life. (25, my emphasis)

The template to writing an obituary consists of a streamlined process that uses a language of computation, processing, and facts. Yet, Beccah finds that the form of the obituary comes up short when trying to begin to imagine her mother’s life. Different from recording a life, Comfort Woman is about the question of how to imagine one. Beccah reflects back on how she listened to her mother’s stories with a degree of caution: “I grew cautious of my mother’s stories, never knowing what to count on or what to discount” (32). Beccah confesses: “I realized that not only
could I not trust my mother’s stories; I could not trust my own” (34). The mode of witness then
to her mother’s insanity, to her mother’s life, stems from a position of distrust and uncertainty.
The frame narrative eschews the templates of recording a life and anticipates a different kind of
telling, one that begins with the question: how to begin to imagine a life?

Beccah’s mother was a former comfort woman during the Second World War. She
marries an American missionary and immigrates to America. This diasporic trace is an
inseparable part of her mother’s story and distilled within this trace is an impression of the
transpacific networks of war and commerce overlaid with colonial and postcolonial histories.
Keller’s comfort woman, who is also an American missionary’s wife, is a transpacific figure that
marks the interrelated and overlaid complicities, interests, and histories of the Japan—U.S.—
Korea triangulation, and therefore re-mark the East Pacific politics that continue to be strained
and ongoing today. Through the symptoms of trauma, Akiko’s story is suggestive of the
structural similarities that exist between Korea’s colonial period under Japan and the period of
American liberalism. The comfort woman-immigrant in Comfort Woman speaks to a particular
intersection and history of a transpacific military zone.

In Grace Cho’s Haunting the Korean Diaspora, she writes a history of the Korean
diaspora through the figure of the yanggongju.34 However, Cho explicitly cites the history of the
Korean comfort woman as an “entry point” for this diasporic history, more specifically she refers
to the early testimonies of the comfort women during the 90s (5-6):

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34 Grace Cho writes that according “to Nicolas and Abraham and Maria Torok, “These are often the very
words that rule an entire family’s history.” Unmentionable words that “give sustenance to the phantom.”
Yanggongju, literally meaning “Western Princess,” broadly refers to a Korean woman who has sexual
relations with Americans; it is mostly used pejoratively to refer to a woman who is a prostitute for the
U.S. military. It is a term that has been translated in various ways and whose meanings have shifted
according to specific historical and political contexts […] the woman who provides sexual labor for the
U.S. military is at once a hyper visible object of loathing and desire for Koreans on the peninsula and a
shadowy figure hidden in the collective psyche of the Korean diaspora.” (3)
During those fifty years when the Korean comfort women tried to maintain silence about their sexual enslavement, their secrets were already being transmitted to the next generations of women, some of whom would follow (or be led into) the same path of sexual servitude. Some research suggests that early generations of camptown sex workers were the daughters of former comfort women who had inherited the secrets of their family’s history of forced sexual labor. The comfort woman, or wianbu, is the yanggongju’s ghost. (6)

She adds, “in the context of the making of the yanggongju, September 1945 signaled the transition between the system of sexual slavery set up for the Japanese Imperial Army (the comfort stations) and the system of camptown prostitution set up for the U.S military (gijichon)” (7). Cho cites how the war created the conditions for forced migration, as well as for “the increasingly frequent sexual encounters between American soldiers and Korean women” (13). Furthermore, the War Brides Act of 1945 enabled some of these Korean women to marry American men and migrate to the United States. America’s War Brides Act (following the Magnuson Act of 1943) heralded a wave of Asian American immigration and was fueled by American image-making, its own coming of age Bildung narrative, within a new international world order. 1945 has, popularly, been cited as a date of national liberation for Koreans: a break from colonialism into an era of democracy. However, in light of the War Brides Act, Cho reconsiders it through a framework of transition. It is according to this model that Cho develops her argument about histories of implication and “how the Korean diaspora came to be conditioned by transgenerational haunting” (13).

American declassified documents have since come to light that record instances of military sexual slavery and the comfort stations. And yet, the issue of military sexual slavery was
never brought up during the international tribunals following the war, or even during the period of decolonization (1965) (Yang 82). The comfort woman history is more than just a dark, segment in Korean History. The comfort woman history comes back to haunt the very legitimacy of the Allied powers and their role in the war. Cho writes, “together these narratives make linkages across time and space that show the ways in which the fantasy of American and the violence of U.S. military domination are bound together and how this entanglement is projected through the disavowed figure of Korean nationalism who is also the very foundation of the Korean diaspora in the United States” (133). In this transpacific intersection, it becomes evident that an American history can be read between the lines of what we would normally consider strictly Korean history, and a Korean history can be read in the immigration history and cold-war politics of American history. In Beyond the Shadow of Camptown, Ji-Yeon Yuh argues that military brides are the “invisible backbone of the Korean American community in that for four decades following the Korean War the most common migration route for Korean immigrants was through sponsorship by one of the one hundred thousand Korean women who married American GIs” (Cho 140). What Asian American history cannot, at this juncture, afford to forget is how it is no longer relevant to rely on disciplinary silos: “American history,” “Asian history,” Asian American history.” Cho, in a project that shifts “away from traditional sources of data and forms of writing” asks,

How, for example, is trauma transmitted across time and space through vehicles other than the speaking subject, such as the interviewee or the historical record? Do alternative methods of sociological inquiry and experimental writing such an autoethnography, psychoanalysis, fiction, and performance bring us any closer to
an affective understanding of the yanggongju that cannot be conveyed through traditional narratives? (18)

I engage with Cho’s timely question by suggesting that what takes the place of a speaking subject, even as it makes itself felt in the instance of a speaking subject, is the structure of a relation and community. This community shares a social link through a grammar and language produced within the recitation of trauma and is therefore not representational, referential, or even strictly experiential as such.

I was talking to a colleague about Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*, and she said that it made her feel slightly wary that the novel represents the comfort women issue not from the point of view of trauma but shamanism. While I understand what it was that concerned her, I wonder if it isn’t a misplaced reaction to what the figure of shamanic possession suggests in the text, and how it may be addressing the structures of trauma. After Akiko escapes from the comfort station, she is found by American missionaries:

> They were kind and praised me when I responded to the simple commands they issued in Japanese: sit, eat, sleep. Had they asked, I would have responded to “close mouth” and “open legs.” At the camps where the Japanese called us *Jungen Ianfu*, military comfort women, we were taught only whatever was necessary to service the soldiers. Other than that, we were not expected to understand and were forbidden to speak, any language at all. (16)

After leaving the comfort station, Akiko claims that she “had no voice” by then. Seeing the Japanese name sewn onto her clothes, the missionaries call her Akiko—her designated name in the comfort stations. Akiko was the name assigned to every girl who occupied that particular room. Akiko was an Akiko among a chain of many Akikos. Using the name given to her at the
station, finding her unable to speak, they issue clipped demands in Japanese that, as the text clearly suggests, was reminiscent of the demands issued in the stations. The text also actively conflates silence—one that issues from trauma—and the conditions of the comfort stations themselves where the women were forbidden to speak at all, particularly Korean. The circumstances of a problem of language—its being forbidden—and the withdrawal of silence become historically and specifically significant. *Comfort Woman* makes it impossible to abstract the text or to read its structure of trauma as separate from its embodied history, which is also a history of language.

What appear to be circumstances that “trigger” the memories of the comfort stations are much more. The text conflates the language barked at Akiko in the missionary orphanage with the one used in the comfort stations. Through this imbrication, without necessarily equating the two, the structure of repetition in trauma marks not only the recall of memory, being brought back to a certain time, but the repetition of systemic violence in the present: one that marks the carry overs between regimes of power. The repetition compulsion, the nightmarish returns that characterize trauma are not an out of body experience where an overwhelming movie reel plays over and atop the present. On the contrary, I want to argue that it, to some degree, is a *heightened* sensitivity to the symbolic idioms, discursive suggestions, but also material circumstances of the present that nevertheless sustain a critical relationship to the past. When we fall into these gaps of the past, these resonant structures, they aren’t an imposition from the past onto the present so much as the very fabric of the present that is threaded through with the past.

At the missionary house, Akiko watches the broom scratch across the surface of the floors, and she feels the water run down her hands as she does the dishes:
As I swept, washed dishes, pasted labels, followed gestures and pointing fingers, instead of hearing the broom or the water or the fat sucking noise of glue on paper, my ears are filled with memories of the comfort camps. Invading my daily routine at the mission house, shattering the gaps between movement and silence, were the gruntings of soldier after soldier and the sounds of flesh slapping against flesh. Whenever we stopped for a beat, for a breath, I heard men laughing and betting on how many men one comfort woman could service before she split open. (64).

This graphic section depicts a return of the past that seems unrelated to the present; it would appear to interfere with it. However, on the very next page, Akiko continues,

And always, a low rumbling underlying every step I took at the mission house, I heard the grinding trucks delivering more men and more military supplies: food rations, ammunition, boots, and new women to replace the ones that died, their bodies erupting in pus […] Each day, I woke in silence, not sure of where I was. Then, when I sat up, saw the Jesus-on-the-cross hanging on the back of the door, and realized I was in the Mentholatum building with the missionaries, I would begin to hear the thunder of delivery trucks and the grinding metal of gears shifting. The rumbling of the trucks would get louder and louder, and I knew that if I did not jump out of bed and hurry into action, I would be delivered into the camps once again. (65)

Each day, Akiko wakes up and she realizes where she is, the missionary home. Upon making note of exactly where she is, she hears the morning rumbling of delivery trucks. This small detail indicates that these sounds, unlike the previous conflation of sounds and memory, hold a
different status: these sounds are from her present. The sound and grinding metal of shifting
gears can be felt reverberating throughout her body, and they make up the everyday soundscape
of the mission home. Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* highlights the structural similarities of
most modern institutions—schools, prisons, and hospitals bear common architectural
characteristics and run a similar bureaucratic logistics. Certain histories are never simply past;
they pervade our present in persistent, and often material, forms. And while the guise of power
changes hands and ideological slogans, its bare face is not quite as plastic. For economy’s sake,
it will often reuse structures and the logistics of violent histories without qualm. Though they are
by no means equal, it nevertheless bears noting that both the post-war missionary homes and the
comfort stations were distinctly modern institutions that, for obvious reasons, created a similar
soundscape. If, for Akiko, the sounds that make up her life in the mission house remind her of
the comfort stations, this reminder is not merely incidental. This moment of trauma, one wrapped
up in an embodied and aural experience, simultaneously marks out what scholars like Nayoung
Aimee Kwon have called the “intimacies” of Japan, The United States, and Korea. *Comfort
Woman* offers a literary distillation of how these structures of intimacy span what have
traditionally been understood as discrete eras in Korean history: the years of Japanese
colonialism, the interregnum period of American occupation, and the continued histories of
immigration and foreign relations.

Chang-Rae Lee’s fourth novel, *The Surrendered*, is about the complicated and
triangulated relationship between three people (an orphaned Korean girl, a young American GI,
and a missionary’s wife) whose lives become entangled in a Korean missionary
home/orphanage. While largely passed over as a novel that falls short of the mark, it is,
nevertheless, one of the very few novels other than *Comfort Woman* that has attempted to write a

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novel that develops a commentary on the intimacies between Korean women, American GIs and the American missionary homes in post-war Korea. One of the other American novels that attempt it is Toni Morrison’s *Home*, about a black veteran from the Korean War suffering from PTSD. A slim, rich novel, it addresses issues of race, eugenics, and sexual violence in America. Frank Money, a black veteran of the Korean War, journeys to find his sister who has been the victim of biological fertility experiments. What could, for the most part, be read as a novel about race and gender in America, brings in the added and complicated dimension of the Korean War and a secret: the black veteran’s traumatic memories of war stem from a peculiar encounter with a young, Korean girl who offered her body to him in exchange for a nectarine. Even as the black veteran suffers from trauma, it presents itself as a dense, knotted, and difficult moment because he confesses, deliberately late in the narrative, to the role he played in the shifting terrain of power and violence in the war. Morrison has Money’s journey, a seed narrative, unfurl from within the folds of a history that marks America’s presence in Asia, and brings it back again to the question of sexuality and violence. Through Frank Money, what come into a plane of comparison are the victims of sexual violence, his sister, Cee, and the little Korean girl. What is important not to gloss over, however, is that these are not simply scenes of rape—they are systemically mobilized instances of sexual violence that were part of a discourse of war or a discourse of science. Despite the underwhelming literary reviews with regard to *Home*, Morrison demonstrates a concentrated fidelity to the responsibility to thought and literature, a spirit that refuses to back down from the most difficult questions of our times, and thus proves she is among the very best, if not the best, writer of our times.

Later, the head missionary at the missions home marries Akiko, and they will move to the United States and have Beccah, their mixed-race daughter. But even before they are married,
Akiko recognizes something in the American missionary, her soon-to-be husband, that she identifies as a secret:

It was a secret I learned about in the comfort camps, one I recognized in his hooded eyes, in his breathing, sharp, and fast, and in the way his hands fluttered about his sides as if they wanted to fly up against my half-starved girl’s body with its narrow hips and new breasts. This is his sin, the sin he fought against and still denies: that he wanted me—a young girl—not for his God but for himself. (95)

Later, while having sex for the first time, the experience is compared to her time in the comfort camp:

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

The comparison between her soon-to-be husband and the soldiers at the comfort station is made explicit during a moment of explicit sexual violence. The conflation between the scene of rape that takes place between her American missionary husband and the Japanese soldiers at the comfort stations is a bold commentary both on, as I mentioned, the intimacies between colonial and postcolonial conditions. However, it is also a commentary on the limitations of nationalistic frameworks. A transnational framework is especially urgent in terms of gender and sexuality studies.

Elsewhere, in a different book, Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, the winner of the 2016 Man Book award, I found, what I want to insist is a textual counterpart to this disturbing moment of
domestic rape in Keller’s novel. *The Vegetarian* masterfully depicts the regular and otherwise unremarkable rhythms of gendered violence arise from an admixture of a patriarchal discourse and the neoliberal male anxieties that are particular to Korea’s contemporary history and its brand of market economy. The novel explores the consequences of these violent rhythms and how it plays out in the life of one woman and her family. Identified simply as “my wife” in the first section, narrated by her husband, she announces, suddenly, that she will no longer eat meat. Her dramatic change in diet is part and parcel of a deliberate and continued avoidance of sex with her husband:

I thought I could get by perfectly well just thinking of her as a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order. But it was no easy thing for a man in the prime of his life, for whom married life had always gone entirely without a hitch, to have his physical needs go unsatisfied for such a long period of time. So, yes, one night when I returned home late and somewhat inebriated after a meal with colleagues, I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers, I became unexpectedly aroused. She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully. Once that happened, she lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her face blank, as though she were a “comfort woman” dragged against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services. (38)

What is a bit unusual about the translation is that according to the ambiguous clause in the English, the bit about the vulgar curses floats unanchored to a definite subject. The construction
is such that I wouldn’t be at all surprised if a reader incorrectly attributed it to the wife! In fact, it is the husband who is spitting vulgar curses. What is doubly strange is that Korean is not as neat with its pronouns as English; it is entirely common in Korean to retain deictic assumptions while completely dropping the subject. So, before I checked the Korean text, I wasn’t very surprised that there was an instance of misattribution. I was surprised, however, to find that, in this particular instance, the Korean text makes it very clear who is issuing curses. Even if the reader did not glide over the clause and correctly attributed it to the husband, the construction reads differently from the Korean. In the Korean, the sentence is actively constructed around the husband. If the English translation reads, “she put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully” (38). But, if I had to offer my own version of translation, it might read, “While spitting out low profanities against my wife’s furious struggle, I attempted to penetrate her, and out of the three attempts I succeeded at least once.” The latter, if it falls short in other ways, takes into account the active construction where the husband is the consistent focus and subject who performs the rape, the penetration, and the low profanities—action mounting upon action. Again, what makes the translation doubly unusual is that, normally, the grammatical structure of English and Korean are inverted. If the English prioritizes the subject of the sentence, the Korean tends to prioritize the verb. Because of these differences, with regard to translation, the words tend to be in reverse order. What this means is that it would have been entirely easier to retain the husband’s active position in the English. The slightly more passive construction goes against the grain of certain habits of translation. The English is far from incorrect, at the same time, its ambiguity attests to a certain anxiety about the wife’s abject portrayal. It says something about a certain romanticization of resistance. At the same time, in an
argument about shared testimonies, the latter parts of this chapter will highlight expressions and clauses that can be attributed to more than one person. By citing this particular instance, I want to make bold that while I make a case for shared testimony, this should not, conscionably, be used as generalizable model. Some clauses can be shared, others cannot. What this should suggest is that the act of testimony, acts of speech, can be an act of witness or an act of repression. As a technology, forms of reported speech have the potential to be both.

The romanticization of resistance and its purchase in discussions about activism and historical redress need to be re-examined with scrutiny. Akiko is the name for a long chain of women named Akiko, and from within the name that the Japanese soldiers attributed to this chain of women, comes a split between the Akiko who survived, the witness, and the Akiko who died in the camps. Beccah’s mother remembers the Akiko who was Akiko before her:

When she was alive, she did not seem so impatient. But then I knew her only at the comfort stations, when she had to hide between layers of silence and secret movements. I want to say that I knew she would be the one who would join me after death. That there was something special about her even then, perhaps in the way she carried herself—walking more erect, with impudence, even—or in the way she gave the other women courage through the looks and smiles she offered us. But I am trying not to lie. There was nothing special about her life at the recreation camps; only her death was special. (144)

This is a strange account. Partway through a recollection, Akiko-witness begins the account of what she would want to say. She would want to say that there was something special about the former Akiko—erect and proud, she encourages her fellows, she smiles nobly. The witness is tempted to paint the portrait of a hero. But, the witness is trying not to lie, and so she confesses
that there was nothing special about Akiko (who also goes by Induk in the text, her Korean name) except her death.

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

(144)

Earlier on, Akiko-survivor remarks, “that is how I know Induk didn’t go crazy. She was going sane. She was planning her escape. The corpse the soldiers brought back from the woods wasn’t Induk. It was Akiko 41; it was me” (21). The text suggests, in multiple places, that the soldiers, as well as the other comfort women, had thought that Akiko-Induk had gone crazy. The witness’ account centers on two important points, within an account given through a) what she would have wanted to say, an imagined lie, about Akiko and b) what others had mistaken about Akiko. Through a lie and through a mistake, we know that Akiko-Induk was not special, and she was not crazy. What is the relationship between remarkability and insanity? Why make these two points? First, why would a witness be tempted to paint the portrait of a remarkable figure? It assumes that the subject of resistance must be the subject of an extraordinary will and a heroic personality.36 On the other hand, the other witnesses interpret Akiko-Induk’s death as the result of a mind gone insane. According to the contending claims, since willful resistance and madness cannot be thought together. The former is the subject of resistance, the latter the subject of sympathy. What kind of implicit valorization of a resistance that looks a particular way is at work here? How do we account for this fascination for the extraordinary individual?

[36 For more on the romanticized notion of the dignified victim, please refer to Caroline J. Dean’s “Atrocity Photographs, Dignity, and Human Vulnerability.”]
The witness is tempted to, against an interpretation of madness, insert a new, revised reading that would award Induk a kind of recognition. But, the terms of this recognition is the extraordinary individual. What are the terms of recognition? It is important, if uncomfortable, to ask: upon what basis are certain representations of victimization valorized above others? In what ways might we be reproducing these categories? Several years ago, the first talks were underway with regard to adding a wing in the National Korean Museum that would commemorate the Korean comfort women. These proposals were aborted because the descendants of the Korean Independence Fighters went up in arms—they argued that it would be a disgrace, a national shame, to have these women housed in the same wing as those who fought for Korean Independence. So, perhaps we must ask the most uncomfortable question of all: what are the unsaid effects of valorizing the resisting and dignified victim? I am not, by any means, undermining resistance itself. Rather, I want to query what our representation of resistance looks like. Between the remarkable hero and the woman driven out of her mind, between these diametrically opposed figures, it would seem they are the only ones we can imagine for the victim. From between these figures, is it possible to imagine an image of complexity?

_The Vegetarian_ weaves the husband’s rape with a reference to the comfort stations. Ironically, it is the husband himself that makes the historical reference that aligns his wife with a comfort woman and himself with a Japanese soldier. Everything about this textual example draws on and works with a symbolic and historical idiom that evokes a scene of absolute abjection while simultaneously creating a line of association between colonial, militarized violence and contemporary, domestic sexual violence. _The Vegetarian_ is not at all about the history of the comfort women; this reference is singular within the context of the novel as a whole. But it is its singularity, and the abrupt quality of the passing reference—it seems to come
from no where, and the reference is sudden, crass, and unusual precisely because of its taboo status in Korea—is what accentuates its single, almost ungainly, appearance in *The Vegetarian* feels so irregular from within the masterful, poetic craft of Kang. I want to induce an encounter between two different texts, written at two different times. Between the prior comfort woman, Akiko, trapped under the body of her American husband, and Young-hye trapped under the body of Korean husband, the two textual instances trace a wider problematic that weaves together networks of complicity and of continued sexual violence that bring to the fore why it needs to be embedded in a historical framework that is not nationalist but also not individuated. The romanticization of resistance is yet another iteration of discrete, responsible, individuated subjects. What the translation demonstrates is there is something unfaithful about *both* an overdetermined attribution or a misattribution. Between the romanticization of the autonomous individual as the only foundation for resistance and an abstracted, universal interchangeability that mocks justice, we must begin to think of ways outside—flightlines—this dearth of options. The question is the possibility of being many, without being interchangeable. How does one tell the story of a many that is not also interchangeable?

Immediately after the missionary and Akiko are wed, they immigrate to the United States. The journey is long, and they must make occasional pit stops to eat and fill gas.

Though my husband complained, lecturing on how cleanliness was next to godliness, I could not bring myself to stand in line to use the toilets and showers. I felt cleaner skipping showers than remembering the way the Japanese referred to the recreation camps as public rest rooms. Some of the rest stops and gas stations along the road had what were called vending machines, where anyone with a coin could pull a knob and receive candy—something that I thought only America
must have. […] At first I found it comforting that there was always another candy bar behind it, waiting to take its place. But the more of it I ate, the more it began to bother me: it was so easy, so cheap, so easily replenished. (108)

The passage sets the stage for a comparison between the comfort stations and Akiko’s first impressions of the United States. She cannot bring herself to use the public restrooms because they remind her of how the soldiers referred to the comfort camps as public rest rooms. The passage carefully layers on, through the image of the candy vending machine, a conceptual and figurative understanding of the United States—the place of plenty, the place of endless rows of replaceable goods. Keller specifically uses the word Comfort to describe Akiko’s initial reaction to the machine, and this slowly turns into a heavy, disturbing comparison that evokes how easy, how cheap, and easily replenished the stock of girls were in the comfort camps. The layered scene draws out a reference to America’s particular brand of market logic that can be distilled in the iconic image of big grocery stores lined with aisle after aisle of replaceable, identical goods and yokes it to the comfort stations, particularly its bureaucratic logistics of supply and demand. How does one tell the story of a many that is not also interchangeable? How does one imagine a collective, a many, that is not homogenous? What kind of language would be able to accommodate the heterogeneous many?

Marcus Rediker in The Slave Ship argues that the slave ship was its own kind of modern technology that produced slaves:

Preparations also included subjection to the discipline of enslavement. Captives experienced the “white master” and his unchecked power and terror, as well as that of his “overseers,” the mate, boatswain, or sailor. They experienced the use of violence to hold together a social order in which they outnumbered their captors by ten to one or more.
They ate communally and lived in extreme barrack-like circumstances. They did not yet work in the backbreaking, soul-killing ways of the plantation, but labor many of them did, from domestic toil to forced sex work, from pumping the ship to setting the sails.

The Africans who first boarded the vessel were a multiethnic group, who would in the translation across the Atlantic, become “black people” or a single “negro race” (10): “in short slowly transform them into commodities for the inter-national labor mark” (10). Rediker writes, “the slave ship and its social relations have shaped the world” (10). It goes without saying that the slave ships and the Japanese comfort stations were different institutions, but it is not entirely pointless to draw on the similarities between these two colonial establishments. The ships were modes of transport—if, as Rediker points out, not merely so—that were also critical subjective technologies that produced the slave-subject. The comfort stations were stationed, and the traffic of demand flowed to and through these barrack-like buildings. But, the comparison is extremely suggestive if provocative. The African slaves, a multiethnic community, were put on cargo ships that effectively turned them into slave-subjects, products for a modern, global market. The comfort stations also consisted of a multiethnic community from all over Japan’s occupied regions—mostly Korea, China, and the Philippines, but also Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Taiwan. For those who survived the camps, when this multiethnic community of women returned to their homelands, or in many cases became an unacknowledged part of an Asian diaspora, they encountered and had to engage in modes of labor that reproduced, on some level if not absolutely, the logic of the camps. If we are to take Rediker seriously, and I believe it would be a mistake not to, the slaves were produced for an international, global market. Even if the survivors “returned” to their homelands or embarked on journeys of migration for hopes of a
better future in better lands, a “return” is no longer conceivable. I am not trying to say that the world is a comfort station. There is no point to being provocative for its own sake. What I am trying to say is that there is reason to be attentive to the ways in which women’s labor, particular the labor of women of colour, within a globalized market has a long but also distinctly modern legacy that extends a logic that was present, if violently distilled, in the comfort stations.

At the same time that the ship was a subjective technology that produced slaves, Rediker also points to a very different kind of production that takes place at the same time. Rediker asks, “How would this “multitude of black people, of every description chained together” communicate?” (7). He writes,

> They found ways to exchange valuable information about all aspects of their predicament, where they were going, and what their fate would be. Amid the brutal imprisonment, terror, and premature death, they managed a creative, life-affirming response: they fashioned new languages, new cultural practices, new bonds, and a nascent community among themselves aboard the ship […] thereby [they] inaugurated a “fictive” but a very real kinship to replace what had been destroyed by their abduction and enslavement in Africa. (8)

Rediker suggests that this new community found endless and creative ways to resist through hunger strikes, suicide, outright insurrection, but also “selective appropriations of culture from the captors, especially language and technical knowledge, as, for example, about the workings of the ship” (7). Rediker writes,

> [I]t must also be noted that in preparing the captives for slavery, the experience of the slave ship also helped to prepare them to resist slavery. They developed new methods of survival and mutual aid—novel means of communication and
solidarities among a multiethnic mass. They gathered new knowledge, of the ship, of the “white men,” of one another as shipmates. (350)

While in the comfort stations, Akiko becomes fluent in a language that is neither Korean nor Japanese, but born from the specific, historical exclusion of the former:

But we were fast learned and creative. Listening as we gathered the soldiers’ clothes for washing or cooked their meals, we were able to surmise when troops were coming in and how many we were expected to serve. We taught ourselves to communicate through eye movements, body posture, tilts to the head, or—when we could not see each other—through rhythmic rustlings between our stalls; in this way we could speak […] (16)

According to Akiko, the women developed a language of care and survival that was constituted through idioms of touch and song:

I liked caring for the women. As their girl, I was able to move from one stall to the next, even from one section of the camp to another, if I was asked. And because of this luxury, the women used me to pass messages. I would sing to the women as I braided their hair or walked by their compartments to check their pots. When I hummed certain sections, the women knew to take those unsung words for their message. In this way, we could keep up with each other, find out who was sick, who was new, who had the most men the night before, who was going to crack. (20)

In the case of the songs, it was not the words but the missing words that contained the message. Only a few pages before, the readers are already primed for this language that operates like a secret in plain sight:
My job was to help my mother wash clothes…I remember that as we crouched over our wash, pounding out the dirt, I pretended that my mother and I sent secret signals to one another, the rocks singing out messages only we could understand.

(17)

After Akiko escapes the comfort station, she nevertheless carries this new idiom into her new life. While listening to the missionary’s sermon at the pulpit, she sings a new song from within the congregation:

After a moment of utter silence I heard singing, but singing like I’ve never heard before. The only songs I had heard before that day were sung by one person at a time, or by group of people who all sang the same part in the same way. What I heard after my ears cracked open was a single song with notes so rich and varied that it sounded like many songs blended into one. And in that song I heard things that I had almost forgotten: the enduring whisper of women who continued to pass messages under the ears of soldiers; a defiant Induk bellowing the Korean national anthem even after the soldiers had knocked her teeth out; the symphony of ten thousand frogs; the lullabies my mother hummed as she put her daughters to sleep; the song the river sings when she finds her freedom in the ocean. (70)

Akiko finds herself in a congregation full of people who sing one song, and it becomes, at the same time, a commentary on the ontology of modern subjectivities: a song sung by one person at a time, or a group of people who sang the same part in the same way—individuated but homogenous. Born of a language that knows implicitly how to hide, how to protect, and how to find its syntax in what is unsaid, Akiko finds, and it is important that she does so within the hymns of an American congregation, the possibility of a symphonic song that she describes as
rich, varied, like many in one, but also one that listens to the things that are almost forgotten. Together and different, past and present.

This song, or refrain, reappears throughout the entirety of *Comfort Woman*. Akiko teaches Beccah a song, the song of the Yalu River, and it cycles through their separate narrative sections, and later it will be repeated and remembered through Akiko’s story about her own mother. The song will thread through three generations of women: “As I pick her up, her body stiffens with her screams, and out of my mouth comes my mother’s voice, singing the song I forgot I knew” (70). When Akiko comes to after her escape from the camp, she lies down by a river:

I lay by the river, already feeling the running water erode the layers of my skin, washing me away, but Induk filled my belly and forced me to my hands and knees. She spoke for me: No one performed the proper rites of the dead. For me. For you. Who was there to cry for us in kok, announcing our death? Or to fulfill the duties of yom: bathing and dressing our bodies, combing our hair, trimming our nails, laying us out? Who was there to write our names, to even know our names and to remember us? Here, she said, giving me the image of a woman. I saw a fox spirit who haunted the cemeteries of deserted villages, sucking at the mouths of the newly dead in order to taste their otherworld knowledge. This is Manshin Ahjima, Induk said. Old lady of ten thousand spirits. Go to her, and she will prepare you. (38)

Induk, another Akiko, speaks for the survivor—a strange reversal since it is, usually, the burden of the survivor to speak for those who died. But here, Induk speaks for Akiko and on behalf of them both. What follows is impossible to attribute to one or the other. What begins as a “for me”
“for you” turns into an “us” and “we” that ends with the image of a being that is, at once, a 
woman, a fox spirit, and ten thousand spirits. *Manshin*—in Korean, literally “ten thousand 
spirits”—is the designation given to a renowned shaman and signals her responsibility to a 
multitude. This moment in the text can be read as Akiko’s initiation through Induk, into a 
shaman community. However, this moment marks a process that had begun far before this rite.

Akiko, even before this moment, in her capacity as the message bearer, singer, and 
translator within the comfort camps, was already versed in a language of witnessing. I believe 
that my colleague’s reservations about *Comfort Woman* stems from a well-founded wariness 
about how readers might read a novel about a Korean American shaman. To focus misguidedly 
on this aspect of the novel, at the risk of being folded into the nativist or essentialist notions it 
almost seems to invite, would be at the expense of other things. Not unrelatedly, Akiko’s 
acquisition of this language of survival is not traced back to her initiation as a shaman, but to her 
mother’s history, one caught between Korean and Japanese:

> My mother’s was the first in Korea to learn a new alphabet, and new words for 
everyday things. She had to learn to answer to a new name, to think of herself and 
h her world in a new way. To hide her true self. […] These are the same lessons my 
mother taught me, the morals of her stories, and because I learned them early, I 
w was able to survive what eventually killed my mother. Hiding my true self, the 
original nature of my head, enabled me to survive in the recreation camp and in a 
new country. (153)

Here, it is language itself that functions as a subjective technology where the acquisition of a 
new one, in circumstances of force, means to think of oneself and to think of the world in new 
ways. It became the idiom of hiding and survival. What is interesting is that a careful reading
makes it hard to conclude that the Korean is the true self, and Japanese a fake one. Such an essentialist notion would be to fly in the face of the nuances of the text, one that focuses on the conditions of learning a language. The lesson is in the circumstances of dictation, not the language itself. In other words, the violence is not in the language itself, but in the circumstances, the terms, of the translation. At the same time, the violence is now irrevocably encoded within the language. And while the turn of phrase, “hide the true self”, refers back to a monolithic notion of self, I would argue, on the contrary, the text is arguing for a subject—one created through circumstances of translation—that could never assume a true self. Through a subjective technology of violence and force, one intended to create a slave-subject, what it created, simultaneously, was a subject for whom a true self could never be an ontological given. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, privileged about this subject position, but an ideological structure will leave behind its trace of force in the reverse. In trying to stamp something out, it leaves behind the mark, the force, of that stamp. And it is this language of translation that gets inherited but repeated from Akiko’s mother, to Akiko and to Becca, from the Korean countryside to the comfort stations to Hawaii.

To be initiated into a language, a song, or a way of understanding the world, is to know what to look for. And once you have been initiated, the things that may be hidden in plain sight make themselves known. Once you have been initiated into a certain way of listening, it reconfigures your very consciousness, shifts and reorganizes how we see the world. Now everything is touched by this language, this music, and it thereby opens into you and therefore opens onto the world. It structures and changes the way we relate to that world. To be initiated into that language can also mean a way of reading, and once you have learned to read a certain way, the texts and contexts that you encounter begin to speak to each other in strange and
wonderful ways. It is the way in which these moments resonate with each other that constitute the music, the rhythm, of meaning. In *Comfort Woman*, a similar role is played by shamanic music and its performance of possession.

There is an especially evocative scene at the end of Keller’s novel after the mother passes away. While sorting through her mother’s belongings, the daughter finds and plays an audiocassette tape. In the effort of trying to sort through the task of how to remember her mother’s life, Beccah sorts through her late mother’s belongings and she finds a box: “I slapped the lock on the box, snapping the hinge, and unearthed something unexpected under the tangle of jewelry: a cassette tape marked “Beccah.”” (172). Beccah remembers that her mother would often perform a blessing or an exorcism for her clients and their family ghosts. Her mother would tape the ceremony, “capturing the voices of the spirits as they spoke through her” (172).

My mother slipped the cassette into our tape recorder. After a prelude of whirs and scratching, my mother’s voice—accompanied by a beating drum—wailed out of the recorder.

“Yaaak!” I shoved my hands against my ears. “What are you doing, Mommy?”

My mother slapped down my hands. “You should listen, learn,” she said. “This will be you one day.”

“Not!” I yelled. “No way. I’m not going to scream like that for nothing.”

“Not for nothing,” my mother said. I am crying for the dead. To show proper respect. To show love.”
We listened to my mother’s cries and moans, to the heartbeat of the drum, until the tape wound down. I knew that as a fortune-teller and spirit medium, she was paid to console or cajole the dead. (172)

_Comfort Woman_ while delineating the possibilities of the performative poetics of shaman possession as a form of witness nevertheless introduces an interesting third-party: the technology of recording. It is part of the text’s infinite complexity that Beccah’s mothers’ final words come to Beccah in the form of a recording. Beccah’s mother tells her to listen and to learn from these recordings. Thus, the recording is not the repetition of the performance, but in this new context, it becomes a tool of pedagogy, an exercise of sorts, and an altogether new performance. It serves a new, or reconfigured purpose. What is a copy? Or, what is the status of recording and its relationship to the act of witness and listening in _Comfort Woman_?

Beccah does not play the tape right away. She takes her time. Even while she is constantly touching and grazing the tape, turning it around in her hands, she works from the outside in, reading the many newspaper articles and letters that she finds along with the tape in her mother’s box: “I remembered my mother saying this as I fingered the tape she had marked as mine. Under this cassette, bound with a rubber band, was an envelope stuffed with paper and yellowing newspapers articles” (173). Among the documents and articles, she finds two missing-person reports, one from the American embassy in Seoul and the other from Red Cross: ““Dear Mrs. Akiko (Kim Soon Hyo) Bradley,”’ they read. “I am sorry to inform you that we can find no trace of your sisters—Kim Soon Mi, Kim Soon Hi, Kim Soon Ja—presumed dead or residing in North Korea.”’” (173). It takes Beccah a while to realize that the letter, addressed to Kim Soon Hyo, is her own mother,
I had to read these opening lines twice before I understood who was who, that my mother once belonged to a name, to a life, that I had never known about. I sat, surrounded by the papers, by the secrets she had guarded and cultivated like a garden. I sat and I waited for some way to understand, to know this person called Soon Hyo. (173)

Both Beccah and the reader are introduced, for the first time, to Akiko’s given name: Soon Hyo. From here begins the only section, between the alternating sections, that belongs to the name “Soon Hyo.” This section, if it appears to be the autobiography of Soon Hyo, is actually the autobiography of her mother. It begins, “My mother died more than once in her life” (175). The slim section is entirely about her own mother and, simultaneously, about colonial Korea and the days leading up to Independence. Her mother was part of Ewha Woman’s College and she had joined the throngs of farmers, merchants, and students who protested in the streets. During the protests, her lover is mowed down in the streets. Having passed out, she awakens to the sound of her mother (Soon Hyo’s grandmother) clipping her toenails, part of a ritual practiced to prepare a deceased body for burial rites. The mother feigns her daughter’s death, and in secret, the daughter (Soon Hyo’s mother) is sent away to a neighboring village and married off to Soon Hyo’s father, “my mother never heard her name again” (180). Only when it came time to bury her mother does Soon Hyo realize that no one knew her mother’s name. But, Soon Hyo does remember that her mother had kept a special box, a space to store various bits: fingernails, newspaper articles, her wedding dress, gold thread, and the “fine hemp cloth with which she wanted, but would never have the time, to stitch her own shroud” (181). Soon Hyo narrates,

While I sip, I try to think of the words to a prayer I can offer for my mother. I cannot. Instead I will tell my daughter a story about her grandmother. I sift
through memory, and this is what I say. […] In the box I hold for my daughter, I keep treasures of my present life […] And a thin black cassette tape that will, eventually, preserve of a few pieces, the secrets, of our lives. I start with our names, my true name and hers: Soon Hyo and Bek-hap. I speak for the time when I leave my daughter, so that when I die, she will hear my name and know that when she cries she will never be alone. (182-3)

In a confusing chain of stories about mothers of mothers, and boxes that tell the stories of other boxes, we bear witness to something. Yet, what we bear witness to it is not a testament to the life and death of one individual but a relationship that addresses each other across the threshold of life and death. These histories, and their recordings, perform a history. Written on the underside of this performance is the opportunity to listen, to learn, and to hear an address of love, one that is constituted by the hopes that the recipient will never be alone. The narrative takes the form of a story within a story and thereby creates an autobiography of impossible attribution, one that is made up of a chain of witnesses and gaps in memory that allows the subject of the story to be multiple. Reminiscent of the beautifully crafted Russian matryoshka dolls, the form of the novel models a notion of reported speech as heteroglossia. It models reported speech as a form of witness or a concept of possession—the state of being possessed by something else, to let an other inhabit or overwhelm you.

One morning, Beccah does not feel well. She tells her mother she needs to stay home from school, but her mother drags her out of bed:

“I already called, said you were too sick. That we have to go to the doctor.”

“Oh,” I said, pulling off my mother’s gown. “Why didn’t you say that’s where we’re going?”

37 The etymological root for matryoshka is ‘matron’—mother.
My mother signed, then spoke slowly: “Because we’re not. I only told
them something they could understand.” (189)

She leads Beccah to her garden and to the chicken wire enclosing their property. Her mother
steps through the fence, but Beccah, at first, cannot find the opening (189). Her mother carefully
grasps at a particular nexus of the fence and eases the wire apart: “the fence split wide enough
for me to insert my body, then snapped shut behind me” (189). To cross into the clearing and to
cross the threshold of the stream, Beccah relies on her mother to read the structure of the chicken
wire fence. They cross a stream, and Beccah’s mother tells her to dance and begins to do so
herself, singing “a song with no words” (190). Beccah begs her mother to stop and confesses, “I
vowed that if she went into a trance, I would leave her here in the woods, making my own way
back into sanity” (190). But, her mother tells her, “Let the river speak to you. Listen to what it
has to say, to what you have to hear.” (190). For all her “insanity,” her mother proves a powerful
reader of barriers, who
knows where to locate the looseness that will allow them to pass through.
Despite the poetry and beauty of this scene of dancing, what, however, must not be romanticized
is the fact that in this moment Beccah must burden the responsibility of being the guardian figure.
Even as she follows her mother through the fence and across the river, she has to measure the
distance from and negotiate a “way back to sanity”. Beccah feels it is her duty to shield her
mother, and also to give an account of her mother to the outside world. It is Beccah who must
contend with the outside world and keep her mother, and herself, safe. The task of translation
becomes nothing short of keeping safe, it becomes a matter of survival and assimilation, or
having to find the way back. And because Beccah must burden this task of translation, she
misses something: she misses the beauty of this moment and she misses this opportunity to listen.

Before Beccah plays the tape, before she listens to the tape, she realizes,
Like the river in my blood, my mother waited for me to fly to her, waited for me to tell her I was ready to hear what she had to say. I never asked, but maybe she was telling me all the time that I wasn’t listening. (191)

The river in her blood, interestingly enough, cannot be traced according to a line of familial bloodlines. The history or the legacy of the river can only be traced back to Soon Hyo’s own escape from the camps, her encounter with Induk, and her initiation into a shamanic community of a thousand spirits. The shamanic tradition was an organized community of adopted daughters within a larger patriarchal society. It was common practice for orphaned girls to become young initiates. Thus, the shamanic community had a marginal and marginalized status. But, at the same time, within a society that organized itself around family lineage, it provided a different mode of kinship, an emphasis on performative communication, and a different mode of listening.

Beccah realizes that she wanted to hear her mother’s voice. So, she plays the tape recording:

Wanting to hear her voice once more, I unpacked the “Beccah” tape—my mother’s last message, last gift to me—I had carried back from the Manoa house. But just as when I was a child listening in on my mother’s sessions with her clients, just as when I listened to that one tape many years ago, I heard, when I first began playing my mother’s tape in the apartment I had chosen for myself, only senseless wails, a high-pitched keening relieved by the occasional gunshot of drums. Still, I listened, but only when I stopped concentrating did I realize my mother was singing words, calling out names, telling a story. I turned the volume knob on the stereo until my mother’s voice shivered up the walls, as if the louder the words, the easier I would be able to understand the story. (191, my emphasis)
Beccah does not immediately understand her mother’s singing. There is no magical instance of translation. The wails still, for the most part, remain senseless. What was opaque in her childhood, remains opaque for Beccah. But, a shift occurs when she listens with less concentration, with a kind of looseness, one not keening for a certain type of translation, and then something does come through the otherwise untranslatable parts of the recording. What is important is that the recording does not give itself entirely over to Beccah, it remains, for the most part, untranslatable. But encoded within a message Beccah will never master, and does not ever master, is one that comes through fragmented and incomplete:

As the tape wound on, I rummaged through the kitchen cabinets for paper and pen, wanting to write down my mother’s song. […] After filling several notebook pages with black scrawl, I stopped the recorder. The scraps of paper seemed inadequate, small and disjointed. Needing a bigger canvas, I stripped the sheet from my bed, laid it on the living room floor in front of the speakers, pressed Play on the recorder, and caught my mother’s words. (191)

While the tape plays, Beccah, at first, tries to transcribe it using another technology of recording, and finds it inadequate. What she must create is a composite between ritual acts known to shamanic practices—the act of ripping of white sheets in order to perform the cathartic release of a spirit’s pain or discontent—and a poetic performance. She re-creates and re-imagines the recording using an embodied form of practice and performance that also incorporates the recording itself.

Derrida in *Of Hospitality* writes, “there is a madness in the relationship to the mother which introduces us to what is enigmatic in the homely. The mother’s madness threatens homeliness. The mother as unique, matchless, as the place of language, is what makes madness
possible, as that possibility of madness that is always open” (88). This means that there is something exceptionally terrifying and lonely about being a child and witnessing the madness of your mother. According to Derrida, there is a fundamental, ontological anxiety with regard to the idea of a mad mother, the unraveling of an orderly home. So, to witness the madness of your mother, to see her unravel, according to Derrida, is a particularly frightening thing for a child. Beccah remarks,

Not once did my mother sing my name. And though primarily in English, this tape was not for me, was addressed not to me but to her mother, a final description of her mother’s death and feast. Faithful in performing the death anniversary chesa, my mother proved to be dutiful and dependable as a daughter in a way she never was as a mother. (191)

This excerpt describes the impossible tension, the question, which lies at the heart of Comfort Woman. A moment tinged with resentment but also understanding, Beccah claims that her mother was a better daughter than she was a mother. Between Soon Hyo and Beccah, there are moments when their roles as mother and daughter have to be reversed, and this reversal is entrenched in the material and social circumstances of their American lives. Beccah’s role as child-translator is part of this reversal. This is further complicated by the fact that Beccah comes from a line of women—both Soon-Hyo and Soon-Hyo’s mother—whose relationship to the mother tongue was anything but straightforward or homely. For these women—Beccah, Soon-Hyo, and Soon-Hyo’s mother—the mother tongue is uncanny. But, there is something peculiar and singular to and for a child whose mother might have appeared mad to the world, to the daughter herself at times.
Derrida writes, “the essence of madness must be related to the essence of hospitality, in the area of this uncontrollable outburst toward the one who is closest” (92), in response to which Anne Dufourmantelle will write, “[Derrida] leads us to think of the mother tongue as a metaphor for “being-at-home in the other”—a place without place opening onto hospitality—and which as such gestures toward the essence of hospitality” (92). Between Derrida and Dufourmantelle, there is a careful lining up of madness, the mother’s madness, the mother tongue, and hospitality. For those who have known madness, who know what it feels like to feel absolutely apart from your own mother, to feel like a foreigner in your own skin, to those who know what it’s like to be a spy in your own language, these people have a particular insight into hospitality. This special insight is not a place of privilege at all, but it simply is what it is—some subjects have an embodied knowledge of what it feels like to be a stranger in your own home, to lay down every last resort of familiarity, belonging, and safety. And, as a result, they also know what it means to extend hospitality in the face of difference and from within estrangement: the hospital stranger. Then, hospitality is in league with estrangement, and therefore hinges on whether or not we can imagine motherhood in complex ways. Whether or not we can deploy a fortified imagination with regard to motherhood, the mother tongue, and even madness.

In Comfort Woman, the recorder plays to this tension in interesting ways because the matter of its address is not straightforward. Labeled “Beccah”, it is in no way simply for Beccah. As Beccah points out it addresses Soon Hyo’s own mother but also names the comfort women of the camps. And yet, it is primarily in English. The very language that Soon Hyo conflated with her husband, for Soon Hyo, it is the language of violence and coercion. Why record this song in English? If the contents are not addressed explicitly to Beccah, the language itself bears witness to the fact that it anticipates her as its listener. In the language that, for Beccah, was the language
of mediation, of embarrassment, of resentment toward her mother’s lack of fluency and social norms, this is the language that Soon Hyo sings, but in a form that hardly makes sense and remains opaque. Thus, beyond the letter of content, it is a performative gesture of kindness toward Beccah. Soon Hyo, despite her lack of fluency, reproduces the language that her daughter probably wished on her. She crafts this last address in the language that is most difficult for her. If it cannot reverse the burden of translation that Beccah felt throughout her childhood, it is still a gesture. Without saying a word to Beccah, the song, because of the language in which it is sung, says volumes to Beccah about love, about regret, and all the things that remain unsaid.

Toward the end, Beccah adds her own voice and she joins the thick of the song:

I added my own voice, an echo until I stumbled over a term I did not recognize:

*Chongshindae*. I fit my words into my mouth, syllable by syllable, and flipped through my Korean-English dictionary, sounding out a tough, possible translation: Battalion slave. […] I rewound the tape where my mother spoke of the

*Chongshindae*, listening to her accounts of crimes made against each woman she could remember, so many crimes and so many names […] (193)

The atonal shamanic song that ensues is sung on behalf of the women who did not survive the comfort stations. Aleatory but also highly stylized, the song relies on a language of repetition and rhythm rather than a linear narrativization of a chain of events. Nothing about this recorded testimony would service something like a legal adjudication: it is hearsay upon hearsay. The recorded testimony is a thick polyvocal song. When the form of testimony is understood as a juridical, monadic form yoked to a discrete individual, it forestalls and flattens certain representational possibilities. What would it mean then to re-possess these forms and effect a critical departure from within them?
*Comfort Woman* is a work that bears to an entangled discourse: a semi-transparent hive of different events, different time frames, tropes, written in the symbolic language that draws its affective energies from histories of Japanese colonialism, racial intermarriage, U.S. immigration, women’s mental health, militarized sexual labor, etc. In order to expand how we understand the stories of diasporic women, whose traumas stem from multiple histories and multiple regions, it requires a reinvigorated concept of trauma studies, translation theory, and a de-individuated notion of relationality. With only a handful comfort women survivors left, the question of witness is more urgent than ever. By querying the status of second-generation figures of witness and translation, we can begin to theorize new possibilities for witness. But, I am not talking about an overly optimistic sense of a diffuse and universalized notion of witness. While the question of a proxy witness is worth asking—the act of witness that can go beyond the subject of experience—it does not mean that these stories are indestructible. They are incredibly tenacious but infinitely vulnerable because they are constituted by and are the constitution of relationality. When we destroy the conditions of possibility for people to relate (to themselves, to others, to concepts, etc.), we destroy the possibility of witness. By perpetuating models of proof and individuated narratives, we isolate our selves. When we fail to create relationships with difference, with other people, with other stories, occasions to implicate ourselves, then we have forfeited an ethical responsibility to listen—then, and only then, are these testimonies fundamentally and irrevocably put in danger.
CONCLUSION
Memoirs of a Polar Bear

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point [...] a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux
—Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (80)

Memoirs of a Polar Bear weaves together the memoirs of three generations of polar bears—an unnamed matriarch, Tosca and Knut. The unnamed matriarch is a bygone star of the circus. In her retirement, the Soviet she-bear finds that, against her will, the traumatic memories of her childhood as a circus trainee continue to come back to her, and she has trouble breathing. As a way to cope with these episodes, she sets out to craft her autobiography. The she-bear, interestingly enough, does not begin the project of an autobiography in order to record memory or her history, but to recall it: “But I thought a diary was for recording the day’s events. I want to write to call back to mind something I can no longer remember.” “The superintendent listened to me and then casually made one more suggestion: “So write an autobiography!”” (14). She shows an early unfinished manuscript to an old lover, a Sea Lion, who works for a publishing firm and she realizes that “publishing an autobiography was a far more dangerous acrobatic feat” (19). The writerly she-bear does not receive any compensation for her work, and appeased with the occasional chocolate bar, the Sea Lion and his publishing firm make a pretty penny off her wildly popular autobiography: “It couldn’t have been Herr Eisberg who published my text illegally. Probably Sea Lion had sold Eisberg the translation rights without informing me. In this way, my text was transformed into West German currency that vanished in the depths of Sea Lion’s pocket” (33). Even though the bear, well, is a bear, strangely enough once she becomes famous as an author, she is often mistaken for an “ethnic minority” (39). Without reducing the she-bear to an anthropomorphenic figure, or an extended metaphor, the text invites the comparison
and the question: how does a woman of colour author an autobiography? How and in what ways does it produce value? More specifically, it probes how authoring an autobiography is entangled within an arena of power—the industry of publishing, the constraints of genre, and the politics of translation. When the Sea Lion reads the she-bear’s manuscript, he tells her to skip any instances of “political criticism” and “philosophy”: “What your readers want to know is how you mastered the high art of stagecraft without losing your wildness, and what that felt like. Your experiences are important, not your thoughts.” (31, my emphasis). When a she-bear, an unusual subject to say the least, becomes recognized for a certain craft, the readers want to know how she accomplished this without losing her “wildness.” The text subtly comments on how the autobiographies of women of colour are consumable only in so far as they remain experiential. The she-bear must retain her organic wildness. She discloses that,

It was a great misfortune for me that Herr Eisberg was a talented translator. He turned my bearish sentences into artful literature that soon was praised in a celebrated West German newspaper. Admittedly there were no literary critics lauding my autobiography for its lyricism. All the praise was based on different criteria altogether, criteria I didn’t understand. […] They discovered my autobiography as something that might be used as proof of the socialist abuse of animals. (34, my emphasis)

The Russian speaking she-bear recognizes that there is a particular set of criteria at work in evaluating her writing. She intuits that the translation of her manuscript has been used to prop up a political line, and so she decides to try to learn German so she can avoid translation.

“But this way I can learn German. I’ll write in German, and you can save time. No more translations.”
“No, that’s out of the question! You have to write in your own mother tongue. You’re supposed to be pouring out your heart, and that needs to happen in a natural way.”

“What’s my mother tongue?”

“The language your mother speaks.”

“I’ve never spoken with my mother.” (51)

The question of the mother tongue, the most natural and unassuming of assumptions, when posed to a polar bear gives us pause. What is a mother tongue to a polar bear? Does a polar bear have a mother tongue? The popularity of the bear’s autobiography hinges on its status as an anthropologic case study: natural, apolitical, from the heart (experiential), and in a mother tongue. The she-bear asks herself, “Why can’t I write the present? Why do I have to invent an authentic-sounding past?” (63). From whom do we demand a difficult division of labor? From whom do we demand, and in the same gesture relegate to, the past? Who bears the past, the authentic past (no pun intended)?

The novel brings to the fore a politics of translation, but also how a politics arises from out of the circumstances of translation, the circumstances of writing: “After that I stopped writing anything political, though I’m not entirely sure what’s political and what isn’t” (31). Not unrelatedly, the she-bear writes her autobiography under conditions that remind her of the acrobatic feats of the circus, but with reference to a neoliberal, multicultural rhetoric: “More specifically, I abhor the human stupidity and vanity that takes pride in forcing tigers, lions, and leopards to sit nicely side by side. It reminds of the government choreography that displays brightly garbed minorities in a parade, minorities granted a crumb of political autonomy in exchange for providing an optical simulation of cultural diversity in their country of residence”
The Benjaminian tiger’s leap that takes place in the “arena where the ruling class gives the commands” (“Theses” XIV) comes to life in novel about autobiography but with the added valence of race and gender, despite the fact that the main characters are not even human. Having been cheaply tantalized by the Sea Lion at his office, the she-bear returns to her room and her manuscript:

As soon as I shut the door of my apartment behind me, I sat down at my desk. I was still furious, and the desire to write clamped down my ankle like a trap, refusing to release me. Even as far back as the Middle Ages, there were men like Sea Lion who placed traps in the woods to catch bears alive. They would put flowers on a bear and make him dance in the street. The masses delighted in these performances, and would applaud and throw coins. (28)

Tawada beautifully evokes the double-ness of the trap that attends the task of authoring an autobiography. If we expected the trap to be the expectations of a genre and an uneven terrain of power, the trap is also the desire to write. Caught between the impossibility of not writing and the impossibility of writing, how can a she-bear negotiate these acrobatic feats, these treacherous waters? How does she stand up, find sure footing, on the precarious ice floe that appears and reappears like a thematic motif throughout the text?

*Memoirs of a Polar Bear* is a transnational text, not simply because it unfolds in Russian, East Germany, West Germany, unified Germany, and Canada. This text follows three generations of polar bears who are, respectively, part of a national circus, a national ballet troupe, and a national zoo. And yet, it seems infinitely strange to ask a polar bear what nationality she is. Tosca, the matriarch’s daughter, reminds the readers that “for polar bears,

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38 Yoko Tawada’s novel *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* was published both in Japanese and German. Recently, it was translated in English by Susan Bernofsky, which was a fortuitous turn of events for me since I cannot read either Japanese or German.
national identity has always been a foreign concept. It’s common for them to get pregnant in Greenland, give birth in Canada, then raise the children in the Soviet Union. They possess no nationality, no passport. They never go into exile and cross national borders without a visa” (86). Notably, Tosca undoes the naturalization of national identity, but she also marks how the circumstances of giving birth, how the mother, is part of a discursive composite where mother, nation, and nature are mutually enabling fictions. In order to write her autobiography, a text that gets deployed as a tool of nationalistic propaganda, the she-bear must learn human grammar. For the purposes of learning grammar, the matriarch she-bear reads Kafka’s short story about the mouse-people and Josefine, their performing singer. Josefine’s song rises up from within times of grave national danger, during moments of historical disturbance. But according to the story’s ominous end, the mouse-people will forget Josefine and her song because they are a forgetful nation that doesn’t “go in for history.” Embedded within a memoir about writing an autobiography during the height of the Cold War, Kafka’s short story is evocative of nothing short of national memory and history. Does the concept of nationhood and nationalism foreclose certain histories? Does it induce particular kinds of forgetfulness? But, the polar bear learns that the main character of this story is not a character at all but the loss of memory itself. If Josefine’s song can be understood as a kind of testament to the times, what does it mean that the main character of this testimony is not an individual, or a national community, but the loss itself? This reversal, depicted so evocatively in the relationship between two texts (Tawada’s and Kafka’s), is only possible if the schema of testimony includes a more complex understanding of subject positions, and if testimonial truth refuses to be subsumed within a framework of nationalism, a will to knowledge, and a schema of proof. More specifically, testimony should be considered a
poietic performance and a form that produces ways of relating—fundamentally incommensurate to something like a record, an empty, homogenous repetition.

The she-bear is wily. And she tells us that as dangerous as the circus act is, we would be mistaken if we failed to see its art and craft:

Knights and artisans, perhaps, viewed the bear with contempt, seeing him as a street entertainer flirting with the crowd—flattering, submissive, and dependent. The bear, meanwhile, had quite different goals in mind: he wanted to enter into a state of ecstasy along with his audience or else use his dancing and music to commune with spirits and ghosts. (28)

In this passage, we get the image of a dancing bear, but the bear is refracted by two points of view. Knights and artisans view the bear with contempt, and we see how the bear may or may not be acting out a submissive position to win the crowd. Perhaps the bear utilizes the crowd’s contempt as a shield. At the same time, the text intimates the different qualities of an ecstatic performance, of music, and communion with the audience and the dead. There is no simple way out here because by setting it up as one or the other, the text reproduces the trap set for the dancing bear. As readers, we are tempted to read the scene through the second vantage point, but we cannot unread or unlearn the bear’s disenfranchisement, its material conditions, or escape through an overdetermined reading of subjective agency. It has become trendy in academia recently to insist on subjective agency. I think this is important work, but I also cannot shrug off a rising suspicion that there are circumstances that produce a peoples who are profoundly disenfranchised, profoundly abject. But, at the same time, I cannot unread or unlearn these enigmatic lines concerning ecstasy, dancing, music, and a communion with spirits and ghosts. I
cannot unread these two frames that occur within the same arena, at the same time. Tawada’s
text frames the performing bear and makes it impossible to disentangle these two positions.

Toward the end of the section, the she-bear begins to author a different kind of
autobiography. As she watches a young man riding a low bicycle and practicing acrobatic turns,
she also watches him fall over on his side: “Clearly he was training for the circus stage, even if
he didn’t know when or even if he would ever be allowed to perform” (68). What does it mean to
train for a performance for which we might never be allowed to perform? What does it mean to
exercise an acrobatic pro-ject that unfolds within the space of an even if? After the bear witnesses
the young man fall, she continues to watch him:

His bare knees turned red. But no pain would keep him from continuing. He got
up and for his next number attempted a headstand on the moving bike. The word
“steering wheel” occurred to me—that’s it, a steering wheel is just what I need to
steer my destiny. For this, I’ll have to keep writing my autobiography. My bicycle
is my language. I won’t write about the past, I’ll write about all the things that are
still going to happen to me. My life will unfold in exactly the way I’ve set it down
on the page. (69)

Her autobiography then is not the record of what has happened, but records an as-yet future that
will, assumedly, inflect the future as it happens. It has become an inextricable part of the text and
texture of the present and the future. Similarly, the she-bear asks herself, “How is an author to
avoid repetition when one and the same scene keeps repeating itself in her life?” (69). As an
answer, or perhaps in lieu of one, she consults her friend Friedrich who owns a bookstore. He
recommends for her three books. From these books, she selects certain sections that she copies
out by hand, and it becomes increasingly unclear what parts of the text belong to which book, or even which parts are or are not copies/quotes:

While I was copying out these passages from the book, I entered the story being told as its protagonist. I wanted to adopt what was being told as my own life story and live it myself, down to the last punctuation mark. I read every sentence aloud and copied it down, but at some point I stopped looking at the pages—a voice from inside the book was whispering the story to me. I listened and wrote. (71)

From this point on, the pronoun “I” can never be taken for granted. It comes to mark the site of an assemblage where the borders between copy and autobiography become irrelevant, where the borders between what really happened and what was imagined are less important, and the I is possessed by a many, a many who, nevertheless, are not false witnesses because their lives touch at critical points. Thus, the following two sections, about Tosca the matriarch’s daughter and Knut, her grandson, unfold within an imaginative space whose potentiality is, nevertheless, not curtailed because there is every possibility that it happened just so. It can never be clear if the following “memoirs” were copies, or even if they were, that it did not, in fact, happen. And this space is, according to Tawada, a snowy field covered in ice that stretches out to a horizon. A horizon speaks to possible futures, to a beyond that stretches the imagination:

I gaze out at the wide field: not a house, not a tree, everything is covered in ice all the way to the horizon. With the first step I take, I realize that the ground is made of ice floes. My feet sink along with the floe I’ve just stepped on, already I’m up to my knees in ice-cold water, then my belly is wet, then my shoulders. I have no fear of swimming, and the cool sensation of the icy water is rather pleasant, but I am not a fish and can’t stay in the water forever. There’s a surface I took to be an
edge of the mainland, but the moment I touch it, the entire thing tilts to one side and disappears into the sea. *I stop looking for the mainland—just a substantial chunk of ice will do* [...] I balance on top of it, staring straight ahead, feeling the ice melt away from second to second beneath the warm soles of my feet. This ice island is still as large as my desk, but eventually it will no longer be there. (73, my emphasis)

The beauty of a horizon’s suggestiveness can look thin and cheap when we stand on precarious footing. As much as this excerpt is a concrete reference and commentary on our precarious relationship to the environment—the reality of a quickly melting North Pole and drowning polar bears—it doubles, without losing any of its materiality, as a commentary on a different kind of threatened space: the literary imagination. And, the work of imagining otherwise is very much affected by our social and material circumstances. If not the absolute conditions of possibility, the two are, surely, entangled. It is from this precarious space of drifting ice that Tosca and Barbara speak to each other.

The section that focuses on Tosca is, surprisingly, narrated by Barbara. Barbara works for the circus and part of her job is to train its animals, but Tosca and Barbara develop a very strong and unusual friendship. Outside their training sessions, Barbara’s narrative is interrupted by strange dream sequences that feature a space of white expanse that blurs all sorts of boundaries:

I saw the black flame in Tosca’s pupils flicker. Everything around me was filled with light, so bright it blinded me and made the line dividing the wall from the ceiling disappear. I still felt no fear of Tosca, but there was something frightening in the atmosphere surrounding her. I’d entered a realm where it was forbidden to set foot. And there, in the darkness, the grammars of many languages lost their
color, they melted and combined, then froze solid again, they drifted in the ocean and joined the drifting floes of ice. I sat on the same iceberg as Tosca and understood every word she said to me. (98)

Here where the grammars of not one or two but many languages lose their colour, this is not a scene of whitewashing but something entirely different. We get a portrait of the plasticity of language where the difference between the languages is not erased, but they melt to be reconfigured and recombined, only to freeze solid again—language is set adrift. The narrator, assumedly Barbara, refers to this realm as a “sphere situated halfway between the animal and human worlds” (102). It is worth looking closely at this dreamscape and how it is described:

A snowfield extended between me and the jagged horizon. I spread a piece of hide on the hard, snowy ground and sat down. Tosca followed, placing her chin in my lap and closing her eyes. She had no voice. The ice goddess had lost her voice after going several thousand years without speaking. I could read her thoughts, they were as clear as if they’d been written in soft pencil on drawing paper. (104)

Drawing paper is usually the kind that you find bound with black, plastic spirals at the top—it is thick, substantial, and textured. The surface has fine, thin ridges, and if you use a soft pencil on it, the line you draw is dark and bumpy. Not only do you see what is written, you see the terrain of the material you are writing on. The writing and the material, it is in their meeting, the inscription, that bring each other out. Reading someone’s thoughts, at least in this space, is not the labor of a transcription but a textured act, closer to reading braille rather than a traditional sense of reading where the eyes scan a piece of paper. The text describes the space as a snowfield of extension between the speaker and the jagged horizon where the jagged horizon folds neatly into the analogy to drawing paper. But the point is neither in the snowfield nor the
jagged horizon—much like the act of writing cannot be reduced to either the pencil or the paper. The text reads, “a snowfield extended between me and the jagged horizon” (104). The space structures the relationship between whatever is “me” and a jagged horizon. The snowfield is a beautiful, uneven landscape that is created in the space of an extension that expands out as an in between, a long hyphen, of relation. The friendship that develops between the she-bear and Barbara is a singular and mysterious phenomenon, but it is also very clear and uncomplicated:

“Why do I feel so lonely?” I asked Tosca.

“You aren’t alone. I’m here.”

“But no one except me believes I can speak with you. Sometimes I wonder if it’s even true. Lots of people want to talk with me—but not about the war, they only want to talk about the circus.

[…]

“I’ll listen to you” (142)

Barbara is lonely. Surrounded by people, she finds they are willing only to listen to a select slant of her experiences. The extraordinary and singular quality of Barbara and Tosca’s friendship can be distilled in this exchange: you aren’t alone, I’m here. The snowfield, the white expanse of drifting ice, is the space of the social, relational link: a last reserve and a shaky foothold.

Tosca confides in Barbara about her earliest memory as a bear cub, and the earliest memory of her mother. And then she turns to Barbara and asks: “What sort of woman was your mother?” (104) Barbara is surprised by the question: “Now it was my turn to talk” (105). In an episodic conversation that spans a series of waking reveries, eventually, the two discuss Tosca’s mother and her famed autobiography:
Tosca’s voice was as clear as a thin, transparent sheet of ice. “I, on the other hand, can’t write anything at all.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“My mother already described me as a character in her book.”

“Then I’ll write for you. I’ll write your life story so you can escape from your mother’s autobiography.”

When I made her this promise, I didn’t realize it would be too difficult for me to keep. (110)

Tosca cannot write anything at all, and she attributes this to the fact that she is already described as a character in her mother’s autobiography. What about the form of the autobiography makes complexity difficult? How can it fail to imagine a person or a being? Barbara then suggests, as a remedy, something very peculiar—she volunteers to write Tosca’s autobiography for her. We’re not unfamiliar with this practice because it happens all the time; we refer to them as “ghost writers”: “I ironed smooth the cleaning list with my hand, then picked up the dwarf pencil, and began writing Tosca’s biography in the first person” (111, my emphasis). Barbara writes Tosca’s autobiography for her, but in the first person. From this point on, every time that the pronoun “I” is used, it refers to not Tosca or Barbara, but always both. Barbara discovers that in trying to write Tosca’s biography, what unfolds is her own history. Or rather, the difficulty of telling them apart:

“I promised to write down your life story. But so far I’ve only been talking about my own. I’m terribly sorry.”

“That’s all right. First you should translate your own story into written characters. Then your soul will be tidy enough to make room for a bear.”
“Are you planning to come inside me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m scared.”

We laughed with one voice. (138)

A relation of resonance is formed through making room for one another, where one is brought inside the other. Toward the end of the section, Tosca recalls Barbara: “In Barbara’s memory, two bears intermingled later—the older one was named Tosca, just like me, and Barbara had already kissed her in the 1960s […] I am Old Tosca reborn and carry her memory within me.” (162). The Toscas are doubled, and so this last section is narrated by an already multiple “I”, doubly multiplied:

In the time since our first kiss, her human soul had passed bit by bit into my bear body. A human soul turned out to be less romantic than I’d imagined. It was primarily of languages—not just ordinary, comprehensible languages, but also many broken shards of language, the shadows of languages, and images that couldn’t turn into words. (163)

Barbara welcomes Tosca inside her, and Tosca reciprocates by making room for Barbara’s human soul bit by bit. The “I” is a composite and entangled position, and Memoirs of a Polar Bear brings forth a radically rich, complex enunciative position that is able to host a shared testimony.

For this extraordinary friendship, Tosca gives up her son, Knut. Even though she bears a male polar cub, she entrusts “Knut’s care to another animal” (164). At the end of Tosca’s memoir (or Tosca squared /Barbara), we are introduced briefly to Knut and his life, but this is quickly interrupted: “But all that is his story. I don’t wish to write about the life of my son as if I
could take credit for it. Among the mothers of Homo sapiens, there are some who treat their son like capital. My task, on the other hand, is to narrate the magnificent life story of my friend Barbara” (164). Tosca does not give up motherhood, but it is Barbara that she fosters, not her biological son, Knut:

   It pained me that after 1989 Tosca was harshly criticized for having rejected her son Knut. Some said that Tosca had relinquished her son to strangers because she was from the GDR. Others wrote in their newspapers that Tosca had lost her maternal instincts while working in a circus known for its animal abuses, under typical Socialist stress levels […] Equally misplaced was the notion “maternal instinct.” With animals, childrearing is a matter not of instinct but of art. It can’t be very much different for humans or they wouldn’t keep adopting children of different species. (92, my emphasis)

What comes under scrutiny in Memoirs of a Polar Bear is this union between the mother and a natural, maternal instinct. According to the text, for animals, childrearing is an art, not a natural instinct. Therefore, motherhood, maternity, becomes independent of physical birth. Motherhood cannot be circumscribed by sex, biology, or even gender. Memoirs of a Polar Bear paints a portrait of motherhood whereby two women can mother each other; motherhood is independent of having given birth; a woman can give birth to someone else’s autobiography; men can become mothers to cubs; and perhaps most important of all, there is something intimately resonant between motherhood and writing. Knotted together in this section of the text, is the art of motherhood—motherhood and its relationship to art and the labour of art—and the concept of adoption. Together, they destabilize the idea of the biological womb and, in its place, propose a
spirit of motherhood that is not unrelated to art, and by extension the craft of writing and the act of bearing witness to another.

Knut, on the other hand, is raised, fostered, and mothered in a zoo by Mathias. The love between Knut and his human mother is depicted tenderly and lovingly in the last section of *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*. Almost near the very end, Knut looks out at the audience of visitors to the zoo, and he sees a crowd full of women and their strollers: “The faces of the mothers standing behind the strollers taught me how many different sorts of mothers there could be” (247). *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* gestures toward a concept of maternal complexity, and toward a concept of motherhood as radical hospitality. Yoko Tawada, in a short and brilliant essay “Seven Stories, Seven Mothers,” writes, “And although anyone can play the role of a mother, that doesn’t mean that they are motherly” (1). She continues later on in the essay, “What fascinates me, in the image of the mother, has nothing to do with nature or with family. Rather it has to do with a space, from which thoughts and images emerge and develop. The air in this space has a dense, material quality like water in a womb. In it is often impossible to distinguish what lives in the space from the space itself” (4).39

Knut attends a dinner party where he happens to overhear two people deep in conversation full of dramatic gestures. He takes note of the deliberate tonal changes and he realizes that what is taking place is an artful performance and impersonation. Knut watches as a stranger impersonates a conversation for the benefit of his addressee. During the animated sketch, both Knut and the readers are introduced to the central figure of this impersonation:

39 I would like to thank my dear friend and colleague Paul McQuade for providing me with his own translation of Yoko Tawada’s “Seven Stories, Seven Mothers.” The translation is entirely his.
But wait, here’s the best part: A gray-haired, elegant lady got up. She was probably in her early eighties. She said in a calm voice: ‘But almost all the parents whose children go on to live in same-sex partnerships are heterosexual. They’re the ones who produced these homosexual children. So if you want to prevent this, you should outlaw straight marriage.’” A few of the men trumpeted with laughter, others grinned. “But I’m not sure how many in the audience understood the lady’s words. So many people are blockheads, impervious to irony, humor, and innuendo. And yet it’s so important for minds to constantly be stretched and turned in all directions. I started clapping right in front of my TV screen, I wanted to show what respect I had for her. It was the author of that book…What was the title again?” (237)

Although the text leaves it ambiguous, the gray-haired lady is likely Barbara, and the book that the man refers to is probably the autobiography she wrote on behalf of Tosca, the one she writes in the first-person: their shared autobiography. What comes to Knut then from degrees of citation, full of irony, humor, and suggestive tones, is a brief encounter with these two women, one facilitated by the quotable gestures of a stranger.

This quality of maternity is not equal to women; it is, at the same time, the inseparable quality of my mother that I cannot possibly separate out from her person. The act of giving room to another person, it is that quality that engenders the mother as a mother. But, this kindness is a reach far beyond bloodlines, families, or the circumstances of biology. In Derrida’s Of Hospitality, he writes, “absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them” (25).
"Memoirs of a Polar Bear" features a wide cast of strangers, and the stranger is a recurring figure in the novel—Barbara’s name, etymologically, means stranger or foreigner. There is a South Korean TV drama, an adaption of a Japanese TV drama by the same name, entitled *Mother*. It is about a woman, abused in her childhood and sent to an orphanage and later adopted by her current adoptive mother. She is fascinated by birds and their migratory trajectories—their flight lines—that span continents. She becomes a researcher of birds and their migratory patterns. At the beginning of the series, she applies and is accepted by a prestigious research institute based in Iceland. But, in the interim, she teaches at a local elementary school where she meets a little girl. Out alone at odd hours of the night, skimpily dressed, and too thin, the teacher recognizes the signs of domestic abuse. When she realizes that the abuse is life threatening, the teacher risks every form of comfort and stability by kidnapping the girl and embarking on a dangerous journey of flight to Iceland. This is the dialogue of the final scene:

“Teacher, what did you think of me when we first met? Did you feel sorry for me?”

“No, I thought, how can there be another girl just like me?”

Through a link of trauma that engenders their relationship as mother and daughter through friendship and not the circumstances of giving birth, they become mother and daughter. The teacher’s adoptive mother has a wonderful line that I will paraphrase and translate: *To become a mother is to give your self over, completely, to another small being.*

It is at the conclusion that I return to Derrida’s “The Night Watch,” which in the French is “La Veilleuse”—she who stands by, who remains awake, she who holds vigil when all other lights are extinguished. This is the language of the witness. It is also in this particular essay that Derrida will “distinguish between the mother and maternity” (88): “The mother was never only,
never uniquely, never indubitably the one who gives birth […] Maternity thus cannot be reduced to the mother. But what are we to make of a maternity that would not be the maternity of the mother?” (99-100). What is this maternity that Derrida speaks of? What is the quality of this maternity? In order to begin to follow his thoughts on this question, we need to follow Derrida into the realm of matricide:

[I]t follows that one can dream of doing away with the mother, some particular mother, though one will never be done with the maternity of the mother. Maternity goes on, and will always go on, defying matricide. Maternity is that which will never be done calling for and escaping impossible matricide. And thus impossible mourning. And it will never be done provoking writing. Watching over it and surveying it, like a specter that never sleeps. (88)

According to Derrida, it is in trying to win over mastery from this maternity, this impossible will to mastery, that will author, will engender, the desire for autobiography, autobiography as auto-parthenogenesis: “an interminable attempted murder. For maternity always survives, by coming back, by returning to its haunts [en revenante]. It never sleeps; it not only keeps watch [veille] over the survivors but keeps vigil for them [elle veille les survivants]; it surveys them and survives them because those who come after it are also dead children” (94). Derrida will continue in this vein of maternity as a haunting: “Maternity is generative of the phantasm as such, it is the genitor—I dare not say the mother—of the phantasmatic” (95). The desire for mastery over maternity, to kill maternity, stems from the desire for a kind of forgetfulness. In a push to forget the past, to destroy the trace of a trace, to leap over that which returns, the desire to engender oneself is the ethos of autobiography. According to Derrida, the auto-parthenogenesis of autobiography is at odds with the hospitality of maternity even as the desire
for autobiography is engendered by maternity. Thus, maternity is consonant with the figure of
the witness, and with redress. It concerns itself, always, with the question: what kind of writing
could bear witness? Asked differently, the question of bearing witness is simultaneously also
about what kind of writing would constitute “writing without writing” (103). What might this
“other writing” look like? Derrida writes that “altered writing” is “the one that has always
worked over my own in silence, at once, simpler and more convoluted, like a counterwitness
protesting at each and every sign against my writing through writing” (103). The “other writing”
works over the text of the autobiography in silence, and like a counterwitness it protests at every
sign against the writing, the auto-parthenogenetic writing constituted by a sovereign and
individuated “I”, through writing.

I have an odd habit of reading. I read the first thirty pages of a novel and then I skip to the
very end. Bookended by the beginning and the end, I feel safe to continue. This relief has
nothing to do with the logic of chronology but it is a matter of space. I imagined the text as a
space. If I could guarantee the beginning and the end, if I knew they were there, not to entrap me,
but as a safe space, I could read in peace. If I got the ending out of the way, then I could read
with joy. I believe in opening up safe spaces, because I think that our efforts at thought that take
place without the pressures of duress or threat, are worth protecting. To open up as many pockets
of safe spaces as possible and to defend those space furiously. As a teacher, I have a
responsibility to thought, and thought has a responsibility to safe spaces. The habit that I have
continued since childhood is not a matter of compulsion, but one of joy. Unhampered and
uninhibited by the compulsion of a pending ending, if I just got it over with, I was free to be
attentive and careful, to enjoy the details of the text. It was as if by reading the ending, I was able
to suspend it.
Entangled Testimonies is a criticism of testimonial forms. I recognize them as assimilationist techniques. Yet, my argument lies in reading and searching for a trace of the dispossessed histories, the trace of their erasure. Within the entangled forms that also encode violent forms of entanglement—a trap—how do we imagine a way out? Walter Benjamin, in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” writes,

[I]t is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rules. (254-255)

It is incredibly moving for me that, according to Benjamin, what becomes impoverished in us when we are under duress is the capacity for courage, for humor, cunning, and fortitude. Benjamin suggests that reopening a history that is also a wound, in a moment of crisis and danger, is a retroactive force. To reopen the past is, in every way, also to change it—thus, it is an understanding of history that is not equal to, as Benjamin says, recognizing “the way it really was” (VI). To refuse to render up those things like courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude is what will make the difference both in terms of the number and the kind of flightlines we can create. But, I have said elsewhere, a way out is not necessarily freedom. We will take freedom every time, but sometimes we need a way out, and this is not always the same thing as freedom.
From Kafka’s “A Report to the Academy,”

I am afraid that you will not understand exactly what I mean by a way out. I use the word in its fullest and most customary sense. I deliberately do not say freedom. I not mean this great feeling of freedom on all sides. By the by: all too often humans deceive themselves with freedom. (40)

[…]

No, it was not freedom I wanted. Only a way out; to right, to left, in any direction; it was my sole demand; even if a way out too was only a delusion; my demand was small, the delusion would not be any greater. Move on further, further! Anything but stand still with arms raised, pressed against the wall of a crate.

Today I can see it clearly; without the greatest inward calm I would never have been able to escape. And in fact, perhaps I owe everything I have become to the calmness that came over me after the first days there on the ship. But on the other hand, I probably owed that calm to the ship’s crew. (41)

[…]

Above all, the calmness I acquired in the company of these people held me back from any attempt at flight. From my present perspective it seems to me that I had at least an inkling that I would have to find a way out if I wanted to live, but that this way out was not to be reached by flight. I can’t remember whether flight was possible, but I believe it was; for an ape flight should always be possible. With my present teeth I have to be careful even cracking nuts, but with time I should have been able to bite through the lock on the door. I did not. And what would
have been gained by it? I would scarcely have put my head round the door before they would have captured me again and locked me up in an even worse cage; or I could have fled unobserved to one of the other animals opposite me, maybe to the giant snakes, and breathed by last in their embraces; or I might have succeeded in stealing up on deck and jumping overboard, when I would have been tossed on the ocean for a while and would have drowned. Acts of desperation. (41-2)

[...]

By an effort which to this day has not been repeated the whole world over, I have attained the average educational level of a European. That would in itself perhaps be nothing at all, but it is still something insofar as it did help me out of the cage, and made this particular way out available to me, this human way out. There is a phrase that puts it very neatly: taking to the hills; that is what I have done: I’ve taken to them there hills. I had no other way, always assuming that freedom was not an option. (45)
Genealogies: An Addendum

By the time I was introduced to Grace Cho’s *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, I had already been exploring the idea of ‘entanglement’, albeit through Bakhtin. I was, to say the least, surprised to read, near the end of Cho’s book, a notable section dedicated to an ethics of entanglement. By way of a conclusion, she provides a quote from Petar Ramadanovic’s “When ‘To Die in Freedom’ Is Written in English” (191). What Cho highlights as an ethics of entanglement can be traced back to Ramandanovic’s essay. It is in citing Cho’s citation of Ramadanovic that I want to speak of the sites of citation.

I was again surprised to discover that the title of Ramandanovic’s essay “When ‘To Die in Freedom’ is Written in English,” is, in fact, a quotation from none other than Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*. Caruth’s text has had an enormous influence on my research (and it goes without saying that Cathy’s work, her teaching, and her capacity as an advising member of my dissertation, has had an effect both profound and decisive). The resonances were striking, and it felt, almost, like a fated instance of coming, through various and unexpected routes, back to certain points of departure. I had come full circle. Why, in a work that ties together questions of witness, writing, trauma, and the specific histories of colonial Korea and the Korean diaspora, was there this inexorable condensation around the word ‘entanglement’? It was only in reading Ramadanovic’s essay that I realized how many times the word ‘entanglement’ as well as expressions like “inextricably bound up” (7,13,75) “inescapably bound” (7) and “deeply tied” (12) appear and reappear throughout *Unclaimed Experience*. How had I missed this? How had I missed this in a text I had read so very many times? It seemed almost ridiculous to have to come to terms with the fact that even after I had titled my dissertation “Entangled Testimonies,” I had failed to flag its significance in the text that constituted, in many ways, my point of departure.
How could I have missed this? Only to return to it, to be recalled to my missing it in the first place but through another, incidental, entry point? It is my suspicion that I did not miss it; or rather, that I did miss it, entirely, at least in terms of a conscious surface. Instead, in imbibing Unclaimed Experience, the keyword had weaved itself into my practices of thinking, had implanted itself in a kind of unconscious idiom, only to resurface, having completely forgotten its origins. I have read Unclaimed Experience, and in reading it again, I will know that I can never really have read it. Already, in the language of my own apologetics, I can hear the echo of Unclaimed Experience and Freud’s Moses and Monotheism. The quality of this condensation was incredible for me only because the entry points were so varied and only occasionally related: Einstein, Bakhtin, Rey Chow, Grace Cho, Petar Ramadanovic, and Cathy Caruth. A strange genealogy.

Citation must be done responsibly, but it must also be the occasion for a creative homage and a spirit of humility. Citation is not merely an instance of scholarship or a part of scholarly writing; thinking is itself the structure of a citation. Peter Ramadanovic’s review of Unclaimed Experience, “When ‘To Die in Freedom’ is Written in English” is a quote from Caruth’s book, but the section that it quotes is also a quote from Freud’s letter to his son Ernst. Therefore, Ramadanovic’s title, simultaneously, cites Caruth and Freud. To quote the essay here is to invoke, at the same time, Ramadanovic, Cathy Caruth, and Freud (and of course, Grace Cho). But it is worth looking at the text quoted in Ramadanovic’s title. Sigmund Freud, May of 1938, is waiting to leave Vienna for London and he writes that two prospects keeps him going in these “grim times”: the idea of rejoining his friends and so as “to die in freedom” (Ramadanovic 54). Ramadanovic comments on Cathy’s comments about the letter, and how the last four words—“to die in freedom”—is written in English:
In the movement from German to English, in the rewriting of the departure within the languages of Freud’s text, that we participate most fully in Freud’s central insight, in Moses and Monotheism, that history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas. (Ramadanovic 54).

The block quote is Ramadanovic’s own block quote of Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience. My citation attributes the quote to Ramadanovic’s essay as the source, but the words are entirely quoted from Unclaimed Experience: quoting a quote within a quote. It is telling that our current practices of citation do not know how to accommodate the model of possession as is made evident by the clunky citation. It knows only a one to one relation between quote and subject. But, the spirit of citation lies in its infinite citability, its ability to grow thick. Caruth reads this moment of translation and address within a larger question of freedom, a freedom that comes from leaving: “Leaving home, for Freud, is also a kind of freedom, the freedom to bring forth his book in England, the freedom, that is, to bring his voice to another place” (23). She remarks, marked again by Ramadanovic, that unlike the rest of the letter that is written in German, this line is written in English:

The announcement of his freedom, and of his dying, is given in language that can be heard by those in the new place to which he brings his voice, to us, upon whom the legacy of psychoanalysis is bestowed. It is significance, moreover, that this message is conveyed not merely in the new language, English, but precisely in the movement between German and English, between the languages of the readers of his homeland and of his departure. (23)
Ramadanovic will argue that these lines, embedded in a back story about running away from a European genocide, can no longer reach today’s Americans without added significance—we will undeniably, inescapably, inextricably, invoke the American myth of freedom, a history of slavery, the Middle Passage, and a different genocide. Ramadanovic will offer, by way of a book review on Unclaimed Experience, his own close and literary reading of Toni Morrison’s Beloved. To this he adds, “What I have argued here is not meant to legitimate a reading of Morrison’s Beloved with Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience or vice versa, or a reading of the African American diaspora by way of, together with, the Jewish diaspora charted in Freud.” (65). He writes,

To be sure, refugees, Jewish people, and African American people have different material, epics, and historical pasts. Yet inevitably there is something in the way of their being that is more than a history, more than a metaphor, and implicates others […] The call to rethink the possibility of history does not imply the forgetting of the past, nor does it halt the search for facts. Rather it implies that we can change our notion of history and with it, possibly, our involvement in each other’s histories—histories and involvements which we are living, as the past is repeated inversely. (65)

To understand this better, it is useful to look at his reading of Caruth’s use of the noun “we”:

To say that my trauma is (tied to) the trauma of another intimates not that there is a “we” but that, instead of the we-that-will-have-been, there is an entanglement beyond all possibility of disengagement. It suggests not the substitution of my wound for your wound, or that you suffer for me (Caruth does not say: my trauma is your trauma, my dead is the death you die), but that an individual (or a
collective) cannot possess or own or conquer that which defines him or her or it

[…] In this sense, my trauma is incomparable to and incompatible with your trauma (62, my emphasis).

By thinking of a mode of witness that does not refer to a structure of substitution but instead works with a frame of incomparability and incompatibility and the impossibility of disengagement, it allows us to rethink the subject of history and the subject of trauma. Thus, Ramadanovic will write that Unclaimed Experience “offers a theory of reading” where “[w]riting is a historical act not because it belongs to the time when the text as written, nor because it lends itself to an immediate referential meaning, but because of the openness of its address and because of the opening that its address provides us as readers” (64). And, in way that ties together the anecdotes provided in this section with his readings of Unclaimed Experience, Ramadanovic writes, “The materiality, the agency of writing cannot be overemphasized here. Writing is not a record by virtue of what is remembered in the form of written data in it, nor because of who its author is, but because of what is recorded by it and gets carried over as a trace” (64). Thus, in order to read the figure of traumatized diasporic women, it requires new practices of reading and creativity, particularly a reinvigorated notion of testimony and translation, testimony as translation. By theorizing a theory of testimony and of translation that is not non-individuated, not monolingual, and thus not equal to a notion of communication as data, it might suggest a way to read history not as a record but a performative trace.

+++ “I want to know what it’s like in a young country with lots of space,” she said. “If you say something out loud, you hear your own voice differently.”

Sparrow nodded.

She said, “Canada.” (357)
— from Madeleine Thien’s Do Not Say We Have Nothing

I didn’t understand what exactly he meant by that, but I did note that the word “Canada” sounded beautiful and cool.

[...]

“Is it really that cold in Canada?”

“Yes, it’s incredibly cold there.”

I dreamed of a frozen city in which the walls of all the buildings were made of transparent ice. Instead of cars, salmon swam through the streets.

I lived with my windows open wide day and night. To me, Berlin was a tropical city. Some nights, the heat held me in its grip and wouldn’t let me fall asleep.

Although it was February, the temperature rose to above freezing. I made up my mind once and for all to emigrate to Canada. (45)

— from Tawada Yoko’s Memoirs of a Polar Bear

There is no way to be indifferent to these excerpts. But, I cannot claim them. How could I claim the story of a girl growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution? How could I lay claim to the story of a migrating polar bear? And yet, I am moved and sad because their words come to me simultaneously through the text of my own personal history. In Entangled Testimonies, I argue for a heteroglossic form that is evocative of a multitude, of a collective history, but one that arises from a relation that can make itself felt in, what is not unrelated to, the personal. When I hear stories of immigration, when I encounter this history, I cannot hear it without thinking about my mother. The structural conditions, the material specificity, the macro-arcs of
histories of migration and displacement are inseparable from my relationship with my mother. This history, its historical and political quality, is what makes her, for me, her without reducing her to this quality. How do you separate out the person from history? When you love someone, it becomes impossible to separate out the strands that belong to what is categorically recognizable as history, as politics, and as personality. It is not simply that my relationship with my mother comes to inflect my understanding of certain histories, but history inflects my relationship with my mother. It is from within this relation, that a history arises.

A name is a strange thing. My mother had always wanted to leave; it did not necessarily matter where, she had just wanted to leave. Her mother had passed away when she was young; she grew up under a stepmother who quite clearly preferred her own biological son.

For my mother, any notion of maternal homeliness was destroyed at a young age.

She told me the story of a time when her father, returned from a seminary conference in Canada, told her that the people in Canada “looked differently”—not “looked different” (although, I am sure, the two are not easily held apart). He told her that, unlike the people at home, the people he had seen in Canada looked out at the world with peace. He read in them a sense of being that was not threatened and that did not threaten. He told her it was probably because there was so much space there. He read in their eyes a sense of being at home, homeliness, which he had misread for hospitality. She tells me that she had not known, at the time, that she had not seen immigrants.

When I was born and it came time to give me a name, her father gave her a choice among several options: she chose the homonym for North America. She immigrated to Canada from South Korea in the mid 80s as a newly wed, and has not returned for over thirty years. I asked her once why she didn’t visit Korea. By way of answer, she said that she is not sure she understands the homeliness of go-hyang: a Korean word for what is usually considered the place of birth, or at least the place where childhood was spent. It was only after I heard her answer that I knew to ask what I should have asked first.

Why did you leave?

She said she wanted to be as far from home as possible. So, I asked her if she ever missed Korea.

You cannot want to go back, if there is no one to want to go back to.
I have asked my mother whether she missed Korea on two occasions: the first time she said no, as I have already noted. The second time, she said yes. Sometimes, she did want to go back: to see her mother’s grave. What her ambivalence suggests, I think, is the very ambivalence in the notion of home for someone whose sense of homeliness, entangled with the mother, is ambivalent. For her, she misses her mother, and she both misses and does not miss Korea. For her, this is a longing for homeliness and the knowledge of its impossibility. For her, to miss Korea, is the irreconcilable experience of wanting to return to what isn’t there.

It is almost like wishing your mother back from the dead.

In both wanting and not wanting to see her mother’s grave, she allows me to understand the condition of missing something that is missing—not simply in its absence, but its impossibility, for the two are very different. The awakening to an intractable reality of loss. What does it mean to know that the home is unhomely, to be awakened to its ambivalence, and yet desire it?

When I was in elementary school, I told my father I wanted an “English” name. This was unacceptable to him, and he refused to change my name on the grounds of remaining faithful to our Korean culture. My name had been inscribed on a strange substrate of contradictions. And it is only in the translation that the irony is detected. My Korean name means North America. My name bears witness to a strange pull—where form and content come together in contradiction and fidelity.
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