Multiple Affiliations

Autobiographical Narratives of Displacement by (Im)migrant US Women

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Whereas the conventional immigration/assimilation paradigm assumes the resolvability of difference, (im)migration, related to the concept of diaspora, is sensitive to “different differences,” related to race, class, gender, etc. Further, (im)migration points to the variability and mobility within the immigrant experience. I use the concept of diaspora, not as a metaphor, but as a lens through which to investigate subjectivities that disturb the assumed union between place, culture and identity. I further employ various exigencies of “locational feminism” to take into account shifting, unstable, postmodern identities and, at the same time, pay attention to historical and material particularities.

Multiple Affiliations shows how “diasporic” dialectics – negotiations of here and there, continuity and change, roots and routes – continually shape (im)migrant subjectivities, even if the possibility of returning to the homeland is precluded and even if the experience of immigration is not firsthand. Acts of imaginative memory are called upon to re-configure diasporic identity by linking the present and the past, here and there, self and ethnic group, and with marked insistence, to rewrite history, frequently to trouble national schemes. I propose that, far from inhabiting separate spheres, immigrant and diasporic sensibilities often overlap.

Key words: autobiography, (im)migration, United States, diaspora, locational feminism, history, memory, place, home/displacement, body, postmodern, subjectivity.
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Autobiographical Narratives of Displacement by (Im)migrant US Women

Lena Karlsson
For my family
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INTRODUCTION: (IM)MIGRANT AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

And the passport did, in many ways, set me free. It allowed me to come and go, to make choices that were not the ones my father would have wished. But I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose.


Salman Rushdie, *East, West*

One day you raise the 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.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée*

These two contextually diverse scenes of passports being received speak of the enduring power of nation-states in a world increasingly marked by transnational movements of goods, capital, information, and people. Decreed by the nation-state, the passport allows people mobility, the option to come and go, to pass the port. According to theorists trumpeting current processes of denationalization, the world is marked by an unprecedented pace of transnational flows, which, to a certain degree, transcend the nation-state.1 Yet, as literary and cultural critic Sau-ling Wong observes, “[n]ations dispense or withhold citizenship, identity cards, passports and visas, voting rights, educational and economic opportunities.”2 The nation is/should not be totally transcended – we live in a transnational, not postnational world, Wong suggests.

At the same time as Rushdie and Cha, in these brief passages, speak of the enduring power of the nation, they also speak of the urge to resist and challenge it. They illuminate the pressure frequently expressed by (im)migrants with transnational, multicultural affiliations to choose sides, transfer loyalty. The latter is perhaps particularly true in the United States where ideologies of assimilation prevail. The favored US-American

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immigrant trajectory is linear and unidirectional and goes from "alien to American." In this construct, the US is construed as a consent-based polyethnic nation-state. As Cha writes, "the rest is past." In this statement, Cha suggests that the immigrant is demanded to perform acts of amnesia to pass the American port. By contrasts, she and other authors in this study give voice to the seemingly concomitant silencings involved in taking up the assigned hegemonic, assimilationist position that enables US-America to "absorb" the immigrant.

Contemporary cultural productions by (im)migrants often highlight the impossibility, or rather, undesirability, of choosing sides, forgetting pasts, and conferring loyalty. They refuse to be defined or confined by either homeland – "origins" – or present place, nation, culture. To use the words of Rushdie’s protagonist, they “buck, snort, whinny, rear, kick” when demanded to choose. They show how frequently cultural identity is not congruous with national identity. The imperative of choosing also implies that cultures are discrete, homogenous entities when, on the contrary, contemporary diasporic cultural productions show both cultures and identities as unfixed, always in the making, and necessarily hybrid.3 New identities, new ethnicities that traverse either/or paradigms are forged, as Stuart Hall has argued.4 Diasporic and hybrid identities “stitch together languages, traditions, and places in coercive and creative ways, articulating embattled homelands, powers of memory, styles of transgression, in ambiguous relation to national and transnational structures,” anthropologist James Clifford writes.5 The received notion of a permanent union between cultures, peoples, identities and specific places erodes in this scenario. As literary scholar Mia Carter notes, we find expressions of “the desire to inhabit, both metaphorically and literally, multiple locations or a singular location multiply, that is with various and sometimes conflicting types of cultural and national affiliations.”6 Contemporary (im)migrant cultural productions retain multiple

3 Diasporic cultural productions proliferate at present. See, for example, the writings of Caryl Phillips, Jamaica Kincaid, Meena Alexander, Paule Marshall, the films My Beautiful Launderette (1985) by Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureshi and Mississippi Masala (1992) by Mira Nair. The list could be made much longer.
5 Clifford 10.
affiliations, to allude to my title. (Im)migration, related to diaspora, points to the variability and mobility within the immigrant experience. Studies under the rubric of immigration, especially in the United States, conventionally stress arrival and settlement. Casting immigration in dialogue with migration and diaspora troubles the notion of immigration as a one-way road.

_Multiple Affiliations_ explores the autobiographical negotiations of memory and multilocality articulated by five (im)migrant women writing from, and being read (primarily) within, the US. Texts as diverse as Korean-American Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's _Dictée_ (1982), Polish(Jewish)-American Eva Hoffman's _Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language_ (1989), Chinese-American Maxine Hong Kingston's _The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts_ (1976) and _China Men_ (1980), Caribbean/African-American Audre Lorde's _Zami: A New Spelling of My Name_ (1982), Pakistani-American Sara Suleri's _Meatless Days_ (1989) highlight how various (cross-race and transnational) experiences of location, dislocation, and relocation resonate with each other and "immigrant America." My close readings illuminate the complexity and variety of (im)migrant autobiographical negotiations. The various tactics these narrators deploy to write their emergent identities into and against discourses of the nation(s) is one of the central concerns of this study.

In a broad sense, the identities being negotiated in the texts I examine are US-American. The autobiographical subjects are all first, "1.5," or second-generation immigrants to the US. Yet, in their autobiographies other places are remembered and frequently desired; affiliations with more than one place are sustained. Diasporic dialectics—negotiations of here and there, continuity and change, roots and routes—continually shape (im)migrant subjectivities, even if the possibility of returning to the homeland is precluded and even if the experience of immigration is not firsthand. I argue that (im)migrant consciousness lingers through generations. For example, in _Zami_, Audre Lorde's mother, a Grenadian immigrant, "breathed exuded hummed the fruit smell of

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7 As pertains to Asian-American literature, King-Kok Cheung directs our attention to a growing interest among overseas scholars. There are organizations and publications in Japan, for instance, which exclusively deal with Asian-American Literature. See King-Kok Cheung, "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies," _An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature_, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997) 8. Further, Maxine Hong Kingston's books are available in Chinese. In Cheung's _Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa_ (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993) 116-117, we find copies of pages of a Chinese version of _China Men_ with Maxine Hong Kingston's father's remarks in the margins.
Noel's Hill [Grenada] morning fresh and noon hot, and I spun visions of sapodilla and mango as a net over my Harlem tenement cot in the snoring darkness rank with nightmare sweat. Made bearable because it was not all” (Z 4). Through acts of imaginative memory (working in tandem with forgetting) the autobiographical narrators move between here and there, back and forth between the places that are crucial in their autobiographical re-construction of identity. Memory and place often assume heightened importance in migratory contexts when the assumed isomorphism of culture, place, and identity is imploded. Cultural productions such as these (and others connected to processes of decolonialization and geographical relocations) have contributed to the status memory and place presently, and as of rather recently, enjoy as keywords in cultural, literary, and social studies.

With their emphasis on multiple affiliations and the multiplicities of identity and place, the autobiographical texts selected here refuse to be defined or confined by gender, sexual orientation, racial, national, ethnic, or familial lines separately, but articulate how these various components of identity intersect in various ways in various places. As Audre Lorde states, “[i]t was a while before we came to realize that our place was at the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference” (Z 197). Thus, in my readings, I do not privilege gender as the constantly most important ingredient in the construction of identity. Yet, undeniably, I privilege gender in my selection of texts. Firstly, this choice is related to the fact that numerically, there is a striking preponderance of autobiographical works concerning (im)migration written by women at present. Secondly, I am motivated by the fact that many of the (im)migrant autobiographies written by women that have cropped up in recent years show certain thematic and formal similarities. The Woman Warrior (1976) is often seen as a “forerunner” for a particular type of female, intercultural self-writing. Hokenson, for instance, hails The Woman Warrior as “[o]ne of the first intercultural autobiographies [...] a dazzling intricate
and angry interweaving of Chinese-American selves and cultures.\textsuperscript{11} Goellnicht writes, "The Woman Warrior has had a profound and lasting effect on our definition of what constitutes the genre of autobiography, especially ethnic and women's autobiography, which is now routinely identified as stressing group or community identity and as being written in a nonlinear, fluid, fragmented style."\textsuperscript{12} Getting Home Alive (1986) by Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales, Borderlands/La Frontera (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa and Meena Alexander's Fault Lines: A Memoir (1993) are examples of other autobiographical texts written by (im)migrant women which feature these thematic and formal characteristics and which could have been included in my study. While noting the structural and thematic similarities to be seen in many contemporary autobiographical narratives by (im)migrant women, I wish to avoid making any simplistic equations between experience and text, gender and text based on their difference from male (im)migrant writing. I make no link between "anatomy and autobiographical destiny."\textsuperscript{13} As will be evident, more components are at work here. Thirdly, I am motivated by a keen interest in the processes, to use James Clifford's formulation "women in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a 'home' culture and a tradition – selectively. [...] diaspora women are caught between patriarchies, ambiguous pasts, and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways."\textsuperscript{14} Complex and highly selective gendered processes of re-membering, affiliation/disaffiliation can be traced in each text. Lorde chooses to construct a mythos out of the women-oriented women of the island Carriacou, where her mother partly grew up. In The Woman Warrior, when the narrator finds herself tormented by conflicting gendered narratives, caught between different patriarchies, and perplexed by a mother who at times appears to be a feminist forerunner and at times force-feeds Maxine misogynist Chinese sayings, she makes use of a select group of female ancestors' stories to re-imagine her gendered self. In China Men, Kingston explores both her father's silence and his misogynist sayings and recognizes the emasculation he has undergone since his arrival in America. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

\textsuperscript{12} Donald C. Goellnicht, "Blurring Boundaries: Asian American Literature as Theory," Cheung, Interethnic 344.
\textsuperscript{13} I borrow the expression from Gillian Whitlock, The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography (London: Cassell, 2000) 3.
\textsuperscript{14} Clifford 259.
rewrites Korean history mainly through a few female figures, of whom her mother is one. As my analysis makes evident, present needs, often gendered, press new versions of the past to serve the present.

Thus, Cha, Hoffman, Kingston, Lorde, and Suleri are all marked by experiences of transnational (and national) movements and resettlements, which constitute one of the formative experiences of the past century. I do not argue that this diverse group of authors are “in the same boat” of transnational migrations. They are situated on highly different places on a continuum of voluntary/involuntary migrations. Further, historical, ethnic, racial, sexual orientational, generational, gender and class-related specifics inform and cross-cut their respective relations of displacement.

As displayed in Dictée, the Korean nation has for centuries been buffeted by colonial and neocolonial processes – where the US has been an active agent – prompting the multiple migrations in Cha’s family history. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s family history is marked by multiple dislocations in multiple geopolitical settings. She belongs to a third generation of Koreans in the diaspora. Her immediate family has sojourned in Manchuria (China), Hawaii, and the United States. Cha, born in South Korea in 1951 and immigrating to the US in her early teens, belongs to the “grouping of Korean Americans known as il-chom o-se or ‘1.5 generation,’ those who were born in Korea but who emigrated to the U.S. as children at an age young enough to become acculturated but old enough to retain some memories of the Korean homeland, its language, and its history.”

In her multiform, loosely constructed autobiographical text, Cha finds ways to explore how her pasts inform the present - “there is but one thing period There is someone period From afar period” (D 1). This line is from the opening of Dictée and constitutes a displaced schoolgirl’s response to the question “How was the first day” (D 1). It displays the difficulties involved in separating here and there, past and present.

In 1959, at the age of thirteen, Eva Hoffman, born in Crakow, Poland, together with her family emigrates to Canada. Subsequently, Eva will move from Canada to the United States. The family leaves Poland as part of a major Jewish exodus inaugurated with

15 See the introduction to Angelica Bammer’s Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) xi-xx, for some of the staggering numbers of peoples who have been geographically relocated during the 20th century.

the 1957 decision that the Jews should be exempt from the ban on emigration under which the major part of the Polish population lived. Hoffman writes of her family's departure: "[w]hat are the ceremonies for such departures – departures that are neither entirely chosen nor entirely forced, and that are chosen and forced at the same time" (L 83). In Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language, Hoffman explores her dialectic (im)migrant consciousness. However, her text also displays a strong desire to depart from that relativity.

The sense of displacement negotiated in Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical recollections is intimately connected to a certain class experience: in the 1930s and 1940s her parents emigrated from one of the poorest provinces of southern China, Canton (now Guangdong), to the States out of economic necessity/opportunity. In the major part of The Woman Warrior, the family operates a laundry in Stockton, California. The Woman Warrior deals primarily with the young, second-generation Chinese-American girl, Maxine, trying to make sense of her mother's incessant "talk-story" as a way to negotiate her Chinese-American identity and see how "the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America" (WW 13). With an emphasis on Maxine's male ancestors, China Men maps the criss-crossing travels and sojourns of her great-grandfathers, grandfathers, and father as workers in the United States and Hawaii.

The reasons for the Audre Lorde family to migrate from Grenada to New York in 1924 are also presented as economic. The imperative seems to be to collect money and return. Yet, Lorde writes, "[i]n October 1929, the first baby came and the stockmarket fell, and my parents' dream of going home receded into the background" (Z 1). The narrator, born in the US as the third child of the Lorde family, struggles to "seek some more fruitful return than simple bitterness from this place of my mother's exile" (Z 86) and to reintegrate her mother's heritage into her present life. Zami: A New Spelling of My Name deals with Audre's attempt to juggle the different components of her identity – as black, woman, lesbian, student, writer, traveler, factory-worker – components which are acute in some settings and dormant in others, and also productively re-member her mother's Caribbean home and make it have use-value in her present settings.

The diasporic experiences recollected in Meatless Days are of a different kind. Sara Suleri's experiences of displacement – her childhood is spent partly in Pakistan and partly in Britain (her mother is Welsh, her father is the well-known Pakistani writer Z. A. Suleri),
her siblings as adults live in various places around the globe: Britain, Pakistan, Kuwait, and she herself in the US – are grounded in the choices wealth and privilege create. Sara and her siblings repeatedly articulate their feelings of displacement to each other, "[w]e are lost, Sara," and 'yes, Shahid, we are lost" (MD 104). In *Meatless Days*, Suleri revisits childhood and Pakistan in retrospect to grapple with family dynamics: silences, contradictions, power relations, and structures of affiliation. Just as her deceased sister Ifat with time becomes "a repository of anecdotes for me, something I carry around without noticing, like lymph" (MD 42), so do childhood memories of Pakistan and Britain surface. Suleri delves into this "repository of anecdotes" with the concerns of the Yale professor she has become – what she sarcastically calls, "an otherness machine" (MD 105).

**Writing the *Intemation***

It is, of course, a truism to say that the United States is a nation marked by immigration. It is further not unique to note that immigrant writing in the US most often is, and has been, autobiographical. The once new nation fed on individual life-stories that underwrote notions of American exceptionalism. Smith and Watson write, "[autobiographical narratives, their citation, and their recitation have historically been one means through which the imagined community that was and is America constitutes itself on a daily basis as American." Robert Sayre has argued that, "there is no great American autobiographer [... because of] the very identification of autobiography *in America* with America. An American seems to have needed to be an American first and then an autobiographer." The genre "immigrant autobiography" has revitalized processes of Americanization and underlined the uniqueness of that process. The emphasis has been on arrival in America, and certain set stages in becoming American, "the reading process...

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began in the negative and required a stripping away of the ‘old’ self,” Boelhoewer writes.\(^{20}\)

Among the earliest immigrant autobiographies, we find titles such as *The Promised Land* (1912) by Mary Antin and *The Making of an American* (1901) by Jacob Rüs. Among the more recent immigrant autobiographies that undergird the American meta-narrative of immigrant transformation and voice the imperative of “claiming America,” Richard Rodriguez’ two autobiographical texts, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* and *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*, can be mentioned.\(^{21}\) Bharati Mukherjee, a South Asian writer and recent immigrant to the US, begins an article on immigrant writing with the declaration: “I’m one of you now.”\(^{22}\) Above all, these writers speak of the hunger to belong and the necessity to let the past rest.

The autobiographers discussed in *Multiple Affiliations* do no write themselves into the national meta-narrative of one-way assimilation; rather, they sustain multiple affiliations. They write themselves both into and against the nation; they frequently invoke the national meta-narrative of Americanization, but remain in friction with that notion – a notion/myth that lingers.\(^{23}\) The imaginative and material limits of the ideologies of assimilation are demonstrated more and less urgently by Cha, Hoffman, Kingston, Lorde, and Suleri. The one-way road to assimilation has certainly not been open for most immigrant groups, as Sau-ling Wong has pointed out.\(^{24}\) She shows how the assimilation model pertains almost exclusively to immigrants of European descent. Hence, the set transitional stages of immigrant autobiography identified by Boelhoewer and others could be seen to apply only to immigrants from Europe. As Lisa Lowe has argued, Asian-Americans, partly because of the different Exclusion Laws directed to various groups of

\(^{20}\) Boelhoewer, “Making of Ethnic” 125.


\(^{23}\) Bonnie Honig writes about the usefulness of the myth of immigrant America, “the immigrant’s foreignness positions him or her to enhance or reinvigorate the national democracy: our faith in a just economy, our notions of community or family, our consent-based sense of legitimacy, and our voluntarist vigor are so moribund that only a foreigner could revive them.” Bonnie Honig, “Immigrant America? How Foreignness ‘Solves’ Democracy’s Problems,” *Social Text* 16.3 (Fall 1998): 3.

Asian immigrants (see my discussion of *China Men* in Chapter 2) and partly because of other acts of racialization, have remained “foreigners within.”

Sense of membership within the larger U.S. national collective has traditionally followed the political, economic, and cultural incorporation of a Western European ethnic group under the banner of immigration and assimilation, and through the spatial metaphors of the United States as a point of arrival and melting pot.

"Under the banner of immigration and assimilation," migratory movements to the US become homogeneous, when in fact they are highly heterogeneous and uneven. Immigration to the US has peaked two times during the past century: in 1910 and during the prosperous 1980s. The 1910s saw the entrance of a high number of Europeans. The Immigration Act of 1965 “eliminated prior restrictions against non-Nordic Europeans” and thus opened up for the great demographic changes the US has seen during the past decades. Today non-European immigrants dominate the immigration scene. “During the last 30 years, Asians, Central Americans, Mexicans, and Caribbeans have constituted 80% of all immigrants to the United States.”

The paradigm of assimilation, which is habitually Eurocentric, does not quite apply in the present scenario. Neither has it ever been applicable to African-American experiences in the New World. David Palumbo-Liu argues that the myth of immigrant America’s “perniciousness lies in the fact that it is more that the externally identified ‘myth’ so easily debunked by every social reality, it is rather the more deep-seated myth of America’s ultimate justness despite every social fact.”

The same choices are not available to all immigrants. Notions of migration, I believe, trouble the paradigm of assimilation and of the US as prime setting and context for (im)migrant writing. In the (im)migrant texts at issue in *Multiple Affiliations*, we find multiple displacements, not linear trajectories from place A to place B, culture A to culture B. Whereas the conventional immigration/assimilation paradigm assumes the resolvability of difference, (im)migration, related to the concept of diaspora, is sensitive to
“different differences,” related to race, class, gender, etc. Migrancy, to use the words of Iain Chambers,

involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation.29

José David Saldivar asks provocatively: “What changes, for example, when American culture and literature are understood in terms of ‘migration’ and not only immigration?”30

Further, the assimilation paradigm, with its emphasis on arrival, also obscures the fact that the US is an imperial, or neocolonial power in several immigrants’ home countries, for instance Korea, which is evident in Dictée.31 The paradigm also suggests that American culture is a homogenous, unchanging, entity – a “common” American culture. Yet, even Eva Hoffman, the autobiographer in this study who most frequently invokes traditional notions of immigrant autobiography and assimilation, writes about American culture, “[o]nce I step off that airplane in Houston, I step into a culture that splinters, fragments, and re-forms itself as if it were a jigsaw puzzle dancing in a quantum space” (L 164). Because unidirectional assimilation is put into crisis when it is unclear what one should assimilate into, notions of cultures as homogenous entities anchored to certain places and congruent with national cultures are insistently contested in these texts.

These autobiographers display re-imagined ways of belonging, where national belonging is not construed as central. Further, they widen and displace the generic and thematic boundaries of autobiography. My thematic reading strategy, with its dual focus on identity as constructed by the workings of memory and the multiplicities of place, allows for a reading of (im)migrant autobiographical writing that eschews common conceptualizations of both immigrant autobiography and autobiography in general, as developmental trajectories with certain set stages and a stable self that we can follow on the journey. Here we find autobiographical articulations written against the bipolar axes of departure and arrival, innocence and maturity, and towards new spatially marked,

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diasporic subjectivities. The forms of these texts open up a place for subjectivities that are, to use the words of Inderpal Grewal, “multiply placed and [...] multiply linked.”32 Multiple Affiliations offers an exploration of the ways in which these texts gesture beyond the individual self to the networks of relation that constitute that self, and an exploration of the ways in which these (im)migrant texts gesture beyond the US as setting and context for belonging, communion, and self-formation. I propose that, far from inhabiting separate spheres, immigrant and diasporic sensibilities often overlap. The general tendencies of immigrant autobiography studies have been to offer either a group-by-group study which falls under the rubric immigration as described above,33 or to let “diaspora” signal a more or less figurative experience, indicative of a certain postmodern zeitgeist. I have sought to put place and thereby history back into displacement and diaspora discourse. I wish to eschew a rather fashionable reading of migrant cultural productions in which all postmodern subjects are equally fragmented, on the move and belonging nowhere. The migrations of these autobiographical subjects are not merely figurative. My emphasis is on multiple affiliations in different places, negotiations of belonging and exclusion, not on cultural productions in what is frequently loosely called “third-space,” which appears to be a non-place or a transit lounge.34


33 Unavoidably, my transnational and cross-racial approach forecloses the specific, detailed account of a single ethnic group’s immigrant literature and its vicissitudes in US-America, which the more common group-by-group approach could offer. I have not sought to offer a representative sample of immigrant autobiographical writing in the United States. I have not, it follows, examined a representative text each from what historian David Hollinger calls the “ethnoracial pentagon,” which divides the American population into five groups: Asian-American, African-American, Euro-American, Latino and Indigenous. David A. Hollinger, Postethnic America (New York: Basic, 1995) 8. Too often, the (im)migrant/ethnic subject has been seen as a spokesperson for the group. The autobiographical narrators that inform my study claim and are claimed by many, often conflicting, affiliations, not only to the specific US ethnic group.

Diaspora Discourse

“Diaspora” has proved to be a semantically mobile term of late. The term has been unanchored, taking on metaphoric dimensions. My usage of diaspora and diasporic is related to recent translations of a term that used to – and sometimes still does – signify a very specific experience of dispersal, which we will turn to shortly. On the other extreme, Walker Conner provides a very inclusive definition of diaspora, “that segment of a people living outside the homeland.”35 I find his definition too broad to be productive. The negotiations of multiple affiliations that I find in diasporic productions, I believe, are actively sustained; that is, not happenstance, not a routine effect of living outside the homeland. Lavie and Swedenburg’s attempt to define present theoretical invocations of diaspora bear close affinities with my usage:

Diaspora is one attempt to name this hodgepodge of every day “out of country, ... even out-of-language experience” (Rushdie 1991:2) and its textual representations. Challenging our received notions of place, disrupting those normative spatial-temporal units of analysis like nation and culture, it accounts for one type of displacement. “Diaspora” refers to the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places – their connections to the place they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with “back home.” Diasporic populations frequently occupy no singular space but are enmeshed in circuits of social, economic, and cultural ties encompassing both the mother country and the country of settlement (Rouse 1991).36

Diaspora, traditionally defined, does not cover a hodgepodge of migrant experiences of multiple belonging that precludes the boundaries of nation-states. The classical definition of diaspora refers to clearly identified groups and contains a few distinct features, “a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for the eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship.”37 The paradigm cases that follow this definition are, the Jews, the Armenians, the Greeks and the Palestinians. Yet, as James

Clifford has pointed out, several of these features of diaspora – most evidently the desire for eventual return – are ambivalent even for the paradigmatic case of the Jews. Both James Clifford and John Durham Peters have turned to the borders of diaspora, related concepts that diaspora is posited against, to delineate the contours of the traveling term via alternative routes. I use their delineations for descriptive purposes; I do not wish to argue with their claims. Peters chooses to compare diaspora with the concepts exile and nomadism. Diaspora, Peters notes, indicates a collective experience, whereas exile frequently constitutes a solitary longing for a lost homeland from which one has been banished. Exile is connected to a nostalgic, utopian longing for home that at present is unapproachable and “a dream of glorious return.”38 Diaspora, on the other hand, “suggests real or imagined relationships among scattered fellows, whose sense of community is sustained by forms of communication and contact. [...] Some communities in diaspora may agitate for return, but the normative force that return is desirable or even possible is not a necessary part of diaspora today.”39 Nomadism signifies another relationship to home altogether. In a postmodern manner, it decenters the subject, and “sunders the notion of home from a specific site or territory, being homeless and home-full at once.”40 Peters’ delineation of the different attitudes to “home” connected to “exile,” “nomadism” and “diaspora” ends with the statement that “[d]iaspora teaches the perpetual postponement of homecoming and the necessity, in the meanwhile, of living among strange lands and peoples.”41 Thus Peters’ version presents diaspora as a viable existential option. Clifford posits diaspora against two completely different borders: norms of nation-states and claims of tribal, Fourth World peoples. In my previous discussion we followed some of the ways in which diasporic subjectivities disturb the norms of nation-states. Clifford writes, “articulations of diaspora identity reach outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history) of the nation-state. [...] forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference.”42 The other border of diaspora that

39 Peters 20.
40 Peters 21.
41 Peters 39.
42 Clifford 251.
Clifford discusses is to be found in tribal claims of identities “naturally” linked to specific places. Fourth World peoples “stress continuity of habitation, aboriginality, and often a ‘natural’ connection to the land.” Diasporic identities, quite on the contrary, come into existence after dislocation. To a great extent, herein lies the present suggestiveness of diaspora: notions of diaspora disturb naturalized categories, specifically those of identity and place.

For many, the language of diaspora has become a means to open up — in its initial exigencies in particular — a rather closed politics of identity, Asian-American discourse. Diaspora here is linked to and seems concomitant with notions of heterogeneity, hybridity and multiplicity. Similar theoretical shifts (identity politics moving into dialogue with “diaspora”) can be seen in other minority groups’ discussions of immigration and identity. In a broad sense, then, this specific discussion of Asian-American discourse is pertinent to the texts in my study (Lost in Translation and Zami) that do not fall under the umbrella “Asian-American.”

Many Asian-Americanists have cautiously noted and some have advocated the shift from a domestic to a diasporic perspective in Asian-American studies. David Leiwei Li notes, “[i]n almost all the recent Asian American anthologies the words [difference and diaspora] are used to explain the works’ structure, scope, subjects, and styles, and they are central in critical discourses that radically revise the assumptions of Asian American studies.” Sau-ling Wong, King-Kok Cheung and David Leiwei Li concur on the need not to view the present suggestiveness of diaspora discourse as part of a teleological development. “It would be far more useful to conceive of modes rather than phases of...

43 Clifford 252.
47 Li 190.
Asian American subjectivity: an indigenizing mode can coexist and alternate with a diasporic or transnational mode,” Wong argues.48

I will explore the main discursive modes/paradigms since the inception of Asian-American studies in the late 1960s through the vexed story of the hyphen. Initially, however, I want to point out that the term Asian-American, on a general level, is problematic on two accounts. It lumps together heterogeneous peoples with distinct cultures, histories, ethnicities (Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Thai, Indian, etc.), and languages under a single rubric, neglecting acute differences. Secondly, the term Asian-American, as Samir Dayal points out, is “a sign constructed differentially, in logical opposition to that spectral authenticity that does not bear the mark [...] of hyphenatedness, namely real and unqualified Americanness.”49 As I have argued above, notions of unchanging, homogenous Americanness are untenable. Notwithstanding, to hyphenate or not to hyphenate has been a nodal question for minority groups within the United States, and intensely so for Asian-Americans. The hyphen marks unsettled movements of separation and connection, the elision of the hyphen makes “Asian” an adjectival marker of “American,” and thus signals a more stable entity. For Radhakrishnan, “the diasporic location is the space of the hyphen that tries to coordinate, within an evolving relationship, the identity politics of one’s place of origin with that of one’s present home.”50 This statement should be seen against the backdrop of decades of a cultural nationalist movement to excise the hyphen, the marker of movement, unsettlement and ambivalence between the entities America and Asia.

The central concern of Asian-American identity politics of the late 1960s and early to mid 1970s was to forge a viable collective Asian-American identity. The kind of identity politics promoted by the early Asian-American movement can be seen as paralleled in an early second wave feminist movement that essentialized and homogenized “woman.” In fact, both movements were modeled on the vocal Black Power movement.51 The Asian-American identity movement envisioned that Asian-Americans

50 Radhakrishnan, Diasporic xiii.
were to go from repression to expression, and that the eventual expression would sound like a unified choir: one voice. It was
galvanized by anti-Vietnam War activism and modeled upon the Black Power struggle. [...] *Asian American* [...] expresses a political conviction and agenda: it is based on the assumption that regardless of individual origin, background, and desire for self-identification, Asian Americans have been subjected to certain collective experiences that must be acknowledged and resisted. If Asian American subgroups are too small to effect changes in isolation, together they can create a louder voice and greater political leverage vis-à-vis the dominant group.52

The focus of the cultural nationalist movement was to "claim America" via a domestic identity politics. The four editors of the 1975 anthology of Asian-American literature *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, Frank Chin, Jeffery Chan, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong, have been important promoters of a collective Asian-American identity. In the introduction to their important manifesto they maintain that the

myth of being either/or and the equally goofy concept of the dual personality haunted our lobes while our rejection by both Asia and white America proved we were neither one nor the other. Nor were we half and half or more one than the other. Neither Asian culture nor American culture was equipped to define us except in the most superficial terms. However, American culture, equipped to deny us the legitimacy of our uniqueness as American minorities, did so and in the process contributed to the effect of stunting self-contempt on the development and expression of our sensibility that in turn has contributed to a mass rejection of Chinese and Japanese America by Chinese- and Japanese-Americans.53

Thus, notions of multiple national and cultural affiliations were discarded by the group, who stressed US-America as setting and context for an Asian-American sensibility, a sensibility which was very much founded on common experiences of exclusion and invisibility in the American context, as an American minority group. They debunked both mainstream society’s racist/exotic notions of the “Oriental” and assimilationist rhetoric. Links to Asia were downplayed in this paradigm and American nativity and generational presence in US-America were valorized in order to claim the United States as home,

unambivalently. The historical Asian-American presence in the nation — a presence erased in the national historical annals — was unearthed. Further, the cultural nationalist group advocated a masculinist stance of Asian-American identity that would counter the feminization of Asian males in America. “Good or bad, the stereotypical Asian is nothing as a man. At worst, the Asian-American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage and creativity.” It follows that cultural productions promoting images of the Asian-American male were forwarded by the group. Frank Chin, for instance, posed as a “Chinatown cowboy.” As is evident, the cultural nationalist discourse was very much shaped as a counterdiscourse. The kind of identity the cultural nationalist group promoted had very few modalities. Sau-ling Wong writes, “Frank Chin and his co-editors operate on the premise that a true Asian American sensibility is non-Christian, nonfeminine and nonimmigrant.” Even though the editors’ view has been contested — by Asian-American feminists in particular — the politics forwarded in their anthology constitute an important part of the early Asian-American movement. Elaine H. Kim, in retrospect, writes of the instrumentality of this paradigm,

insisting on a unitary identity seemed the only effective means of opposing and defending oneself against marginalization. This strategically constructed unitary identity, a closed essence sharply dividing “Asian American” from “Asian,” was a way to conjure up and inscribe our faces on the blank pages and screens of America’s hegemonic culture and was necessarily exclusive rather than inclusive, leveling such critical differences as gender, nationality, and class.

The cultural nationalists’ search for an absolutist subjective “wholeness,” an elision of the doubleness that the hyphen indicates, should also be seen as a reaction to theoretical notions of pathological “dual personality” — racial and cultural schizophrenia — presented

54 Chin et al. 14.
55 Sau-ling Wong, Reading Asian American Literature 8.
by social theorists and psychologist in the 1970s. For instance, two psychologists, Stanley
and Derald D. Sue, seeing the "traditional Chinese family," 'western influences,' and
racism as major forces shaping Chinese American self-consciousness, the Sues asserted
that if the pressure from the convergence of these forces became too great, the Chinese
American mind would have to make an identificatory commitment in order to keep from
being pulled apart: 'When these sources of stress become too great, mental health
problems are frequently the result.'\textsuperscript{58} The Sues were of course fiercely attacked, yet we
should keep in mind that mainstream celebrations of duality and hybridity are rather
recent phenomena.\textsuperscript{59} Cultural nationalist emphasis on a unitary identity was then in part a
response to the stigmatization of "bifurcated selves."

The cultural nationalist movement was hedged about with notions of "true" and
"false" Asian-American sensibility. Discrepant voices from the Asian-American
community were neglected and sometimes vilified, as in the case of the publication of
Maxine Hong Kingston's \textit{The Woman Warrior} in 1976, which Frank Chin deemed "fake."
The autobiographical writings of Maxine Hong Kingston have stirred much debate within
the Chinese-American community. \textit{The Woman Warrior}, in particular, has been the target
for fierce attacks from strong voices within the community, most notably that of Frank
Chin. Kingston valorizes neither generic nor cultural purity. Both of her autobiographical
texts have been classified as non-fiction. Only \textit{The Woman Warrior} is classified as a memoir
on the book cover. Both texts, however, transgress generic boundaries by their inclusion
of fictional elements. This is one of the features of her autobiographical works that critics
such as Frank Chin finds particularly troubling. Indeed, one of his attacks is aptly called
"This Is Not an Autobiography."\textsuperscript{60} This attack is somewhat ironic since Kingston again
and again makes clear that she relies heavily on her imagination. In an interview she has
said, "[a]fter going back and forth on my classification for a couple of years, I've decided
that I am writing biography and autobiography of imaginative people. [...] I invented new

\textsuperscript{58} Palumbo-Liu 301.

\textsuperscript{59} For explorations of the concept of hybridity, see Susan Stanford Friedman, \textit{Mappings: Feminism and the
Cultural Geographies of Encounter} (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998); Linda McDowell, \textit{Gender, Identity and Place:
Understanding Feminist Geographies} (Oxford: Polity, 1999); Robert Young, \textit{Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory,
Culture and Race} (London: Routledge, 1995).

literary structures to contain multi versions and to tell the true lives of non-fiction people who are storytellers.\textsuperscript{61}

With the autobiographical genre inevitably comes demands for "authenticity" and a strict division between fact and fiction. In addition to his naive argument that one cannot call a text an autobiography if it contains fictional elements, Frank Chin believes that the genre autobiography is not an "authentic" Chinese literary form, and therefore it should not be deployed by "real" Asian-Americans. Frank Chin, Lawson Inada, Shawn Wong, and Jeffrey Chan repeatedly use the terms "real" and "fake" when discussing Asian-American literature. This division, Jingi Ling argues, "reflects their continued preoccupation with survival and ethnic solidarity as a political necessity for Asian Americans in contemporary America."\textsuperscript{62} Kingston's texts are not edifying to, and do not envision a development of, Asian-America. As we will see, American born, Chinese ethnic, Maxine Hong Kingston describes ghostly and material shuttlings between Asia and America. She voices a dialectic the \textit{Aiieeeeal} editors shun.

As stated, one of the central concerns of the early Asian-American movement was to deconstruct the stereotypical effeminate Asian-American male. In both \textit{The Woman Warrior} and \textit{China Men}, Kingston explores the links between race, gender, and sexuality. Her emphasis is on exploring various gendered and racialized positions, not in presenting an edifying Chinese-American manhood. \textit{China Men} does contain the railroad workers that Frank Chin insists should be represented as heroic Chinese-American males. Kingston's grandfather is more lonely and sexually frustrated than heroic, however. Further, her analyses of gendered positions illuminate the commonplace female Chinese-American predicament of double marginalization, i.e. marginalization both by the dominant culture and by the male-dominated Chinese-American community. Voicing these concerns is tantamount to betrayal, Frank Chin and his companions accuse. The \textit{Aiieeeeal} editors maintain that Kingston vilifies Chinese-American males in order to please Anglo-American feminists, and thus the marketplace. Feminist politics have been seen as Western affectation. In the \textit{Big Aiieeeeal} (1991) the same four editors who compiled \textit{Aiieeeeal} launch the following attack on autobiographies and (best-selling) works of fiction.


written by female Chinese-Americans such as Amy Tan, Jade Snow Wong, and Maxine Hong Kingston: "[they are] products of white racist imagination, not fact, not Chinese culture, and not Chinese or Chinese American culture." Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and Jade Snow Wong are certainly not the only American ethnic writers with feminist concerns that have been viewed as traitors of community concerns by the male faction of the community. As Caribbean/African-American Audre Lorde put it:

Recent writing by many Black women seems to explore human concerns somewhat differently than do the men. These women refuse to blame racism entirely for every negative aspect of black life. In fact, at times they hold Black men accountable. The men tend to respond defensively by labeling these women writers the darlings of the literary establishment.

The blatant masculinity of the cultural nationalist movement and, crucially, the publication of *The Woman Warrior* in 1976 gave way to what David Leiwei Li has identified as the second phase, the feminist phase of Asian-American studies (dominant in the 1980s), a phase/reading mode which to a great extent coexists with the emerging diaspora discourse of today. As pertains to *The Woman Warrior*, Li also notes that "Kingston's selection of China as the beginning of an Asian American imaginary seemed also to correspond to, if not anticipate in the literary realm at least, the nascent development of a transnational diaspora to which Frank Chin's version of cultural nationalism was essentially antagonistic." It should be noted that Maxine Hong Kingston has stated that one of her aims with *China Men* is indeed to claim America. Yet, importantly, she does not simultaneously disclaim Chinese affiliations. Cultural nationalists neglected and subdued Asian affiliations in order to claim America. Cued by Palumbo-Liu, I do not see a sharp distinction between the diasporic and the ethnic; diasporic subjects are most often also ethnic subjects in the new location. Palumbo-Liu sees the movement which creates the diasporic subject to "produce at once diaspora and ethnicity: the reconstitution of the

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65 Li 49.
subject in diaspora takes place at the same moment that subject is labeled ‘foreign’ in the new location.”

With the excluding notions of “fake” and “true” Asian-American sensibility in the discourse of cultural nationalism, a sensibility presented as grounded in American soil, one can see the suggestiveness of the emerging diaspora discourse, which allows for a dialectic, a porosity between Asia and America. A diasporic paradigm caters to “accountability to more than one location,” to use Radakrishnan’s words. And, with the demographic changes created by the Immigration Act of 1965, a stress on American nativity and Asian-American sensibility excludes increasingly large portions of the Asian-American population. The essentialism of early Asian-American identity politics excluded many voices. David L. Eng has shown how the cultural nationalist stress on Asian-American masculinity insisted on compulsory heterosexuality for Asian-Americans and was thus both misogynist and homophobic. Like Asian-American women, homosexual Asians could not counter the hegemonic image of the feminine Asian-American. Hence, there were many silencings involved in creating a true Asian-American subjectivity (non-Christian, non-feminine, non-immigrant, non-homosexual). “Might we (re)claim and not dismiss the hyphen for its political potentials and oppositional possibilities?” Eng asks.

To sum up, the suggestiveness of the language of diaspora in Asian-American studies, can be seen in its ability to trouble the US as setting and context for processes of Asian-American self-definition (as Maxine Hong Kingston shows in *The Woman Warrior*), its potential to represent alternative, fluid identities with multiple affiliations where “different differences” matter, and its recognition of the transnational within the national. Instead of promulgating one counter-identity, diaspora language allows for all sorts of connections to be made. Most critics, however, voice the concern that diaspora discourse does not recognize the need to fight for domestic rights within the present nation-state. To hark back to Sau-ling Wong’s words that I quoted at the beginning of this introduction, “nations dispense or withhold citizenship, identity cards, passports and visas, voting rights, educational and economic opportunities.”

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66 Palumbo-Liu 346.
67 Radhakrishan, *Diasporic* xiv.
68 Eng 38.
Locational Feminism

In 1928 Virginia Woolf read a version of what was to become her famous essay, "A Room of One's Own," at a women's college in Oxford. In the 1960s and 70s, "the personal is political," was a much sounded Anglo-American feminist slogan, identifying and calling into question gendered distinctions between inside and outside, private and public. Locational terminology has been deployed in various modes and phases of Anglo-American feminism as it has been recognized how spatial divisions constitute central structuring devices in gender differentiation. At present, spatial terms such as position, site, location, border, margin, map, cartography, etc., abound in various discourses of identity in a number of disciplines. Our concern here will be with the recent "spatial turn" in feminism. In addition to Audre Lorde's spatial trope, "the house of difference," other feminist writers/critics make use of spatial tropes in their feminist politics: Rosi Braidotti (nomadic subjects), Gloria Anzaldúa (borderland subjectivity), Carole Boyce Davies (migrations of the subject), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (cartographies of struggle). My approach participates in the recent feminist invocation of spatial tropes to account for shifting, situational, multiplicitious, contradictory identities, often in connection to diaspora discourse, where the fixed link between identity and place is challenged.

In one of its manifestations, a feminist politics of location can be connected to the heated and long-lasting debate of the "we" of feminism in the United States in particular. In the 1960s and 1970s, Anglo-American second wave feminism, be it the
radical, the liberal or the socialist/communist variety, was marked by a silencing and exclusionary homogenization of women, despite/because of its claims of "global sisterhood" and the universality of women's oppression. The differences at the fore were the differences between men and women, not those among women. The accounts of "female experience" tended to be white-centered, and often stemmed from middle-class experience even as they claimed universality. The "whiteness" of early second wave theorizing was an unmarked category. Critique from women of color, lesbians, and working-class women was sounded alongside the dominant discourses of feminism from the early 1970s, pointing to differences among women. "The fact that Anglo-American feminism has appropriated the term [woman] for itself leaves many a woman in this country having to call herself otherwise, i.e. 'woman of color,' which is equally 'meaningless' without further specification," Norma Alarcón writes. More often than not, early attempts to grapple with differences among women, i.e. take into account forces of social organization other than gender (race, class, ethnicity etc.) were performed through an additive logic. Feminists began to call themselves working-class feminists, Jewish-feminists etc.. Gender, however, retained primacy and was considered a "common denominator," to use Alarcón's terminology. By the late 1970s, many women of color pushed (and, it must be noted, still push) for a recognition of the fact that gender is not always the most salient ingredient in subordination and identity formation. They demonstrate how gender intersects with the forces of race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class etc., in various ways along multiple axes in accord with specifics of time, place and situation. Women of color have called for a recognition of the simultaneity of oppression.

"We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely..."
racial nor solely sexual, e.g. the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression,” The Combahee River Collective wrote in 1977.\textsuperscript{77} The heterogeneity and multiplicity of women were thus pushed into the agenda of Anglo-American feminism with women of color taking the lead.

Differences among women were the focus of much debate within feminism in the 1980s and 1990s.\textsuperscript{78} In the mid 1980s, poet and radical feminist Adrienne Rich probed the contents of a feminist we in a highly influential essay, “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” where she, in fact, coins the much invoked term.

I wrote a sentence just now and x'd it out. In it I said that women have always understood the struggle against free-floating abstraction even when they were intimidated by abstract ideas. I don't want to write that kind of sentence now, the sentence that begins “Women have always ...” [...] If we have learned anything in these years of late twentieth-century feminism, it's that that 'always' blots out what we really need to know: When, where, and under what conditions has the statement been true? \textsuperscript{79}

Rich's politics of location thus emerged in a context where differences among women were pronounced with increased force. Her politics is about taking into account the historical and geographical particularities of where we speak from, the situatedness of each enunciation of knowledge. Her politics of location centrally involves “a struggle for accountability.”\textsuperscript{80} In her essay, she deconstructs egregious homogenizations of women and calls attention to the social and geopolitical embeddeness of each articulation of knowledge, thereby disturbing Enlightenment notions of “pure” knowledge, produced from a “neutral” place. She also calls for an interrogation of whiteness. In her words, “I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a

\textsuperscript{78} Susan Stanford Friedman uses the terminology “scripts of denial,” “scripts of accusation,” and “scripts of confession” to account for the different debates within feminism since the inception of the “second wave” in the 1960s. She calls the universalizing tendencies of early second wave feminism “scripts of denial.” As we have seen, these “scripts of denial” was met with serious critique not only from “women of color,” but also from lesbian feminists who pointed out that much feminist theorizing assumed a heterosexual female subject. Friedman calls these attacks (while at the same time pointing to their importance) “scripts of accusation.” The third category “the scripts of confession” refer to the many white feminist responses to the attacks from women of color, where racist color-blindness most often was admitted. Friedman, Mappings 41-47.
\textsuperscript{80} Rich, Location 211.
woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create.”

In Elspeth Probyn’s explicit appropriation/development of Rich’s concept, a politics of location “raises epistemological questions of what constitutes knowledge: of where we speak from and whose voices are sanctioned.”

A politics of location can in several ways be linked to a postmodern project that privileges “the local, the fragmentary, and the particular”: petit récits, instead of grand récits. The feminist call for particularity can thus be connected to the postmodern turn in criticism in general. Early second wave feminism, in its universalizing tendencies and consciousness-raising politics, placed itself firmly within modernist notions of the self and social progress. It was generally held that emancipatory and revolutionary politics needed a fixed agenda, and a fixed, homogenous community of activists. Alarcón contends, “Anglo-American feminist theory assumes a speaking subject who is an autonomous, self-conscious individual woman. [...] As a result, some Anglo-American feminist subjects have tended to become a parody of the masculine subject of consciousness, thus revealing their ethnocentric liberal underpinnings.” Yet, in the decades since the publication of Rich’s essay, a large number of feminists have drawn on postmodernist theories to launch criticism on “objective” knowledge and the concomitant centered, stable subjects who produce that knowledge. Donna Haraway, a key-theorist within this deconstructive move within feminism, has repeatedly urged feminists to think of knowledge as situated in order to contest the Enlightenment “conquering gaze from nowhere.” Haraway argues for “situated and embodied knowledges and against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims. Irresponsible means unable to call into account.”

81 Rich, Location 212.
83 Hollinger 64.
84 The tripartite division of feminism into radical, liberal and social.marxist has most often been supplanted by a division of feminism into modernist-gynocentric/postmodernist theorizing of the female subject. Modernist feminists express beliefs in the self-conscious, centered individual, whereas postmodern feminists adhere to postmodernist beliefs in the subject as fractured, de-centered and constructed by a multiplicity of discourses. For postmodernists, Chilla Bulbeck writes, “all the 1970s feminisms are similar to each other under the banner of modernism; it is postmodernism which is the new different other.” Bulbeck 12.
85 Alarcón, “Theoretical Subjects” 363, 357.
87 Haraway 191.
A "Politics of Location" is invoked time and again by various feminist theorists, but often for conflicting purposes. It has attracted feminists grounded in modernist identity politics and postmodernism alike. Although Rich displays wariness of the instability and relativity of "place," her essay has often been invoked by theorists who unproblematically "ground" their feminist theorizing in a specific place. Recognizing and taking into account the "link between where one stands in society and what one perceives," might involve fixing both identity and location.88 "What seems like a necessary point of enunciation, a rediscovery of place, a past, a context, a grounding, can become exclusive, limiting, closed, and essentialized," Kaplan cautions.89 Place, cultural geographers have asserted, should not be read as inert, absolute ground. Places are socially produced in complex ways. Commenting on the usages of spatial metaphors in contemporary thought, geographers Neil Smith and Cindi Katz maintain, "[s]patial metaphors are problematic in so far as they presume that space is not."90 In response to the historicist fixation on time during the 19th century in particular (yet, still in evidence), Soja queries:

Why is it that while time was treated as richly filled with life, with agency and collective action and social will, with the dynamics of societal development, with contradictions and crises that carried all human beings along the rhythmic paths of an "ever-accumulating past," space was treated as something fixed, lifeless, immobile, a mere background or stage for the human drama, an external and eternal complication not our own choosing? History was socially produced. Geography was naively given.91

Unqualified usage of terms such as "ground" and "location," Liz Bondi notes, "suggest[s] that place may be the latest repository for essences in contemporary versions of identity politics. [...] place takes the place of essence."92

My delineation of various manifestations of a feminist politics of location notes how it has been invoked to call attention to the multiplicity and diversity among women, to interrogate the concept of whiteness, and to deconstruct Enlightenment notions of

89 Caren Kaplan, Questions of Travel 159.
91 Soja 169.
knowledge and subjectivity. I also point to the danger in unproblematically claiming a ground for feminist identity politics. The most recent invocations of spatial metaphorics cannot be connected to a desire for fixity in a world of flux. As Linda McDowell argues:

If we move towards a definition of both identity and place as a network of relations, unbounded and unstable, rather than fixed, we are able to challenge essentialist notions of place and being, and of local, face-to-face relations as somehow more "authentic" – a common strand of both modern and some versions of postmodern theorizing.93

For many feminists, myself included, spatial metaphorics offer avenues to denaturalize what it means to be a woman and, simultaneously, call attention to "the ways in which gendered, racialised and classed identities are fluid and constituted in place – and therefore in different ways in different places."94 The possibilities of a spatialized feminism reside partly in its ability to describe shifting, unstable postmodern identities while at the same time paying attention to geopolitical and historical particularities. The "free-play" of certain postmodernist tenets is thus avoided.

Susan Stanford Friedman, one of the advocates of the "spatial turn" in feminism, identifies a new "geographics of identity" in her book *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. She sees a feminist geographies of identity as a way to move beyond what she calls the "difference impasse" of the 1980s and much of the 1990s, and open up a discussion of common concerns for feminists without obliterating difference. "Where gynocriticism and gynesis focus mainly on the cultural narratives of gender, the new geography of identity looks for traces of all the circulating discourses of subjectivity and alterity," Friedman writes.95 She identifies and delineates six discourses of positionality, "a new geographics of identity": discourses of multiple oppression, multiple subject positions, contradictory subject positions, relationality, situationality, and

94 Geraldine Pratt and Susan Hanson quoted in Kaplan, *Questions of Travel* 185.
95 Friedman, *Mappings* 29. She explains the theoretical concepts thus: "[w]hether distinct or intermingling, gynocriticism and gynesis have shared an emphasis on sexual difference and a privileging of gender as constituent of identity. For gynocriticism, the existence of patriarchy, however changing and historically inflected, serves as the founding justification for treating women writers of different times and places as part of a common tradition based on gender. For gynesis, the linguistic inscriptions of masculine/feminine – indeed, language's very dependence on gendered binaries – underlie various feminist unravelings of master narratives and discourses" (18).
hybridity. You will find the interplay of all of these discourses in my subsequent readings, yet not always under Friedman's rubrics. My objective with delineating her discourses of identity involves illuminating the recent problematizations of identity in general, and gendered identity in particular.

The discourse of multiple subject positions, according to Friedman, emerged in the mid- to late-1980s. In contrast to the self within the discourse of multiple oppression, "the definitional focus is not so exclusively on oppression and victimization but rather on various combinations of difference that may or may not be tied to oppression."96 The self here is multiple and unstable, different in various places. The third discourse that Friedman identifies, the discourse of contradictory subject positions became apparent foremost in the 1990s. In this discourse, the emphasis is on a self that experiences contradictory subject positions. To use Friedman's description, "a woman might be simultaneously oppressed by gender and privileged by race or class or religion or sexuality or national origin. Conversely, a man might be privileged by gender, but oppressed by sexuality or race or class or religion."97 The socio-cultural forces that construct identities are thus not additive, but act in different and often conflicting ways in different places. Friedman's fourth discourse of identity concerns itself with relationality. "Class, race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, and gender - all function relationally as sites of privilege and exclusion."98 It becomes evident that Friedman's division into six discourses of identity is one of convenience. The discourses are not discrete, but crosshatching. Situational approaches to subjectivity, Friedman's fifth discourse of identity, recognize how at given moments and locations, particular axes of one identity come to interact, leaving others dormant. "So while the person's identity is the product of multiple subject positions, these axes of identity are not equally foregrounded in every situation. Change the scene, and the most relevant constituents of identity come into play."99 Lastly, then, Friedman recognizes a sixth discourse of positionality within her "geographics of identity," that of hybridity, which she connects to the broader paradigms of postcolonial, transnational and diasporic studies. Its rhetoric, she writes, "emphasizes the cultural

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96 Friedman, Mappings 21.
97 Friedman, Mappings 21.
98 Friedman, Mappings 23.
99 Friedman, Mappings 23.
grafting that is the production of geographical migration.” She mentions Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* as important texts of cultural grafting and explorations of hybrid subjectivities.

We can identify the feminist shifts in focus: early second wave feminism was mainly concerned with differences between men and women, then, in the late 70s and most of the 80s the focus was on differences among women, and of recent we find a geographies of identity pushing to move beyond difference. The analytical tools offered by a geographies of identity offer a way to circumvent binaries which tend to fix positions, man/woman white/colored, margin/center – what Friedman calls the “difference impasse.” A geographies of identity, to use Edward Soja’s words, “carries with it an unsettling epistemological and theoretical critique that revolves around disruptions and disorderings: of difference, of confidently centered identities, and of all forms of binary categorization.” Yet, can a geographies of identity be seen as politically effective? What happens to feminism if gender loses primacy and the concept of woman is deconstructed?

The African-American cultural theorist bell hooks expresses her belief in the possibilities of a postmodern geographies of identity:

> Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent, ruptures, surfaces, contextuality, and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined by narrow separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of the everyday [...] a space is there for critical exchange [...] this may very well be “the” central future location of resistance struggle, a meeting place where new and radical happenings can occur.

hooks views ruptures as sites from which to make connections, a meeting ground. The shift between what constitutes a basis for politics in modernist identity politics (and here I do not only refer to early second wave feminist identity politics, but also movements like the Asian-American cultural nationalist movement, the black nationalist movement, etc.) must be seen as radical. Modernist identity politics claimed difference, common ground

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100 Friedman, *Mappings* 24.
101 Soja 107.
and called for unity in order to claim space and visibility in dominant society. The ruptures that are presented by hooks as sites from which to form political realignments were shunned in modernist identity politics, as we have seen in early second wave feminism. At present we find moves to forge coalitions beyond difference through reimagined senses of self, place and nationality. Several feminists have similarly expressed their belief in new possibilities for coalitions and alliances between women across differences and national belongings partly as a result of these new ways of looking at alterity, as provisional, unstable, relational, etc. Feminism does not thereby annul itself, but is involved in this project of disentangling power and dominance, in denaturalizing and opposing the apparently “natural” gender relations supporting of and supported by other forms of subjugation. Instead of trying to prove that any given form or scale of feminist discourse is the only one that reveals the “real” essence of womanhood, one might better adopt a perspective that opens up possibilities for an understanding of the role of gendered identities in the construction of the multiple forms of subordination underwriting society.

I claim that it is both possible and necessary to conduct feminist research wherein gender is not always the difference that matters most. Informed by locational feminism, I illuminate the complex and often contradictory positionings of the female autobiographical diasporic subject.


Autobiography

The past few decades have witnessed an upsurge of interest in the genre autobiography. The genre's history has been located and relocated, as genres not traditionally viewed as autobiography, such as women's life-writing (diaries, letters, etc.) from centuries past have been recuperated. In fact, the coinage autobiography (self-life-writing) has been under scrutiny. The gap between the self that is remembered and the self that authorizes the narrative has been in focus. The referentiality of autobiographical texts has been questioned, and so on and so forth. Although informed by recent explorations of genre, my interests are not generic foremost. I view my study as an intersectional analysis of form and content. My main generic interests can be summed up in the following questions: What in(ter)ventions on the level of form cater to these multivalent autobiographical narratives of identity and place? What are the politics involved in autobiographical writing of/towards subjectivities that are geographically mobile, in the making, unfixed?

At this stage, however, a few generic preambles are called for. Autobiography as a term will here be broadly conceived. The texts I analyze depart from traditional autobiographical conventions and traditions in a number of ways, both thematically and formally. Readers cannot follow a stable self on a developmental life journey narrated in a coherent linear manner with a stable beginning and end. These texts partake in a postmodernist mistrust of any sort of "totalization," any effort to shape one's life and identity into a closed whole. In *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman points out "the avoidance of a single shape that tells the tale" (1. 164). All autobiographers here write following the postmodern credo to, and here I repeat the American historian David Hollinger's definition of the postmodern project, "confer dignity on the local, the fragmentary, and the particular." To various extents and in various ways, the texts are fragmented, event-centered and frequently rather unstitched. One of the "myths" of autobiography is "that


106 Hollinger 64.
the subject is articulate and the story articulable, and that the narrative lies there waiting to be spoken,” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson claim. The autobiographical texts that inform my study contest that myth; they self-consciously point to their own constructedness and to the troubles involved in self-representation. Kingston informs us that if we want a plain, straightforward story we should turn to her brother. Her story, she announces, is “twisted into designs” (WW 147). Suleri speaks of her autobiographical writing as “quirky little tales” (MD 156). Cha includes copies of her own work-in-progress, enabling us to see her hesitations, word-searchings, erasures: in sum, the selective and creative processes involved in self-narration. She also voices the unreliability of her autobiographical memory, “[r]emembered not quite heard. Not certain. Heard, not at all” (D 67). Evidently, the autobiographical story does not “lie there waiting to be spoken.” Hence, these texts, in a postmodern manner, destabilize boundaries between fact and fiction. As will be developed in Chapter 2, with a close look at Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictée and Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men, these autobiographical narrators show an acute skepticism towards historical “facts.” They have often been made painfully aware of the strategies involved in the representation of historical facts; their histories have often been mis- or underrepresented. Therefore, they insistently destabilize the dividing lines between fact and fiction, private and public, memory and history. Laws of genre are further challenged by the multiform nature of several of the texts. Kingston in The Woman Warrior and Lorde in Zami invite myth and song into their autobiographical records. In China Men, Kingston inserts historical documents. Cha’s Dictée, the text that is most markedly multiform, invites myth, historical documents, letters, poetry, photographs (private and public), and different languages.

Often conceived of as a mainstream theorist of autobiography, James Olney, privileges the notion of autobiography as a vertical journey to the innermost self.

I suggest that one could understand the life around which autobiography forms itself [...] as the vital impulse – the impulse of a life – that is transformed by being lived through the unique medium of the individual and the individual’s special, peculiar psychic configuration; we can understand it as consciousness, pure and simple, consciousness referring to no objects outside itself, to no events, and to no other lives; we can understand it as participation in an absolute existence far transcending the shifting, changing unrealities of mundane life; we can

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understand it as the moral tenor of the individual’s being. Life in all these latter senses does not stretch back across time but extends down to the roots of the individual being; it is atemporal, committed to a vertical thrust from consciousness down into the unconscious rather than a horizontal thrust from the present into the past.  

As is evident, Olney’s definition renders the texts to be discussed here non-autobiographies. Self-centered autobiographical paradigms do not apply to the texts of our concern. Cha, Hoffman, Kingston, Lorde, and Suleri insistently point beyond the individual, “to objects outside itself, to events, to other lives,” to use Olney’s words. Time and place surface as crucial in these autobiographical negotiations of culture and identity. Drawing on many public and private histories, they situate themselves in multiple locations and histories, and always among others. The autobiographical self is frequently decentered. Eva Hoffman, with a highly ironic note, compares her autobiographical writing to that of another Eastern European émigré writer, Vladimir Nabokov. She writes:

I wish I could breathe a Nabokovian air. I wish I could have the Olympian freedom of sensibility that disdains, in his autobiography, to give the Russian Revolution more than a passing mention, as if such common events did not have the power to wreak fundamental changes in his own life, or as if it were vulgar, tactless, to dwell on something so brutishly, so crudely collective. […] His observations are those of an entirely free man; but perhaps aristocratic freedom to rise above confining categories and merely material conditions can spring only from a specific circumstance, the circumstance of aristocratic privilege. Perhaps it’s not possible to transcend our circumstances entirely after all. (L 197-198)

Along with the other narrators in focus here, Hoffman foregrounds forces of “crude collectivity.” Like many scholars of feminist and ethnic studies, I argue that the autobiographical self cannot be conceived of as stable, autonomous, and sovereign. Rather, as Betty Bergland argues, a “theory of the subject in autobiography must posit the existence of multiple and contradictory subjectivities as the effect of multiple discourses at a particular historical moment.”

Further, I wish to deploy Smith’s and Watson’s

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broad definition of autobiographical articulation, which is not limited to writing, although all autobiographical articulations I am concerned with here appear in writing, "the practices through which people assemble narratives of their own experiential histories [...] Autobiography is contextually marked, collaboratively mediated, provisional."\textsuperscript{110}

Memory

Acts of memory and acts of forgetting are necessarily involved in assembling and representing narratives of one's own experiential histories. The workings of memory at issue in \textit{Multiple Affiliations} are concerned centrally with processes of reconfiguration of diasporic selfhood. Wolfgang Iser notes, "memory, as an agent that interlinks what is different – be it difference between past or present or between cultures – assumes kaleidoscopically changing shapes in accordance with what it is called to perform."\textsuperscript{111} The changing shapes of memory contribute to the difficulties involved in defining memory; numerous paradigms of memory exist alongside each other. The theories of memory that I employ and discuss (presented by both cultural theorists and neuropsychologists) have in common the fact that they view memory as something predominantly social and external, rather than something individual and internal located in a specific nook in the brain. Further, much like lives represented autobiographically, I start from the assumption that "memories represented are fundamentally imaginative reconstructions – not slavish reproductions."\textsuperscript{112} In these (im)migrant autobiographies memory is called to re-configure diasporic identity by linking the present and the past, here and there, self and others, self and ethnic group, public and private, and, with marked insistence, memory is summoned as a means to rewrite history, frequently to trouble national schemes. What is the relationship between history and memory? How can memory be seen as politicized in these texts? What role does memory assume in diasporic situations? What is the interplay between memory and place? What is the connection between memory and ethnicity? Responses to these questions are scattered throughout this study.

\textsuperscript{110} Smith and Watson, \textit{Getting a Life} 9.


As is evident, I do not subscribe to one single theoretical approach. My study draws on a number of theoretical discourses: literary studies, American studies, diaspora discourse, cultural studies, cultural geography, historiography, autobiography studies, feminist studies. I have chosen an eclectic approach for several reasons. First, disciplinary boundaries are highly constructed and unstable in themselves. Second, I do not view the literary as a separate realm. I see no reason to pit the "real" against the aesthetic or the academic. These autobiographies negotiate historical, political and cultural forces. They offer individual gestures to historical realities. In my introduction I have insistently invoked my primary texts, with the objective to trouble the dividing line between autobiography and theory. I do not want to position myself theoretically first, and then turn to my primary texts to apply my established theoretical grid. The autobiographical texts we deal with here are theoretically self-conscious, theoretically informed and theoretically informing.\textsuperscript{113} In my study they enter into a dialogue with other critical voices.

In Chapter 1, "Negotiating Home and the Places of Displacement," I look at discussions of home and displacement in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's \textit{Dictée}, Eva Hoffman's \textit{Lost in Translation}, and Audre Lorde's \textit{Zami}. I explore how "home" in these texts is a complex word, space, and concept, that, nevertheless, is saturated with yearning. Granted, similar mediations are present in each text included in this study - negotiations of home and displacement animate this selection of texts. I have chosen this particular juxtaposition because it allows me to illuminate specific aspects, in particular the link between certain spatial metaphors and metanarratives of America. Chapter 2, "Creating Memory, Creating History: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's \textit{Dictée} and Maxine Hong Kingston's \textit{China Men}," deals with the illustrative, yet specific ways that these texts present memory as a means to recuperate lost annals and rewrite history. It also investigates the two texts' acute distrust of representation, and their ways of alerting the reader to recognize representational politics. Chapter 3, "Autobiographical Memory-Work as a Poetics of Relation in Maxine Hong Kingston's \textit{The Woman Warrior} and Sara Suleri's \textit{Meatless Days}" explores the autobiographers' invocations of the networks of relation surrounding and

creating the autobiographical self. The networks of relation, I argue, are displayed both formally and thematically. I point out how they present memory as relational and social, depending on others for its existence. Chapter 4, “Inscriptions, Transmissions, and Beyond,” deals with the most immediate of places, the body. It discusses how the figure of the body is used to narrate the self, it highlights the connections between ethnic memory and the body, and also shows how the intercultural body can be viewed as a site where various, often conflicting, forces make their inscriptions. This is the only instance in which all texts are discussed in one chapter. All these autobiographers use the body as a lens through which to investigate their complex and often ambivalent positionings. I demonstrate how the bodies in these texts tell us a lot about how these autobiographical subjects locate themselves and find themselves located within society. The “bodily turn” of this last chapter ties into and develops earlier discussions of place, memory, and diasporic identity.
How shall I spell out these fragments of a broken geography?
What does it mean to carry one’s house on one’s back?
Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines*

the embattled!
there is no place that cannot be
home
nor is
Audre Lorde, “Dedication” *Between Our Selves*

Not all diasporic experiences grapple with the same dynamics. Not all displacements are the same. This chapter follows the injunction Angelika Bammer presents in her introduction to *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*. In order to counter recent difference-negating, blanket usages of the term, Bammer urges us to “put the ‘place’ back into ‘displacement,’” which she cogently defines as, “[t]he separation of people from their native culture either through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, migrants, exiles, or expatriates) or the colonizing imposition of a foreign culture.”¹ My analysis focuses on physical displacements, but never loses sight of the multiple colonizing impositions shaping the texts I discuss. I explore how places are imagined and represented in Korean-American Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*, Polish (Jewish)-American Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*, and Caribbean/African-American Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. These texts lead us to a simultaneous discussion of particular discursive, cognitive and material manifestations of home and displacement. Like the migratory subjects Carole Boyce Davies recognizes, which she posits in contrast to the related, yet more free-floating and protean “nomadic subjects” of Rosi Braidotti, these autobiographical subjects migrate from/to “specific places and for definite reasons.”² I investigate how these specific places

¹ Bammer xiv, xi.
are represented in these autobiographical articulations of home and the places of displacement.

Invocations and Cancellations of Home in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*

Mother
I miss you
I am hungry
I want to go home

Few words are as imbued with notions about essence, fixity, and nourishment as the words “mother” and “home.” Consider these coinages that are, in part, made up of the words mother and home: motherculture, motherland, mothertongue, homecoming, homeground, homeland. The concepts appear almost to be interchangeable; they direct us either towards a place, presumably a safe one (homeground), or a stable, homogenous entity (motherculture). There seems to be an immutable link between mother and home. Both suggest primordial origins.

On the first page of her autobiographical and experimental work, *Dictée*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha installs an initial longing for the essence-laden concepts mother and home. Longings for home, in various guises, recur throughout *Dictée*. And to write home Theresa Hak Kyung Cha writes mother. The initial longing, which I inscribe here in English, is actually a translation from her “mothertongue”: “Mother / I miss you / I am hungry / I want to go home.” In *Dictée*, the inscription is in Hangul, the Korean script. It is, in fact, the only instance of Korean script in *Dictée*. In a discussion of the Asian diaspora, anthropologist Dorinne Kondo writes, “home,” for many people on the margins, is [...] that which we cannot not want.” What is it that this migratory subject cannot not want? Where is it that Cha wants to go in her hybrid and fragmentary autobiography? *Dictée* is a highly multiform text. It comprises poetry, photographs,
biographical material, autobiographical episodes, Korean folksong, excerpts from a history book, letters (real and faked, official and private), a passage from what appears to be a film script, citations from the autobiography of St. Thérèse de Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, an invocation from Sappho, French grammar exercises, and so on. Can we speak of direction in a text as starkly non-linear as *Dictée*? In short, what, when, where, and whither is home in *Dictée*? How is the "concept-word-space" — home — manifested in the multiform text?

Before seeking to answer these questions, I will juxtapose the fragmentary, and to a large extent, non-chronological biographical information that Cha provides in the text with biographical information gathered elsewhere, to provide a context for the various longings for home inscribed in the text. The following biographical fragments (intra- and extra-textual) nest in narratives of the Korean nation, of colonization, of the Korean diaspora, of multiple geographical/territorial positionings. Some of these histories, national events and movements will be mapped here. I establish these historical and geographical anchors in order to clarify the significance of the movements and ruptures in Cha’s text.

*Dictée*’s treatment of time and place runs in two opposite directions. On the one hand, there is an insistence on particular dates and places, but on the other hand, these different dates and places appear on a par with each other, as part of the same motion, which erases their distinctness. As an example, on her first return to South Korea in 1979, Cha writes, "[h]ere at my return in eighteen years, the war is not ended. We fight the same war. We are inside the same war seeking the same destination" (D 81). Hence, for Cha the numerous struggles against various colonizing powers, struggles spanning over centuries, constitute one single war. "Against the reduction of these historical episodes as having happened to other people at another time, Cha’s recounts powerfully testify to their

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5 Here I borrow Hyun Yi Kang’s expression from “Re-membering Home” 249.
enduring significance, emphasizing the disruptive and alienating effects that continue to shape this Korean immigrant woman writing out of the US in 1982," Kang notes. The time and place of Dictée is rarely and only momentarily the US in the 1980s, which is the "[f]rom here" of writing (D 56). Cha decentralizes the US as setting and context of her autobiographical recollections, while at the same time marking her present positionality within the US.

The yearnings for home in Dictée are inscribed by a subject with a genealogical history of displacement that far precedes the time of her birth in South Korea in 1951. Cha's immediate family history is embedded in the history of the Japanese colonization of Korea, 1910-1945. Her family history is a history of Koreans in the diaspora. She belongs to a third generation of Korean exiles. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's extended family history recites several geographical places of displacement, including Korea, Manchuria/China, Japan, and the United States. Japan is present as a neighboring and colonizing power, but unlike the other territories in Dictée, not a place of sojourn for the family. To enable visualization of the family's movements, I deploy the following graphic figure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Korea</th>
<th>Manchuria</th>
<th>Hawaii</th>
<th>Mainland US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grandparents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Go into exile in Manchuria 1910s.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mother born in Manchuria, 1922. 1922-1945</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See “Calliope/Epic Poetry”</td>
<td>Born in Korea.</td>
<td>Go into exile in Manchuria 1910s. Die in Manchuria 1940s.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>At least one visit by the exiled mother after 1962.</strong></td>
<td><strong>1962-1964</strong></td>
<td><strong>1964-</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See “Calliope/Epic Poetry”</td>
<td>1945-1962</td>
<td><strong>Mother born in Manchuria, 1922. 1922-1945</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theresa Hak Kyung Cha</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>1962-1964</strong></td>
<td><strong>1964-1982. Cha was murdered in New York in 1982.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 Kang, "Re-membering Home" 268.
9 It is only in connection to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's life and movements that I have the actual dates. Again, I have gathered these from Moira Roth's chronology. I have extrapolated the others from Dictée.
Korea's history as a colonized nation did not start abruptly in 1910, and it did not end abruptly in 1945 with the physical removal of the colonizing regime, Japan. Japan's annexation of Korea was gradual. The process started in the latter part of the nineteenth century. For centuries, the Korean people had "been buffeted by powerful neighbors [Russia, China, and Japan] who sometimes stimulated cultural advance but as often brought repression and exploitation." In 1945, Japan's defeat in the Second World War led to the end of Japanese colonization. The "liberation" of Korea on August 15, 1945, however, did not result in a Korea free from foreign powers. As Chungmoo Choi argues, "the 'postcolonial' designation [...] is the faded signpost that marks this insignificant event in Korean history." The world powers judged that Korea would "require a period of trusteeship in which the United States and the Soviet Union would play the principal roles, before Korea became independent as a unitary state." The US, with the agreement of the Soviet Union, chose the 38th parallel as the demarcation line between Soviet ruled North Korea and US ruled South Korea. Korea could be seen as one of the sites where "cold war fiction was [...] converted into the fact of self fulfilling prophecy." Dictée contains a map of the two Koreas with a thick demarcation line at the 38th parallel (D78). Cha writes about the division in the "Melpomene/Tragedy" chapter.

Dictée is centrally concerned with the time period from 1910 up to the point of writing, 1982. The movements of Cha's family resemble those of other Koreans who fled Japanese rule. Geoff Simons reports that in 1919, 600,000 Korean exiles fled to

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10 In "The Discourse of Decolonialization and Popular Memory: South Korea," Positions 1.1 (1993): 77-102, Chungmoo Choi argues that present-day Korea is in a state of deferred postcoloniality. Choi maintains that the people of South Korea in the 1990s "live in a state of colonialism." She explains, "[t]o live in a state of internal displacement and external dependency is to live in a state of colonialism," and describes Korea "as one of the most heavily armed fortresses of the vast American empire." Choi, "Discourse" 81.

11 Simons 121.

12 Choi, "Discourse" 89.

13 Peter Lowe 21.

14 Simons writes about the arbitrariness of the 38th parallel. "On 10-11 August 1945, during a night-long session of the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee in Washington D.C., John J. McCloy, the Assistant Secretary of War, directed two young colonels, Dean Rusk and Charles H. Bonesteel, to withdraw to an adjoining room and to decide where to draw the line on the map to divide Korea. [...] Allowed 30 minutes for their historic task, the two men decided to draw a line at the 38th parallel – because, as Dean Rusk later declared, this placed Seoul, the Korean capital, in the US zone." Simons 157.

southeastern Manchuria and about 6000 to Hawaii and the United States.\footnote{Simons 135.} Cha’s mother, whose story is allowed the most physical space in \textit{Dictée}, was born in Manchuria, China. Both of Cha’s parents were raised, educated, and worked as teachers in Manchuria. When Cha speaks of her mother as a young woman in Manchuria, she frequently does not make any distinction between her mother and the great group of Korean exiles in Manchuria. “You live in a village where the other Koreans live. \textit{Same as you. Refugees. Immigrants. Exiles. Farther away from the land that is not your own. Not your own any longer}” (D 45, my emphasis). During the family’s sojourn there, the Japanese started to invade Manchuria as well, beginning in 1931. Cha writes, “Japan had already occupied Korea and is attempting the occupation of China” (D 48). The mother’s parents, we are told in \textit{Dictée}, died in Manchuria. They died “[n]ot having seen with their very eyes, the overthrow. The repelling. The expulsion of the people who have taken you by force” (D 47). Cha’s parents, however, returned to Korea soon after the end of Japanese colonization in 1945. After “the purging by sulphur and fire. Of the house. Of the nation” (D 47).

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was born in South Korea in 1951, that is, six years after the physical removal of the colonizing power and in the midst of the Korean War, which raged between 1950-1953. Cha lived in South Korea with her family (parents and five siblings) until she was eleven years old. The authoritarian military regime and the tragic killing of one of Cha’s brothers by the police when he participated in a student demonstration — an event intimately linked to the authoritarian, repressive regime — led the family to again choose exile in 1962. They moved, to Hawaii at first, and then to California. Cha recalls the day her brother was killed:

\begin{quote}

It is 1962 eighteen years ago same month same day all over again. I am eleven years old. Running to the front door, Mother, you are holding my older brother pleading with him not to go out to the demonstration. [...] He is prepared to join the student demonstration outside. You can hear the gun shots. They are directed at anyone.\footnote{As stated, \textit{Dictée} is a multiform text. There are passages in the text that appear as prose and there are passages that appear as poetry. When I quote longer prose passages from \textit{Dictée} I allow myself to make my own divisions of lines. However, when I quote passages that Cha has marked as poetry via italics or via indentions I copy her in full. The passage above is a passage of prose.} (D 83)
\end{quote}
Dictée juxtaposes each narrative fragments of colonization with equally insistent narrative fragments of resistance. The death of Cha's brother is evidently a painful example of resistance. In postwar South Korea, ruled for the most part by US supported military regimes, there had been frequent student demonstrations, such as the one that resulted in the loss of Cha's brother in 1962. During Japan's colonization of Korea there were several active resistance movements (with very different factions), both in Korea and in the diaspora communities. In fact, the resistance movements were centrally located in the diaspora communities, in the US in particular.

Let us return to the initial inscription of the yearning to go home. "Mother / I miss you / I am hungry / I want to go home" is an inscription of the process of seeking, not a description of the sought. Home is most often not a fixed place in Dictée. It is the search, the movement, the ever-present yearning, which, paradoxically, is described as fixed. In the "Melpomene/Tragedy" chapter — the chapter which above all deals with the partition of Korea, and which is one of the few chapters in Dictée where a sense of narrative development can be identified — Cha writes, "[o]ur destination is fixed on the perpetual motion of search. Fixed in its perpetual exile" (D 81). It is almost exclusively in connection to the mother's story in the "Calliope/Epic Poetry" chapter that home appears to be a nourishing, stable entity, something that actually can be returned to. But even then, as I will show, what is longed for is multilayered. The longing is clear and seemingly uni-directional. Yet we meet a multi-layered and ambivalent home each time it surfaces. Home is a contradictory and contested site and notion in Dictée.

The conceptualizations of home that recur in Dictée do so almost exclusively in the more narrative chapters of the text, in the already mentioned "Melpomene/Tragedy" chapter and the "Calliope/Epic Poetry" chapter. Here the notions of home, to use Bakhtin's words, "take on flesh." Further, it is in these two chapters where actual, 18 Cha invokes the nine muses of Greek mythology and uses them as demarcations of chapters. On the surface, this might appear to be an example of Cha being dictated by her classical Catholic schooling, but as Lisa Lowe points out, Cha uses the muses defiantly and with a difference. According to Lowe, Cha maintains an "aesthetic of infidelity" throughout the work. Lisa Lowe, "Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of Dictée," Alarcón and Kim 62. Shelley Sunn Wong points out that one of the muses in Dictée in fact is Cha's own invention. Cha uses "Elitere' - for what would normally have been 'Euterpe,' the Muse associated with music." Shelley Sunn Wong, "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictée," Alarcón and Kim 115.

physical “returns” (or rather visits) to Korea — made separately by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and her mother — are narrated. Yet, the absence and longing for something called home is present throughout the text. Sentences like, “Absence full. Absence glow” are interspersed in the text (D 124). In a sense, it is that ache for something absent that keeps this decentered text together. Notwithstanding, it is in the narrative chapters where, in what at times resembles a straightforward documentary manner, the family history is told — a family history which, as demonstrated, is intimately linked to the national history of Korea.

In the “Calliope/Epic poetry” chapter, the central “mother section” in Dictée, the presence of the mother, who for the major part here is eighteen years old and working as a teacher in Manchuria, is invoked. The whole section comes across as an incantation. Cha repeatedly starts the paragraphs with “Mother,” inviting the mother’s silent presence while telling the mother the mother’s own story. There is the occasional “[y]ou tell me” (D 45), yet it is made clear that the mother here is spoken for. It is Theresa Hak Kyung Cha that speaks. The section’s three first paragraphs begin as follows,

Mother, you are eighteen years old. You were born in Yong Jung, Manchuria and this is where you now live. [...]  
You did not want to see. You cannot see anymore. [...]  
Mother, you are a child still. (D 45)

The speaking autobiographical subject’s I is difficult to locate. The I is written through different female personae in the text, of which the mother is one.20 It is often difficult to distinguish the autobiographical voice from the mother’s invoked presence. Cha suggests that in order to write her own self, she, as it were, needs to “write her mother.” Even though Cha here performs an act of ventriloquism, she speaks her mother, “[y]ou are here I raise the voice” (D 56), she nevertheless anchors her mother’s voice at the end of the book by footnoting her mother’s, Hyung Soon Huo’s, journals.21

20 The other female personae are, centrally, the Korean freedom fighter and martyr Yu Guan Soon, St. Thérèse de Lisieux and the Catholic schoolgirl taking dictation exercises. The Catholic schoolgirl, who appears frequently in Dictée could be Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who attended a Catholic School in San Francisco, “The Convent of the Sacred Heart.” However, the Catholic schoolgirl could also represent the mother, since French Catholicism had a rather strong hold in both Korea and China. For a discussion of French Catholicism in Korea, see David Rees, A Short History of Modern Korea 34-37.

21 See the notes to Elaine H. Kim’s “Poised on the In-Between: A Korean American’s Reflections on
The mother in Cha's text carries many contradictory conceptualizations of home. Hyung Soon Huo appears on a photograph at the very beginning of the “Calliope/Epic poetry” chapter. She is eighteen years old in the photograph (D 44) and remains that age for the predominant part of the chapter. In this 1940 photograph, the young woman, “dressed in western clothes,” looking intently, steadily, at the photographer has just graduated from a teaching college, and is on her way to her first teaching post in rural Manchuria, far away from her parental home, where she had been born (D 48). She feels alienated. “At the station the villagers innocently stare at you and some follow you, especially the children” (D 48). Cha describes her mother at eighteen as “a child still” (D 45), aching, unable to deal with her first separation from her parents, unable to deal with adulthood. Notions of home come across as central for this young woman. The experience of separation from the parental home is described as an experience of exile forced upon her. “You are required by the government of Manchuria to teach for three years in an assigned post, to repay the loan they provided for you to attend the teacher’s school” (D 48). Hence, home here signifies the safe and nourishing parental home in Manchuria – the home as haven. Not yet a mother, Hyung Soon Huo is homesick for her parental home. The text depicts the young teacher’s second return to the parental home as a “final return.” The “final return” follows a mental collapse caused by the sense of alienation she experiences at her first teaching post. Henceforth, she is allowed to stay at home. In this context, home is a safe, nourishing place that can be returned to. “No more sentence to exile, Mother […] you come back you come back to your one mother to your one father” (D 53). Both homecomings are depicted mainly by tropes of food, which evoke the inscription of the first page, “Mother / I miss you / I am hungry / I want to go home.” The returns reinforce the associations of home with the essence, fixity, and nourishment initially invoked.
Mother ... you call her already, from the gate. Mother, you cannot wait. She leaves everything to greet you, she comes and takes you indoors and brings you food to eat. You are home now your mother your home. (D 49)

Food in this chapter, however, is not only the nourishing substance linked to the “safe parental home.” In a dream sequence of the mother’s (depicted as the climax of the mother’s collapse) food is depicted as the enemy seeking to enter the mother. Food is the lure, that which the colonizers (here an unclassified “they”) use to colonize the subjects from within, as it were. Eating their food equals accepting, internalizing their imperialism. “They smile to you they say to you they have prepared this food especially for you” (D 52). The mother in the dream sequence refuses to eat. “You shake your head in refusal inspite of its aroma and the beautiful arrangement” (D 52).

On another level, the yearning for home in the “Calliope/Epic poetry” chapter can be seen as the mother’s diasporic longing for homeland. Seemingly, what is upheld and yearned for is the mythical, unitary, national place of origins. Frequently in Cha’s text, the mother is made inseparable from the large number of Korean exiles in Manchuria, “[a]ll of you who are one” (D 46) “suffer the knowledge of having to leave. Of having left” (D 45). Born in exile, the mother has not left Korea; paradoxically, she has never set foot there at this point. In the mother’s story, home on the nation/origins level functions as both an anticipated physical geographical state, and a mental state upheld in a defiant gesture against colonizing powers. For the mother, home is assumed, rather than sought. Unlike the occasionally surfacing, but always orchestrating autobiographical narrator, the mother is not seeking, but waiting. The “Calliope/Epic Poetry” chapter depicts the national home as something that will simply be returned to as soon as the colonizing presence is removed. The mother and all the other Korean exiles in Manchuria wait.

You keep silent. You bide time. Time. Single stone laid indicating the day from sunrise to sundown. Filling up times belly. Stone by stone. Three hundred sixty five days multiplied thirty six years. (D 47)

Born in 1922 in Manchuria, the mother waits for twenty-three years for her nation to be freed in 1945. “Some have been born into it. And some would die into it” (D 47). The mother’s parents “die into it,” the speaker explains. “Their only regret,” Cha writes, is:
Not having seen with their very eyes, the overthrow. The repelling. The expulsion of the people who have taken you by force. Not to have witnessed the purging by sulphur and fire. Of the house. Of the nation. (D 47)

According to these tropes, the nation will be "purged" from the enemy nation, and the anterior house/nation will surface in its anterior "pure" state. Notice how the house and the nation conflate in the above passage. It is especially in connection to the mother's story that the tropes take on rather salutary rhetorics of nation. Seemingly, the mother has taken on the role of remembering home for the nation. But, the memories of the nation for the nation that she carries have been transferred to her, they do not stem from personal experience. Since the mother was not born in Korea, she nurtures vicarious memories of the nation. Memory in Dictée is generational rather than individual, as will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The Korean homeland becomes a dreamland for the mother. As suggested in Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement, "for a world of travelers, of labour migrants, exiles and commuters, home comes to be found in a routine set of practices, a repetition of habitual interactions, in styles of dress and address, in memories and myths, in stories carried around in one's head."22 The mother's defiant mental maintenance of home is centrally carried through language. The young "Korean" teacher at her first teaching post in Manchuria is forced to speak Japanese to her colleagues, all of whom are Korean.23 Her parents fled Korea to escape Japanese colonization, but in 1940 the Japanese had for several years been present in Manchuria as a colonizing force. "The Japanese flag is hanging at the entry of the office. And below it, the educational message of the Meiji emperor framed in purple cloth. It is read at special functions by the principal of the school to all the students" (D 49). The Japanese attempted to occupy China gradually, partly via a number of symbolic imperial gestures, of which the imposition of the Japanese language was a dominant one. The Japanese undertook a measured colonization of consciousness. Education as well as language are supreme tools in the

23 Japanese is not the only imperial language in Dictée. French and English certainly function as imperial languages here as well.
enterprise of mental colonization.\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Dictée} abounds with educational and dictating sites. Cha’s mother, the young teacher, speaks Korean to her students, “since they are too young yet to speak Japanese” (D 49). Elsewhere she is forced to speak the mandatory tongue, Japanese. Frantz Fanon, discussing the colonizing force of language, writes:

> To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.\textsuperscript{25}

“Civilization” is actually an apt word here. Despite the fact that Korea and Japan are geographical neighbors, the Japanese imposed their civilization upon the Koreans with tales of \textit{racial} and cultural superiority – with the aim of capitalist expansion.\textsuperscript{26} Chungmoo Choi argues that

Japanese imperialism reproduced the fictionality of the European colonial discourse. It was a pastiche of the European Enlightenment. Japanese imperialism simulated and reproduced this grand but empty narrative, in yet another form of colonialism, not with any Enlightenment pretense but through a pastiche of colonization.\textsuperscript{27}

In another section of \textit{Dictée}, Cha cites a history book discussing the, on the surface, ridiculous, but effective colonizing methods of the Japanese:

> “The Japanese advisers instituted a number of sumptuary laws that stirred the country to its depths, relating to the length of pipes, style of dress, and the attiring of the hair of the people. Pipes were to be short, in place of the long bamboo churchwarden beloved by the Koreans. Sleeves were to be clipped. The top-knot, worn by all Korean men, was at once to be cut off.” (D 29-30)

Cha’s mother, Hyong Son Huo, shows a defiant attitude towards the civilization she is called to support by the use of its tongue. She resists in various ways. In private she speaks her mother tongue, Korean. She dreams, speaks, sings, imagines, upholds a

\textsuperscript{24} See Chungmoo Choi’s discussion in “Discourse.”
\textsuperscript{26} See, in particular, Geoff Simons’ discussion in the chapter “The Japanese Colony” in his book \textit{Korea: The Search for Sovereignty}.
\textsuperscript{27} Choi, “Discourse” 84-85.
national home – all in Korean. Hyong Son Huo actively nurses her Korean MAH-UHM, her “spirit heart” (D 46). She sings the Korean folk song Bong Sun Hwa, the song that “would be the anthem. The national song forbidden to be sung” (D 46).

Standing in a shadow, Bong Sun flower
Your form is destitute
Long and long inside the summer day
When beautifully flowers bloom
The lovely young virgins will
Have played in your honor. (D 46)

The Bong Sun Hwa, a folksong banned under Japanese rule, is said to symbolize Korea under Japanese rule. In her article containing fragments of Korean-American “insiderisms,” Elaine H. Kim explains, “Bong Sun Hwa is addressed to a flower that once blossomed in a summer field where young girls played, now shivering and forlorn in the cold autumn winds.” She continues, “[b]ecause the flower symbolizes Korea under Japanese colonial rule, the song was suppressed [...]. [T]he Japanese considered the singing of Bong Sun Hwa a gesture of defiance and, as such, sufficient grounds for arrest.”28 The image of the “Bong Sun Flower,” it follows, is a part of the nationalist imagery of Korea. Benedict Anderson suggests that as “imagined communities,” nations are, to a great extent, collective inventions. He argues, “[i]t [the nation] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their ‘communion.’”29 In Dictée, the exiled mother mentally reproduces the “national home” in private, “in the dark.”

You speak in the dark. In the secret. The one that is yours. Your own. You speak very softly, you speak in a whisper. In the dark, in secret. Mother tongue is your refuge. It is being home. Being who you are. Truly. To speak makes you sad. Yearning. (D 45-46)

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28 Kim, “Poised” 4.
Evidently, a notion of home here becomes a site of mental resistance against colonizing processes. The preceding passage, however, carries a contradiction. If speaking “is being home,” “being who you are,” then the home would not be yearned for: the home would be reached. Using the figure of the mother, Cha repeatedly shows that home, as a physical/national place cannot be physically reached. Homecoming on a national, physical level is impossible; yet Cha shows how the diasporic subjects in *Dictée* cannot help “reaching.”

The mother’s first “return,” or rather her first physical arrival in Korea in 1945, is not elaborated on in *Dictée*. In the “Melpomene/Tragedy” chapter Cha only writes, “[as soon as you heard, you followed South. […] abandoned all to see your nation freed” (D 81). The return of the mother depicted in “Calliope/Epic Poetry” takes place decades later. Hence, the mother “spoken” here is both the mother aged eighteen and the mother as an old woman, returning to Korea as a US citizen. Cha uses the word “return” of what is actually presented as a visit, there seems to be no intention of staying. The autobiographical narrator muses upon the complexity of such a return:

You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. [...] you smell filtered edited through progress and westernization the same you see the numerals and innumerables bonding overlaid the same, speech, the same. [...] Will and will only espouse this land this sky this time this people. You are one and the same particle. You leave you come back the shell left empty all this time [...] Near tears, nearly saying, I know you I know you, I have waited to see you for long this long. (D 56, 57, 58)

The ideal homecoming imagined by the diasporic subject, who has maintained a notion of home for decades, is cancelled. The mother is not allowed to feel at home/at peace/included in the homeland she has waited for. The romantic nationalist vocabulary Cha uses to speak her mother suggests the mother’s belief in an anterior nation that is somehow overlaid and hidden. However, the national home, in Cha’s terminology, “the shell left empty all this time” is unable to hold the mother. The nation is occupied by “[t]hey, the anonymous variety of uniforms, each division, strata, classification, any set of miscellaneous property uni formed” (D 57). “They,” the officers in the ruling military regime, do not know her. The mother is not viewed as being “the same particle,” despite the “numerals and innumerables bonding […] speech, the same.” The communion with
“the same” (to link back to the words of Benedict Anderson) that the mother expected
through years of imagining the “national community” does not take place. “They say you
look other than you say. As if you didn’t know who you were. You say who you are but
you begin to doubt. They search you” (D 57). On her return to Korea the mother
represents cultural and national impurity: her “smell filtered edited through progress and
westernization” (D 57). Nationalism, Elleke Boehmer argues, “favours singleness — one
identity, one growth pattern, one birth and blood for all.” The diasporic mother does
not meet nationalism’s demand for “singleness.” The mother is not viewed as a member
of the South Korean collectivity.

The more fragmentary and less frequent conceptualizations of home made by the
autobiographical I are, in each instance, more distrusting than those of the mother. We
are unable to follow the autobiographical subject the way we can follow the more “fleshy”
narrative of the mother. Cha, in part via irony, interrupts the vertical search for origins,
for homeland. Cha so overdoes the “vertical” search for origins and lineage — the true and
absolute “A Far” — that the search at times becomes parodic. The questions in the
following lines seem not to be the questions posed, but rather: “Asks whom and for what
purpose?” The spirit in the passage, I think, resembles that of the following lines by
Allyson Lee: “Where do you come from, originally? My mother’s womb how about you”?31
In the following passage Cha speaks back to the demand for pure linear origins — an
identity in union with a primordial place. This passage makes the search for true and
absolute origins, “A Fars,” farcelike.

From A Far
What nationality
of what kindred and relation
what blood relation
what blood ties of blood
what ancestry
what race generation
what house clan tribe stock strain
what lineage extraction

30 Elleke Boehmer, “Stories of Women and Mothers: Gender and Nationalism in the Early Fiction of
Flora Nwapa,” Motherlands: Black Women’s Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia, ed. Susheila

31 Allyson Lee quoted in Bulbeck 188.
When situated next to each other in this manner, the questions cease to be questions that can be answered and become empty rhetoric. Cha insists that she is hybrid, "neither one thing nor the other." Curiously, in this passage where she invokes and contests notions of linear origins, she invokes the etymological roots of diaspora. "Diaspora" derives from the Greek verb, "diasperein," to scatter. For the Greeks, Khachig Tölöyan explains, "’diasperein’ was originally an abrupt but natural process, the fruitful scattering away of seeds from the parent body that both dispersed and reproduced the organism. The proto-Indo-European root of the term always contains the triconsonantal root ūpr [...] as in spore, sperm, spread, disperse."32 Belonging to a third generation of Koreans in the diaspora, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha describes herself as a "stray ejection misplaced."

Unlike her mother, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was born in Korea. Her depiction of her return demystifies Korea. Home here is not described as a shell, not even a contradictory, occupied one. "Deceptions all the while. No devils here. Nor gods. Labyrinth of deceptions. No enduring time,” Cha writes (D 88). Cha narrates her return in the form of a letter addressed to her mother, who again is rendered silent. The mother is addressed in a manner that suggests that she has not left Korea for another exile. The mother is here frozen in time and place. The autobiographical I, not the mother, "speaks in another tongue now, a second tongue” (D 85). “This is how distant I am. From then. From that time” (D 85, my emphasis). Here time and place conflate. The letter directed to the mother does not pose to be “real” (which here means sent); the reader is left uncertain where it ends, for instance. In the letter Cha runs the whole gamut of personal pronouns and works with several time zones at once. The emphasis is on the diasporic search for a destination, an end destination that, she suggests, does not exist. The search, Cha stresses, partly via her play with pronouns, “I” and “we,” is not an individual one. “Our destination is fixed on the perpetual motion of search. [...] I am in the same crowd,
the same coup, the same revolt, nothing has changed. [...] Move” (D 81). In the “Melpomene/Tragedy” chapter, Cha suggests that the longing for home is stable and fixed, not the home. The “whither” is underlined, whereas the “what” is sidelined.

\[
\text{[...] every Bird that migrates North}
\text{for Spring and South for Winter becomes a}
\text{metaphor for the longing of return. Destination.}
\text{Homeland. [...]}
\text{There is no destination [sic] other than towards yet}
\text{another refuge from yet another war. Many}
\text{generations pass and many deceptions in the}
\text{sequence in the chronology towards the desti-
\text{nation. (D 80)}}
\]

Yet, I suggest, Dictée most urgently destabilizes the essence-laden concept of home by its very form. Cha stresses the process Dictée rather than the product Dictée. She includes copies of her work-in-progress, her cutting and pasting, and her word searching. As noted earlier, Dictée is a highly hybrid work. The nationalist longings of the mother and the wounds of Korean history that appear predominantly in “Clio/History,” “Calliope/Epic Poetry,” and “Melpomene/Tragedy” are juxtaposed with seemingly arbitrary sequences, including, for instance, a sequence containing a stage direction of an unnamed woman moving in and out of a movie theatre (in the “Erato/Love Poetry” chapter). The arbitrariness of that section resides in the fact that it tells stories that are not directly connected to Cha’s life. The majority of the photographs included in Dictée portray well-known national Korean scenes, but Cha also includes photographs that disturb any desire for “authenticity.” For instance, we find a close-up of the actress Réne Maria Falconetti in her portrayal of Joan of Arc in Carl Dreyer’s famous silent film about the female martyr, The Passion of Joan of Arc (D 119). In fact, the form of Dreyer’s film of the female martyr and the form of Dictée bear affinities. The film supplies the reader with no narrative line. Rather, in a fragmentary and unstitched way, it juxtaposes images, in

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33 Elaine Kim tells us that Cha’s first trip back to Korea was made in 1978, and that she returned three times between 1978 and 1981. As is evident in the above passage quoted from Dictée, this was a time of political unrest in South Korea. The unrest “encompassed the assassination of Park Chung Hee, dictator since 1962, massive civilian demonstrations for constitutional reform and popular elections, demonstrations that culminated in a military coup d’etat in 1980 and the Kwangju Uprising against continued military rule, and growing labor unrest.” Kim, “Poised” 29.
particular, extreme close-ups of Falconetti’s face. Another photograph in Dictée portrays St. Thérèse de Lisieux in a convent play dressed up as Joan of Arc (D 93). The cover photograph depicts an Egyptian ruin.

Home as an end destination is rendered phantom by this “impure” text. No final and absolute return can be made. Dictée’s form disturbs the expectation of descent, the expectation of a downward linear movement towards the static home cued by the inscription on the first page — “Mother / I miss you / I am hungry / I want to go home.” There is, in addition, no stable I that we can follow in the direction home. The conceptualizations of home in Dictée lead us neither to a safe, nourishing place, nor to a stable homogenous entity. Above all, writing home in Dictée becomes recording absence, loss, and yearning. “Absence full. Absence glow” (D 124).

Eva Hoffman’s Territorial Rite of Passage

Structurally, Eva Hoffman’s autobiography Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language can be viewed as a rather traditional story of immigration, the American way. Hoffman’s text is divided into three sections: “Paradise,” “Exile,” and “The New World.” As these subtitles indicate, Hoffman invites traditional immigrant rhetoric of linear transformation and development — assimilationist teleology. In contrast to Dictée, the very form of Hoffman’s text suggests a stable beginning and a final destination. In 1959, when Ewa is thirteen years old, her family emigrates from Poland to Canada. Ewa was born in Cracow two months after the end of the Second World War, and says that she “come[s] from the war” (L 23). Hoffman tells us her story of childhood in postwar Crakow, adolescence of acute alienation in Vancouver, successful college years at Rice and Harvard, and entrance into the publishing-world of New York. Hoffman’s autobiography ends with a sense of

36 Private correspondence with Guenther Waibel via Professor Hertha D. Sweet Wong. Waibel works as a digital media developer at the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive which carries a “Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive.”
arrival: “I am here now” (L 280). Thus, seemingly, Hoffman tells a familiar story of immigrant progress, what Shelley Sunn Wong calls American Bildung, a bildung that proceeds “from disunified self to coherent identity, and ultimately, identification with the larger society.”

Sunn Wong identifies the story of American Bildung when she discusses Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictée. Dictée, of course, vehemently resists the linear story of American Bildung. Cha’s autobiographical text is not one of immigration that results in assimilation/identification. The pull of the past is in focus in Dictée. As a contrast, then, Hoffman’s autobiographical text seems to write itself right into the paradigm of American Bildung. We find a highly disunified self in the “Exile” section and the final line of Lost in Translation, “I am here now,” expresses identification, a feeling of being at home at the new place and its society. Yet, I wish to argue that while Hoffman deploys traditional immigrant rhetoric to delve into her past, she simultaneously destabilizes that rhetoric; at times, she explicitly and self-consciously voices this destabilization. She maintains that she follows up “a trace of the other story behind the story of triumphant progress” (L 163). Hoffman delves into her past with the concerns of the Harvard Ph.D. she has become. As she tells us her story, she offers her mature interpretations and also invokes postmodern theorists such as Jameson and Derrida to understand her story and condition. There is a sense of postmodern self-consciousness to her text. Danuta Fjellestad sees Lost in Translation as “[t]he first ‘postmodern’ autobiography written in English by an émigré from a European Communist country.” Yet to me, the text displays such striking linearity and attempt at final closure that I find it hard to see Lost in Translation as a postmodern autobiography. Hoffman – albeit with considerable effort – renders her childhood in Crakow a stable point of origin, and finally expresses a stable sense of place in America, qualities which bear affinities with modern autobiographies. Caren Kaplan makes the following distinction: “[i]n modern autobiographical discourses, for example, the self that is constructed is often constructed to be evolving in a linear fashion from a stable place of origin towards a substantial present. In postmodern autobiographical writing such a singular, linear construction of the self is often untenable

37 Sunn Wong 129.
or, at the very least, in tension with competing issues." Hoffman stages a tug of war between modern and postmodern conceptualizations of self.

Despite the text's consistent attempt to offer us its interpretation, it is full of ambivalences and slippages. I will take Hoffman's lead and follow her line, that is the seemingly unidirectional line of progress from "Paradise" to "Exile," and finally to "The New World." Hamid Naficy writes:

Exile is a process of becoming, involving separation from home, a period of liminality and in-betweenness that can be temporary or permanent, and finally incorporation into the dominant host country. Although separation begins with departure from homeland, the imprint, the influence, of home continues well into the remaining phases and shapes them. Liminality and incorporation involve ambivalences, resistances, slippages, dissimulations, doubling (my emphases).

In Hoffman's text not only liminality, "Exile," and incorporation, "The New World," but also home, the point of departure, "Paradise," involve ambivalences, resistances, slippages, dissimulations, doubling. The point of origin, Crakow, Poland, does not come across as a wholly stable place.

And yet, the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love. It lives within me despite my knowledge of our marginality, and its primitive, unpretty emotions. [...] All it has given me is the world, but that is enough. It has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind. It has given me the colors and the furrows of reality, my first loves. The absoluteness of those loves can never be recaptured: no geometry of the landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first, and to which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservations. (L 74-75)

Despite her knowledge of her family's marginality within the postwar Polish society, the primacy and absoluteness of her Crakow childhood are what come across the strongest both in the "Paradise" section and in the pangs of nostalgia, or tęsknota, which recur throughout the text. In Last in Translation, "Paradise" is also childhood, the time prior to a


fall from grace, which here constitutes the time before the self became divided. The subsequent fall that leads her to “Exile” is both cultural estrangement in Canada and the liminality and transitions of adolescence. Again, for Hoffman, as children “[w]e are not yet divided” (L 74).

At this point, I wish to illuminate the divisions, the doublings that Ewa handles as a child in postwar Crakow. She grows up in the midst of Polish nationalism and Communist rule and ideology, of which the latter is inducted mainly through education. Ewa and her fellow students are taught Russian, mourn the death of Stalin, and recognize that, somehow, the mourning is a show. “And if Russia is the center, it is a heavy and leaden center, a sort of black hole sucking bright energy into its sinister recesses” (L 60). Ewa’s father, a shrewd and ingenuous dealer in imports/exports, does everything he can to circumnavigate “the System.” Her parents participate neither in the fervent Polish nationalism nor in any Communist fervor. “For both my parents, the sense of disaffiliation is radical enough that they do not feel the drive to develop an opposing ideology, or to join in patriotic or nostalgic discussion about the ‘real Poland,’ which some of their non-Jewish friends, after a few glasses of vodka, mistily lament” (L 58). Eva Hoffman’s Edenic childhood takes place in the midst of Anti-Jewish harassment. She was unconsciously trained to cross herself in front of churches as an act of belonging to the Catholic majority. She knows that almost up to the point of her birth, her parents hid in a forest bunker to escape Nazi persecution. She knows that the signs of Anti-Semitism, which her parents explain “under the heading of barbarian stupidity [...] are everywhere” (L 32, my emphasis). As the family borders the Batory, the ship that will deliver them to the New World, her parents are “put through a body search by the customs police, probably as the farewell gesture of anti-Jewish harassment” (L 3). Nevertheless, when the Batory leaves shore at Gdynia, Ewa “felt I was being pushed out of the happy, safe enclosures of Eden” (L 5). To Ewa, Cracow is “both home and the universe” (L 5) and, yet, “[m]y parents have no doubts about the matter. Poland is home, in a way, but it is also hostile territory” (L 84). Thus, for her parents, exile and displacement preceded the experience of immigration. Yet, baffling, as it seems, Hoffman clings to the notion of her childhood in Crakow as the time and place when she was not yet divided.

Her depiction of Crakow as the “safe enclosures of Eden” is interesting not only because of the evident and self-conscious contraddictoriness involved in portraying post-
war Crakow as a safe enclosure, but also because she simultaneously invites and subverts the rhetoric of *American Bildung* already mentioned. In the classic rhetoric of Americanization, The New World, the absolute finale, equals Paradise – The Promised Land. In that discourse, America is troped in biblical or quasi-biblical language. Hoffman’s immigrant journey starts out from “Paradise” and from there goes to “Exile” and subsequently to “The New World.” One might say that Hoffman’s rendition of the Old World as Paradise downplays American exceptionalist rhetoric. We find out that Canada, and subsequently the United States, are rather arbitrary choices made once the Polish ban on emigration for the Jews was removed. “What are the ceremonies for such departures – departures that are neither entirely chosen nor entirely forced, and that are chosen and forced at the same time,” Hoffman queries (L 83). The family constitutes a part of a major Jewish exodus from Poland to various parts of the world, Israel, the new nation, and the US in particular. Once the ban on emigration is lifted for the Jews, “[m]ost people we know decide immediately, and the exodus begins” (L 83). By contextualizing her family’s immigration to America within global migratory movements, Hoffman further downplays American exceptionalist rhetoric. To be noted, there is not a sharp division between Canada and US-America in *Lost in Translation*. They are both part of a New World discourse. This explains why it sometimes hard to distinguish between the two nations in my text.

Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912) might constitute the example *par excellence* of immigrant autobiographical writing in the assimilationist vein. Hoffman invokes Antin’s story, expressing affinities and disaffinities with it. Mary Antin tells the story of her transition from a girl in the Russian Pale to an accomplished New England woman. Hoffman writes,

> in certain details it so closely resembles my own, that its author seems to be some amusing poltergeist, come to show me that whatever belief in my own singularity I may possess is nothing more than a comical vanity. [...] despite the hardships that leap out from the pages, Mary insists on seeing her life as a fable for pure

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success: success for herself, for the idea of assimilation, for the great American experiment. She ends her autobiography, entitled the *The Promised Land*, as she is about to enter college and pursue her vocation as a natural scientist — and she gives us to understand that everything worked out wondrously well from then on. (L 162, 163)

As we already have seen, Hoffman ends her autobiography as she is successfully pursuing a career in publishing and finally senses her place in America, “I am here now.” Against the backdrop of comments such as “[h]ow much time and energy I’ll have to spend just claiming an ordinary place for myself! And how much more figuring out what that place might be, where on earth I might find a stable spot that feels like it’s mine, and from which I can calmly observe the world” (L 160) and “when the dams of envy burst open again, I am most jealous of those who, in America, have had a sense of place” (L 159), we fathom the sheer personal success involved in that last line, “I am here now.” Are we not led to believe that everything works out wondrously well from then on, when she has finally found a stable place from which to view the world again after years of wandering in exile? Or does perhaps “I am here now” (my emphasis) suggest transience? Hoffman’s text displays ambivalence towards the progressive story of immigration/Americanization, yet at no point is she indifferent to it.

Frequently, in traditional immigrant autobiography, the voyage to the New World splits the life into two parts. Antin begins her story by dividing her life into two parts, “I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over,” she writes. Hoffman begins her book with a scene from the Batory’s upper deck and subsequently spends the first section of her book describing the Crakow of her childhood. The anticipated moment of division comes in the “Exile” section. In Hoffman’s story it is not the voyage across the Atlantic that constitutes the dividing line, but the train that takes the Hoffman family from Montreal to Vancouver, the city that is to be their new home. “[I]t seems to me that the relentless rhythm of the wheels is like scissors cutting a three-thousand-mile rip through my life. From now on, my life will be divided into two parts, with the line drawn by that train” (L 100). The landscape she sees flashing by does not consist of “friendly fields, the farmyards of Polish countryside; this is vast, dull, and formless” (L 100).

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Ewa carried two disparate notions of Canada prior to departure. One was built upon her father’s notion of Canada, a notion that finally makes the family opt for Canada as the destination of their emigration. In the confines of the parents' wartime forest bunker, the father dreamt of the vast spaces of Canada’s wilderness. The book that he kept at their hiding place, Canada Fragrant With Resin, functions as a catalyst for her father’s dreams of space and freedom. The other understanding of Canada that Ewa carries comes from the Polish paper Cross Section, where the country is described as a “cultural desert” (L 88). Accordingly, Hoffman writes, “[t]o me the word ‘Canada’ has ominous echoes of the ‘Sahara’” (L 4). In Hoffman’s text the desert metaphor for America is so prevalent that she seems to echo French sociologist Jean Baudrillard famous book on America.43 Baudrillard writes:

For the desert is simply that: an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance. [...] you are delivered from all depth there – [...] a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference points.44

Hoffman writes:

To me, these interiors seem oddly flat, devoid of imagination, ingenuous. The spaces are so plain, low-ceilinged, obvious; there are no curves, niches, odd angles, nooks or crannies – nothing that gathers a house into itself, giving it a sense of privacy, or of depth – or interiority. (L 102)

Baudrillard writes further:

The omnipresent cult of the body is extraordinary. It is the only object on which every one is made to concentrate, not as a source of pleasure, but as an object of frantic concern, in the obsessive fear of failure of substandard performance, a sign and an anticipation of death, that death to which no one can any longer give meaning, but which everyone knows has at all time to be prevented. The body is cherished in the perverse certainty of its uselessness.45

43 Fjellestad has also drawn the link between Baudrillard and Hoffman.
45 Baudrillard 35.
Hoffman writes further:

But it's not till I come to the land of progress [...] that I'm confronted with the idea of health as effort. Run, swim, do aerobics, I am urged by every cultural loudspeaker. [...] But I keep remembering the more indolent sensuousness that stood for health in my childhood, and I marvel at the eagerness to drive the body to the limit – as if one's flesh could be properly castigated that way, and the danger of passivity exorcises, like a deadly sin. (L 51, 52)

What we see here are two very similar Eurocentric articulations of America's alleged focus on surface and lack of interiority and depth. There are numerous descriptions of the depthlessness of America and the cultured Europe of her childhood in Hoffman's text. For instance, when she visits a concert in Crakow given by the Polish émigré pianist, Arthur Rubinstein, she discusses the “high excitement, patriotism, nostalgia and pure sentiment that art still has the power to induce here” (L 72). Hoffman describes her new home oxymoronically as “my lush Western Sahara” (L 138). “Vancouver circa 1960 is a raw town,” she writes, reiterating Lévi-Strauss's division of cultures into “raw and cooked” (L 134, my emphasis). Together with her sister, Alinka (re-named Elaine by her teacher) the adolescent, exiled Eva, walks through Vancouver's main street and notes, “a ramshackle, low-built part of town, that seems a no place, thrown up randomly, without particular order or purpose” (L 134). The Crakow of her Edenic childhood offers a different kind of walk, a walk where hidden interiors/secrets can be revealed to her. Crakow “is a place not of mystery but of secrets. [...] I walk its streets in a state of musing, anticipatory pleasure. Its narrow byways, its echoing courtyards, its jewellike interiors are there for my delectation” (L 38, my emphasis). “Europe is old, crowded, and burdened with history while America is new, open, and ahistorical,” Caren Kaplan comments on the binary structure of Baudrillard's America. In Lost in Translation, as well, the binary, the divide between the two worlds, one so new and the other one so old, seems total. “Hoffman writes, “[t]he distances, in America, are still the salient thing. The large facts of geographic distances and the smaller facts of the distances between apartments and offices and houses inform the most intimate distances between us” (L 267).

47 Caren Kaplan, Questions of Travel 75.
Hoffman cannot unite the life that has been separated into two parts by that initial train-ride across the American continent. The parts do not intersect at all in the "Exile" section. Hoffman insistently deploys spatial metaphorics to describe the physical and cultural divide she experiences. She asks herself: "Can I jump continents as if skipping rope?" (L. 115). In the latter part of the book she states, "[w]e can't jump over such a large time canyon" (L. 222). Throughout the text, Hoffman employs spatial metaphorics to present a binary mode of identity, of "radical discontinuity" (L. 242). She cannot "throw a bridge between the present and the past" (L. 117). The canyon, the divide is in focus. Beginning in the "Exile" section, she intersperses dialogues between the Polish Ewa and the Canadian Eva. In the "Exile" section, Ewa is "the real one." Like Crakow, Ewa retains primacy, authenticity.

What jokes are your friends in Cracow exchanging? I can't imagine. What's Basia doing? Maybe she's beginning to act. Doing exactly what she wanted. She must be having fun.
But you might have become more serious even there.
Possible.
But you would have been different, very different.
No question.
And you prefer her, the Cracow Ewa.
Yes, I prefer her. But I can't be her. I'm losing track of her.
In a few years, I'll have no idea what her hairdo would have been like.
But she's more real, anyway.
Yes, she's the real one. (L. 120)

Quite consistently, Hoffman utilizes the spatial metaphorics of the divide to describe the mental, cultural and geographical distance between her "two selves," separated by the train that took her to Vancouver. Marianne Hirsch notes Hoffman's "desperate desire to displace the relativity, the fracturing, the double-consciousness of immigrant experience."48 Above all, her closing remark, "I am here now," demonstrates that displacement of relativity. There is, as we have seen, a good deal of ambivalence leading up to that final remark of closure, of finally being able to claim space. In the very same last paragraph the following interior monologue takes place: "Right now, this is the place where I'm alive. How could there be any other place? Be here now, I think to myself in

the faintly ironic tones in which the phrase is uttered by the likes of me” (L 280). These remarks are especially striking when, a few pages back, we find a celebration of diasporic double-consciousness, “[t]he gap has also become a chink, a window through which I can observe the diversity of the world. [...] It’s not the worst place to live; it gives you an Archimedean leverage from which to see the world” (L 274, 275). Even though she does not see the interstices between places and cultures as the worst place to live, it does not surface as the place she most desires. What surfaces as the place she most strongly desires is not a place where she can view the world with “Archimedean leverage,” but that “stable spot that feels like it’s mine, and from which I can calmly observe the world” (L 160).

Similarly, the translation therapy that she says she undergoes seems to be an activity working towards going from point A to point B, that is, from Polish Ewa to American Eva. The last dialogue between Polish Ewa and Canadian/American Eva reminds us of the canyon between the two points:

I’ve acquired new ideals, do you mind?  
You’re an immigrant, you can’t afford ideals.  
I’m trying to live as if I were free. At least I can have that dignity.  
Free. You’re playing a dangerous game. A charade.  
Leave me alone. It’s you who’s playing the charade now. Your kind of knowledge doesn’t apply to my condition.  
I’ll never leave you quite alone...  
But I don’t have to listen to you any longer. I am as real as you now. I’m the real one. (L 231)

Thus, eventually in “The New World” the American Eva has sensed a place for herself, and become “the real one.” This dialogue between the Old World Ewa and the New World Eva resembles the earlier. As becomes evident, Hoffman wishes to preclude the fracturing by choosing sides. Here, the New World Eva is “the real one”; in the “Exile” section Polish Ewa was “the real one.” She calls these dialogues cultural “translation therapy” (L 273). Yet, in Hoffman’s textual universe translations seem to be wanting, incommensurable. Above all, they demonstrate an impossibility to carry across meaning, “the terms don’t travel across continents” (L 175). Etymologically, Salman Rushdie
informs us, the word translation comes, “from the Latin for ‘bearing across.”' Hoffman writes, however, “[i]n order to translate a language, or a text, without changing its meaning, one would have to transport its audience as well” (L 273).

Ewa Hoffman does not exist in the New World, she is, as the title announces, lost in translation. Yet, this title is contradictory, as so many things in this seemingly smooth and linear autobiography. She also writes about translation as gain. “When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it” (L 273). Yet, as we have seen, no cross-fertilization seems to take place in the dialogues between Polish Ewa and Canadian/American Eva. Despite her salutary remarks of double-consciousness and cross-fertilization, what comes across the strongest is the desire for stable absolutes, suggested in her choice of title, Lost in Translation, and reinforced in her closing remark, “I am here now.”

It is also possible to read Hoffman’s ambivalent “achievement” of being here now, as her attempt to follow her father’s repeated injunction, “try to be happy” (L 253). Hoffman finds her parents’ injunction to be “happy no matter what. [...] a terribly paradoxical recipe” (L 16). The displacement of relativity and double-consciousness that we have noted, then, not only suggests a variant of American Bildung but also an attempt to meet her father’s wish for her to lead a happy, new life. With his experience of displacement as a Jew hiding from persecution during the war, “to be happy” implies to be able to claim a place, a new place. Born two months after the end of the Second World War, Ewa, above all, represents a new start, a possibility of forgetting to her parents. Her father, we are given to understand, desires forgetting above all, to “be here now.” The family carries no pictures from their pre-war past “[T]he cut from the past is complete,” Hoffman writes concerning her parents’ past (L 8).

In Lost in Translation there are several “pangs” of nostalgia interspersed. These attacks of nostalgia can be read as other expressions of the already established desire in the text for stable absolutes. Hoffman comments, “one of the ways in which I continue to know that I’m not completely assimilated is through my residual nostalgia [...] for the more stable, less strenuous conditions of anchoring, of home” (L 197). Non-immigrant

Americans, she suggests, have no such desire. Nostalgia, Renato Rosaldo reminds us, etymologically stems "from the Greek nostos, 'to return home,' and algia, 'a painful condition." The first pang of nostalgia takes place almost as soon as Ewa enters the Batory. Hoffman writes, "it comes upon me like a visitation from a whole new geography of emotions, an annunciation of how much an absence can hurt" (L 4). Later, the explanatory voice of the mature Eva, which, we know by now, carries a multitude of contradictions, states, "[n]o there's no returning to the point of origin, no regaining of childhood unity" (L 273). Nevertheless, the expressions of nostalgia (which we find throughout the text) are expressions of a longing for that point of origin "home," a desire that we found present in Dictée as well. At the beginning of the "New World" section, Eva, a recently arrived scholarship student at Rice, Houston, Texas, finds herself struck by the pangs of nostalgia.

The Houston air is thick with heat and humidity, which slow everyone's movements to a sluggish, lazy saunter. The humidity is layered with so many smells that I detect a whiff of a Cracow summer among them, and it shoots me through with a sudden nostalgia, as for a love one has almost forgotten to mourn. (L 171)

Here and elsewhere, nostalgia appears to hit her like a physical force. This, however, is the only time where her description of nostalgia so closely resembles Freud's version of melancholy. Freud, like Hoffman, posits a distinction between mourning and melancholia (nostalgia in Hoffman's case). Mourning involves a healthy process of "working through," whereas melancholia constitutes a pathological condition. As Anne Anlin Cheng explains, "[t]he melancholic cannot 'get over' loss; rather, loss is denied as loss and incorporated as part of the ego. In other words, the melancholic is so persistent and excessive in the remembrance of loss that that remembrance becomes part of the self." If we think along Freud's lines, the traumatic loss of the Edenic Crakow has become incorporated to Eva's ego.

Eva does, at one point, actually return to Crakow. She has no intention of staying. Her parents see no point in her going there: be happy, be here now. "Why do you want to go,

what’s dragging you there?’ my parents ask disapprovingly” (L 232). Once there, she pursues her “recherche du temps perdu with mixed results” (L 237). The original place of the past, her “undivided” childhood is, as she has suspected, not readily available.

I walk along the Planty slowly, and when I come to a spreading chestnut tree, I pause. It is here, under its protective branches, that I once sat cupped in the heart of childhood knowledge. No, that knowledge cannot be recaptured by any tricks or mnemonic aids; and yet, like a pinpoint pulsar of light, it emits an intermittent glow. (L 238-239)

Audre Lorde’s Homebound Journey

By inventing a new genre, “biomythography,” for her autobiographical coming-of-age story, Audre Lorde accomplishes two things, most critics concur. First, she eschews traditional autobiography’s focus on an autonomous I. Second, by her inclusion of “mytho” she calls attention to the fact that this is a construction of her life story. Lorde underlines the story dimension of life narration. Françoise Lionett comments, “Zami is a prominent example of the kind of revisionist mythmaking that a writer engages in when she does not feel legitimated and validated by a long tradition of self-conscious self-exploration.”

Central to our spatial concerns, Lorde’s biomythography has also been viewed as “an early, important attempt to articulate a politics of location in a work of fiction.”

In the opening paragraph of the pro-prologue to Zami: A New Spelling of My Name Lorde writes:


54 Carlston 226. For an overview of the “politics of location” discourse, see my introduction.
My father leaves his psychic print upon me, silent, intense, and unforgiving. But his is a distant lightning. Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home. (Z xiii)

Immediately, Lorde establishes the focal tropes of her “biomythography”: the journey, the search for home, that becomes a metaphor for the search for self, and the central—female—“kind and cruel” others that create her plural self. In Zami, the search for home surfaces as a search for a place “where one best knows oneself” — where best means ‘most,’ even if not always ‘happiest.’”55 Let us track the places and the many experiences of displacement (geographical, emotional, racial, homosexual) involved in that search.

Audre Lorde grew up in a Caribbean household in the New York of the 1930s and 1940s.56 Her parents (her father is from Barbados, her mother Grenada) emigrated from the Caribbean in 1924. Lorde comments, “[i]n October 1929, the first baby came and the stockmarket fell, and my parents’ dream of going home receded into the background” (Z 1). They were “trapped,” Lorde writes. With the deferral of an actual physical return home, the mother, Linda, keeps up her vision of home spiritually and passes it on to her daughters, of whom Audre is the youngest.

[S]he would tell us wonderful stories about Noel’s Hill in Grenville, Grenada, which overlooked the Caribbean. She told us stories about Carriacou, where she had been born, amid the heavy smell of limes. She told us about plants that healed and plants that drove you crazy, and none of it made much sense to us children because we had never seen any of them. [...] Once home was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother’s mouth. She breathed exuded hummed the fruit smell of Noel’s Hill morning fresh and noon hot, and I spun visions of sapodilla and mango as a net over my Harlem tenement cot in the snoring darkness rank with nightmare sweat. Made bearable because it was not all. This now, here, was a space, some temporary abode, never to be considered

55 This is the working definition of home suggested by Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson in their introduction to Migrants of Identity 9.
forever nor totally binding nor defining, no matter how much it commanded in energy and attention. For if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in that sweet place, back home. (Z 4, 5)

From the very start, the birthplace of the mother carries a mythical dimension that Lorde will transform for her own purposes, "biomythography." We will explore the mythic elements subsequently. For now, we will focus on the family's home in America, a home that surfaces as "unhomely." It bears evidence of the alienating effects of processes of dislocation, location and relocation. Lorde speaks of the "insularity of our family" (Z 9). To the young, women-oriented Audre, the parental home is not nurturing, but a stifling, enclosed space. The emphasis within her immigrant mother’s house is on confinement, control, and as Lorde writes in the paragraph cited above, correctness and frugality. It is the place Audre realizes that she has to escape from as soon as she finishes high school, in order to find the pieces of herself that her mother’s home either does not recognize, or recognizes and stifles. In her mother’s house Audre is unable to find "the journeywoman pieces of myself" (Z xv). Her parental home becomes a place of misrecognition; indeed, it becomes one of the places where displacement is experienced.

Lorde consistently calls the household of her upbringing "her mother’s house." The father is rarely present and is described as "a man of few words" (Z 52). After years of odd jobs in a racially segregated job market, where the light skinned Linda Lorde at times could pass as Latina, the couple establishes a real-estate business. Her parents’ marriage is presented as grounded in mutual respect. They slip into patois and remove themselves out of sight of their children when decisions are to be made, "[b]uzz buzz would come through the closed door" (Z 7). Much like the immigrant mother we meet in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, Linda Lorde is guided by "[n]ecessity, a riverbank that guides her life" (WW 13). "She knew how to make virtues out of necessities" (Z 2). The young Audre looks at her mother alternately with awe and anger. "My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time when that word-combination of woman and powerful was almost unexpressable in the white american common tongue" (Z 6). Yet, she also writes, "just sometimes, I wished she could be like all the other mothers, one waiting for me at home with milk and home-baked cookies and a frilly apron, like the blonde smiling mother in Dick and Jane" (Z 42). Audre’s mother, an upward striving black West-
Indian immigrant for whom “front” is central, makes her children share her exile, while imparting her guideline of necessity: “if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in that sweet place, back home” (Z 5). The mother and her two sisters “were large and graceful women whose ample bodies seemed to underline the air of determinations with which they moved through their lives in the strange world of Harlem and America (Z 7-8). Audre’s father, on the other hand, resists the invocation of home, “because it made him sad, and weakened his resolve to make a kingdom for himself in this new world” (Z 4). The emphasis on frugality and correctness in the “mother’s house” seems to be largely shaped by the mostly absent father’s desire to “make it in America.” Further, the home is spatially demarcated in order to undergird the father’s masculinity and enhance his possibilities to create a “kingdom for himself in this new world.” At the office building, the father has a separate room where he can rest. Lorde comments, “I was never allowed to go upstairs, nor to enter the room where my father slept. I always wondered what mysteries occurred ‘upstairs,’ and what it was up there my parents never wanted me to see. I think it was that same vulnerability that had so shocked and embarrassed me the day I peered into their bedroom at home. His ordinary humanity” (Z 52-53).

Lorde speaks of her family’s modest upward mobility in terms of demography. There seems to be an attempt to keep out of racially segregated communities, as matters of race and class clearly intersect. Their first apartment was located in Harlem, at a time when Harlem was still a racially mixed area. “In 1936-1938, 125th Street between Lenox and Eight Avenues, later to become the shopping mecca of Black Harlem, was still a racially mixed area, with control and patronage largely in the hands of white shopkeepers” (Z 8). The family subsequently moved to Washington Heights:

Our new apartment was on 152nd Street between Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway in what was called Washington Heights, and already known as a “changing” neighborhood, meaning one where Black people could begin to find overpriced apartments out of the depressed and decaying core of Harlem. […] Two weeks after we moved into the new apartment, our landlord hanged himself in the basement. The Daily News reported that the suicide was caused by his despondency over the fact that he finally had to rent to negroes. (Z 45-46)
Lorde invokes demography and the occupation of space to illustrate racism in New York in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s. With great detail, she maps the different places in the city that she occupies.

Lorde's autobiography contrasts the salience of demography with the domestic space of the Lorde household. In her mother's house, the daughter finds “no room in which to make errors, no room to be wrong” (Z 45). Frequently, and more and more so as she gets older, Audre feels that she has “wakened up in a hell called home” (Z 68). Again, when the mother invokes notions of home as a sweet place, she suspends America. Linda Lorde nurtures a notion of her “originary” home in practices that evoke it. “Little secret sparks of it were kept alive for years by my mother’s search for fruits ‘under the bridge,’ and her burning of kerosene lamps, by her treadle-machine and her fried bananas and her love of fish and the sea” (Z 1-2). In Lorde’s story, it is in connection to food production that the mother’s house becomes a place of connection and affirmation, almost a sweet place. We will return to Lorde’s ample invocation of food and matters bodily in the last chapter. Nevertheless, as noted, frugality and correctness and the mother’s ruling eye dominate the Lorde household. It is a place where privacy does not exist,

the eternal parental eye [...] was my lot, having only the public parts of the house to play in. I was never alone, nor far from my mother’s watchful eye. The bathroom door was the only door in the house that I was ever allowed to close behind me, and even that would be opened with an inquiry if I tarried on too long on the toilet. [...] My mother viewed any act of separation from her as an indictment of her authority. I was allowed to shut my door to my room only while I was doing my homework and not for a moment longer. (Z 31, 67)

Not only does the mother impose herself on all recesses of the small apartment, she also walls the household off from an outside world, from the friends of her children. The home becomes a place of supervision, isolation and sameness. Rosemary George argues that notions of home above all establish difference through processes of inclusion/exclusion. “Homes are not about inclusions and wide open arms as much as they are about places carved out of closed doors, closed borders and screening
apparatuses.” When Audre befriends Gennie, one of the first women whose image is to stand like a dyke (in both senses of the word) between Audre and chaos, they avoid (or, are forced to avoid) her mother’s house.

We could never go over to my house because me parents didn’t allow visitors when they were not home. They didn’t approve of my friends in general, and they did not care much for Gennie because my mother thought she was too “loud.” So we usually made dates to meet at Columbus Circle or in Washington Square Park, and for a while the golden leaves near each fountain hid the harshness of the confused and alien colors that were sweeping up over our paths. (Z 76)

Her friendship with Gennie, who is to commit suicide in her 17th year, is Audre’s first lesbian relationship. Gennie is described as her first love. They do not, however, physically act on their attraction to each other. Lorde will return to the image of Gennie again and again in Zami. It is together with Gennie that she discovers a fruitful interaction between self and place. Audre and Gennie try on multiple roles and find that “there were appropriate costumes for every role, and appropriate places in the city to go to play them all out. There were always things to do to match whomever we decided to be” (Z 72). Her mother’s household, it becomes clearer and clearer to her, does not match whomever she decides to be. “The first time I ever slept anywhere else besides in my parents’ bedroom was a milestone in my journey to this house of myself,” Lorde writes (Z 31). In Lorde’s text, the trope “a house of myself” functions both materially and figuratively. The narrator describes meticulously her establishment of several apartments and houses with specific addresses. Figuratively, the house of herself constitutes a configuration where she can become the many women she envisions herself, a place that will hold as many parts of herself as possible, a place where she most knows herself.

Audre does not ease her way out of her mother’s household; she leaves abruptly once she has finished high school, and does not meet any member of her parental household for one and a half years. The narrator tells of nightmares she has of the parental home. Years after she moved out of her mother’s house she dreams of her friend Rhea asleep

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in my parents' large bed. She is in great danger. I must save her from the great and nameless evil in this house, left here by the hickory-faced devils. I take her hand. [...] And then suddenly I realize that in this house of my childhood I am no longer welcome. Everything is hostile to me. The doors refuse to open. The glass cracks when I touch it. (Z 173)

Even though Lorde describes her mother as a "demon intent on destroying me" (Z 120) she at the same time acknowledges her mother's intimate relationship with language as a reason for becoming a poet. She also describes her mother as essentially women-oriented. The journey away from the walled-off place that her mother dominates to other places where she can come out "blackened and whole" (Z xv) is also presented as "my need for life, for affirmation, for love, for sharing - copying from my mother what was in her, unfulfilled" (Z 45).

In contrast to her mother's house, the houses of her own that she sets up are open to difference. Yet, to begin with she does not have the tools to examine difference. She writes,

I had grown up in such an isolated world that it was hard for me to recognize difference as anything other than a threat, because it usually was. (The first time I saw my sister Helen in the tub naked I was almost fourteen, and I thought she was a witch because her nipples were pale pink against her light brown breasts. (Z 66)

Even though race clearly constitutes a structuring force in the parental household (recall, for instance, the white landlord who allegedly commits suicide in the basement because he had let an apartment to black people) it is not discussed. Her parents handle racism as a "private woe" (Z 54). When asked at school, Audre is ignorant of the fact that their white landlord had hung himself in the basement of their new apartment building. If the matter were discussed in her home, it would have been between the parents in patois, and behind closed doors. "[W]hatever my mother did not like and could not change, she ignored. Perhaps it would go away, deprived of her attention" (Z 54). Lorde recalls an incident when she is in second grade and her sisters discuss somebody as colored, and neither she nor her older sisters are quite sure what "colored" means. As a child, she does not have a vocabulary for the racism that surrounds her. The mature narrator, however, maps how racial displacement is a structuring force of the family's everyday life. In first grade the teacher divides her class into two groups: the fairies and the brownies. "In this
day of heightened sensitivity to racism and color usage, I don’t have to tell you which were the good students and which were the baddies,” our mature narrator comments (Z 17). On a trip to Washington D.C. on the 4th of July, a white waitress at an ice-cream parlor refuses to serve the family. That incident marks the beginning of the narrator’s political consciousness, wherein the private cannot be distinguished from the public/political. In her mother’s house, the public and the private are sharply demarcated. In contrast to her mother’s survival politics of exclusion, detachment, and keeping up a respectable front, Lorde establishes a politics of location where the private cannot be separated from the political, which enables her to look at difference as other than a threat. Let us take a closer look at how the politics of location presented in *Zami* works.

At home, my mother said, ‘Remember to be sisters in the presence of strangers.’ She meant white people, like the woman who tried to make me get up and give her my seat on the Number 4 bus, and who smelled like cleaning fluid. At St. Catherine’s, they said, ‘Be sisters in the presence of strangers,’ and they meant non-catholics. In high school, the girls said, ‘Be sisters in the presence of strangers,’ and they meant men. My friends said, ‘Be sisters in the presence of strangers,’ and they meant the squares. But in high school, my real sisters were strangers; my teachers were racists; and my friends were the color that I was never supposed to trust. (Z 65)

Thus, sisterhood is not a static concept; different affiliations are assigned and established in different places. In her first “house of her own,” Audre opens the door for friends of the color she was not supposed to trust, a group of friends who name themselves “The Branded.” The Branded is constituted by Audre’s group of high school friends, who initially hook on to each other because of their shared difference from others, from “squares” – a “sisterhood of rebels” (Z 65). “[T]hese girls who saw my house and my independence as a refuge [...] There was a constant stream of young women in and out of my apartment, most of them in varying periods and conditions of stress” (Z 100, 101). Audre, however, becomes secretly frustrated over the fact that her blackness is not made visible, taken into account among the Branded. “We never talked about those differences that separated us, only the ones that united us against the others” (Z 65). Another striking example of the demand for one focused identity based on one difference is the disapproval of the protagonist’s lesbian identity within the leftist circles wherein she moves. The focal concern, according to this group, is supposed to be on class. “For them,
being gay was ‘bourgeois and reactionary’” (Z 127). At one point, Audre shares an apartment with Rhea, a leftist activist. Rhea abruptly leaves New York. The reasons for her departure are revealed to Audre years later. “A visiting higher-up in progressive circles had come to the house one evening while I was there. She later returned to headquarters in New Jersey with the shocking report that Rhea shared a house with a homosexual, and a Black one, at that. [...] Rhea had been denounced for her association with me” (Z 172).

“It was a while before we came to understand that our place was at the very house of difference rather that the security of any particular difference,” Lorde writes (Z 197). Audre searches for a home where she can most know her self, a place where her many, often contradictory differences can be taken into account: “a house of difference.” Lorde refuses to declare allegiance with any one difference. In an interview Lorde has stated:

There’s always someone asking you to underline one piece of yourself, whether it’s Black, woman, mother, dyke, teacher, etc. – because that’s the piece that they need to key into. They want you to dismiss everything else. But once you do that, then you’ve lost because then you become acquired or bought by that particular essence of yourself, and you’ve denied yourself all of the energy it takes to keep all those others in jail. Only by learning to live in harmony with your contradictions can you keep it all afloat.\(^{58}\)

The metaphors of the homebound journey extends throughout Zami. In Mexico, Audre finds the fruitful interaction between self and place that she initially discovered with Gennie, at a New York as a playground.

It was in Mexico City those first few weeks that I started to break my life-long habit of looking down at my feet as I walked along the street. [...] For me, walking hurriedly back to my own little house in this land of color and dark people who said negro and meant something beautiful, who noticed me as I moved among them. [...] It was in Mexico that I stopped feeling invisible. In the streets, in the buses, in the markets, in the Plaza, in the particular attention within Eudora’s eyes. (Z 133, 149)

The places Audre establishes are provisional, yet nourishing; not provisional and more of a space of survival and necessity than a place, the way her mother sees her temporary abode. As a black, lesbian poet in the New York of the 1950s, home as safe place

\(^{58}\) Lorde quoted in Alexander 695-696.
becomes that which one cannot not want, even if the provisionality is there to begin with. The streets, workplaces, public places are both heterosexual and racist. Audre lives and works in hostile territory. Lorde writes about her circle of lesbian friends, "[t]he important message seemed to be that you had to have a place. Whether or not it did justice to whatever you felt you were about, there had to be some place to refuel and check your flaps" (Z 197). She shows us how even within exclusively lesbian places, bars, predominantly, difference is fraught with contradiction. Lesbian places are not situated outside dominant society. Yet gay bars, Lorde writes, "were the only meeting ground we knew" (Z 162). In that scene, if you were a lesbian you were either a butch or a femme, Lorde explains. Audre's crowd refuses to choose a lesbian identity according to those two choices, which renders them a "'freaky' bunch of lesbians" (Z 154). In addition, there are few other black lesbians.

During the fifties in the Village, I didn't know the few other Black women who were visibly gay at all well. Too often we found ourselves sleeping with the same white women. We recognized ourselves as exotic sisters-outsiders who might gain little from banding together. Perhaps our strength might lie in our fewness, our rarity. That was the way it was Downtown. And Uptown, meaning the land of Black people, seemed very far away and hostile territory. (Z 153)

She could thus profit from her blackness as long as she did not align herself with the few other black lesbians around. The privileged difference here is the one of sexual orientation, and for some that difference from mainstream society enables homosexuals to know other experiences of otherness and subordination, Lorde shows. In fact, Muriel, Audre's white lover in the most serious relationship depicted in Zami, makes such pronouncements. "'We are all niggers,' she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it" (Z 177). Together with Muriel, in streets, in shops, in the market, Audre is reminded of the fact that Muriel can doff her difference by acting and dressing straight. If Audre were to doff her lesbian attire, she would still be different.

I knew there was nothing I could do, including wearing skirts and being straight, that would make me acceptable to the little old Ukrainian ladies who sunned themselves on the stoops of Seventh Street and pointed fingers at Muriel and me as we walked past, arm in arm. One of these old ladies, who ran the cleaners across the street, tried to give Muriel a used woolen skirt one day. 'For nothing,'
she insisted, pressing it into Muriel's hands. 'No money, for nothing. Try it on, is nice. Make you look nice, show your legs little bit.' I had gone in and out of that store in dungarees for years, and this old lady had never tried to reform me. She knew the difference, even if Muriel did not. (Z 178)

In addition to being a young gay black woman writing poetry, Audre at this time was also a student – a “closet student.” “This was the fifties and the gulf between the Village gay scene and the college crowd was sharper and far more acrimonious than any town-gown war,” she explains (Z 153). Lorde maps her many positions and states, “[a]t the Bag [a lesbian club], at Hunter College, uptown in Harlem, at the library, there was a piece of the real me bound in each place, and growing” (Z 197). As is evident, Audre Lorde’s “real” me is not bound to an authentic, primordial place. Lorde delineates a politics of location in autobiographical form that refuses to be “boxed into simplistic essentialist positions.” The only part of her identity that appears stable, given, not involved in the process of becoming, is her lesbianism. She includes a childhood incident where Audre recognizes and acts on her desire for females (that is, she sets out to explore a girl’s private parts). She describes the object of her desire, “[t]here she was, curled up and carefully shielded from the inquisitive eyes of the rest of the world, and my family in particular” (Z 24). Momentarily free from the surveillance of the enclosed space of the family, she can feel desire. There is no room for Audre’s sexual self in the mother’s house. In Zami, making love to different women is frequently described as coming home, a home that is not provisional, but incessantly “there.” “I never questioned where my knowledge of her body and her need came from. Loving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for” (Z 118).

Against the backdrop of this delineation of multiple positions and multiple selves, Lorde’s invocation of myth might appear contradictory. Myth rises above particularities of time and place, particularities of location that, as we have seen, give birth to Lorde’s many selves. At the beginning of her narrative, Lorde invokes the mother’s birthplace, Carriacou, an island located in the vicinity of the place where her mother grew up, Grenville, Grenada. As a young girl, Audre searches for it on the map in the library of her school. Carriacou is unmarked, which strengthens the mythic quality of the place in her

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imagination. In Lorde’s rendition of the place, it surfaces as the originary place of women-oriented women, indeed, a lesbian paradise.

Here Aunt Annie lived among the other women who saw their men off on the sailing vessels, then tended the goats and groundnuts, planted grain and poured rum upon the earth to strengthen the corn’s growing, built their women’s houses and the rainwater catchments, harvested the limes, wove their lives and the lives of their children together. Women who survived the absence of their sea-faring men easily, because they came to love each other, past the men’s returning. Madivine. Friendling. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty. (Z 5)

Zami, she explains, is a “Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers” (Z 223). In part, Lorde rewrites the Eurocentric myth of lesbianism originating at the Greek island of Lesbos. In part, she appropriates the West-Indian derogative term for lesbians and imbues it with notions of strength, beauty, and love. In part, she creates a lineage of women-oriented forerunners that grounds her lesbian identity. She includes her mother in that women-oriented lineage. Lorde writes, “to this day I believe that there have always been Black dykes around – in the sense of powerful and women-oriented women – who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my momma” (Z 6). Recreation of myth becomes a tool for survival when “[t]here were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it all alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders on loneliest outposts of the kingdom of Dahomey. We, young and Black and fine and gay, sweated out our first heartbreaks with no school nor office chums to share the confidence over lunch hour” (Z 152). Lorde’s rewriting of myth becomes strategic. Julia Watson contends:

Lorde’s myth of destiny as origin remade is less a nostalgic desire for originary unity than a self-conscious strategy for creating a context in which her painful consciousness of the price of her difference can be transformed into celebration. To rewrite her unspeakability through myth in the final chapters of Zami is to make an intervention in the political arrangements that have rendered her unspeakable and that provide an insistently historical counternarrative to the mythic time of Carriacou.60

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In the last few chapters Audre meets a new lover, Kitty, who presents herself as Afrekete, the African orisha, "mischievous linguist, trickster" (Z 223) and her story comes full circle. In a sense, she goes back to the originary place, Carriacou, which is invoked at the beginning of her text. Afrekete, like once her mother, serves Audre fruit which she

bought in the West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue in the 140s or in the Puerto Rican bodegas within the bustling marked over on Park Avenue and 116th Street under the Central Railroad structures. 'I got this under the bridge,' was a saying from time immemorial, giving an adequate explanation that whatever it was had come from as far back and as close to home – that is to say, was as authentic – as possible. (Z 218)

The established dichotomy between "my mother's house" and a "house of my own" becomes increasingly blurred. The link Lorde forges with her mother also constitutes a diasporic link to Africa. Audre's new lover, who in a sense serves to mediate between Audre and her mother, significantly names herself Afrekete. This is as close as we will come to an arrival to the mythic place in Zami. A notion of a healing, originary home remains, yet a shift in the usage of the myth has occurred. "Once home was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother's mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home," Lorde concludes (Z 223-224). Her homes, then, she realized are the many provisional places where she feels safe enough to come out "blackened and whole" (Z xv). The following passage constitutes Caren Kaplan's vision of where feminism is to go:

We must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism, and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new.61

To me, her words ring true of the movements we see in Zami. Audre has to leave her mother's home, where virtue was what stood as a riverbank between the family and chaos, where chaos, above all, is poverty, racism and otherness, and search for provisional homes, where encounters with different women "stand like dykes between me and the chaos," where chaos certainly is racism and sexism, but also having to privilege one

61 Caren Kaplan, "Deterritorializations" 364-365.
identity and discard the others. From her mother’s home, however, she salvages a notion of the mythic island of Carriacou, where women “work together as friends and lovers” (Z. 223). She remakes the myth of Zami, imbuing it with the use-value for her many selves in their specific localities. To hark back to James Clifford’s words, “women in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a ‘home’ culture and a tradition – selectively.” The search for sanctuaries in Zami is partly a search for a place away from a hostile, heterosexual and racist environment, but also a search for a place where a reconnection with Audre’s West-Indian ancestry can be made. With Lorde’s re-writing of Zami, she finds/fabrics both.

In her study of the African-American migration narrative (concerned with the massive movement of the black population from south to north US), “Who Set You Flowin’? The African-American Migration Narrative, Farah Jasmine Griffin identifies two significant ingredients: safe spaces and ancestral figures. These two ingredients often conflate, Griffin demonstrates. Safe spaces as they are constructed in the works of, for instance, Gwendolyn Brooks and Gloria Naylor, “provide a space, however temporary, for healing and wholeness. [...] ‘Safe space’ takes shape in song, oral culture, memory, dreams and spirituality. They exist as places where ritual evokes Southern or African ancestors.” In her introduction, Griffin states that the framework she sets up for studying the African-American migration narrative could be utilized to study “texts of migration from the Caribbean to North American cities.” I find her framework highly applicable to Zami, where both ancestral figures and safe spaces are central. Similarly, Carole Boyce Davies notes the centrality of female figures, “whose presence or absence evokes a very specific identification or redefinition of the meaning of home” in contemporary female Caribbean writing. “As significant to the contradictory meaning of home are the consistent departures between mother and daughter,” she notes further.

As we have seen the word, concept, place “home” looms large in Zami. Lorde uses spatial metaphors to explore both psychological needs and political exigencies. At the

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62 Clifford 259.
64 Griffin 12.
beginning of this section, I pointed to Lorde’s focal tropes, journey and home. “Journey” and “home” are most often considered to be antithetical concepts, one referring to movement, and the other to fixity. In Lorde’s text, there is no tension between the concepts: the journey is comprised of temporary homes. Gillan observes:

Out of experience of loss, Lorde formulates a portable concept of her home as a temporary stopover. Because she envisions this movement as the source of strength, she is not devastated by the number of times she must create new homes for herself. In the spaces between homes Lorde discovers possibilities for change and growth [...]. Parts of these places have affected her, but none totally makes up her psychic territory or even her physical location.  

Home in Lorde’s text is ubiquitous and semantically mobile, both nourishing and detrimental. On the one hand, home, most often in connection to the mother’s home in America, is connected to surveillance, exclusion and misrecognition, on the other hand, home, as a temporary stopover in the journey towards a place where she can best know herself, is connected to inclusion and self-affirmation, a place free from surveillance enabling her to come out “blackened and whole.” Towards the end of Zami, the dichotomy between her and her mother’s house is destabilized, since out of her mother’s house, she salvages a notion of her mother’s originary home, Carriacou, to affirm her identity as a lesbian and form a reconciliation between mother and daughter.  

“There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother’s blood,” Zami ends (Z 224).

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With my juxtaposition of these texts, I want neither to homogenize, nor relativize the different and varied experiences of displacement. The divergences are profound. Yet, as I hope to have shown, links abound, fruitful connections can be made. The concept-word-space “home” animate these autobiographical articulations of displacement. My

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discussion shows how home reaches a poignancy, "by peoples in diaspora, often peoples of color, who may have no permanent home; peoples on the margins, such as gays and lesbians, for whom home was rarely, if ever, safe; and women and children, for whom the 'haven' of home can be a site of violence and oppression," to use the words of Dorinne Kondo. Avtar Brah has noted that the "concept of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins.

Indeed, the narrators eventually banish the possibility of recapturing the "originary home." The pain of dislocation(s), however, is not banished. This is perhaps most evident in Dictée. Cha's text announces a constant presence of absence. In her text, home is a seething absence. She writes, "Absence full. Absence glow" (D 124) and, "[t]his is how distant I am. From then. From that time" (D 85). Nevertheless, Cha's text vehemently resists, in part by its hybrid structure, the possibility of both a return (stable origin) and an arrival (stable destination). The diasporic subject Theresa Hak Kyung Cha deconstructs home on the level of nation/origins — "No devils here. Nor gods. Labyrinths of deceptions. No enduring time" (D 88). The originary place is evidently not static. As Kang notes, Dictée problematizes "the imperative to cohesive, exclusionist national identification in both geopolitical locations."

In Lost in Translation, an intense yearning for home is present as well. Yet, in Hoffman's text, there is also a yearning to banish that originary place, which, in her case, is Crakow, Poland, and "be here now," which is in the US. Hoffman writes, "I couldn't repudiate the past even if I wanted to, but what can I do with it here, where it doesn't exist?" (L 116). Hoffman maps places of transition from a Polish version of herself to an American Eva who has relocated home. She expresses ambivalence about this process of transition, yet she never abandons her rhetoric of transformation. Hoffman establishes a bipolar axis of Old World and New World, undivided self and fractured self.

Unlike Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Eva Hoffman, Audre Lorde is a second-generation immigrant, born in Harlem, New York. Nevertheless, in the West-Indian household where Audre grows up, when home is talked about, the family's apartment in

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68 Kondo 97.
70 Kang, "Re-membering Home" 250.
New York is suspended. For her mother, her present place can be endured because “it was not all” (Z 4). We follow Audre’s journey away from her mother’s house as she searches for “some more fruitful return than simple bitterness from this place of my mother’s exile” (Z 86). Lorde makes us pay attention to the interaction between place, position and identity. She does not wish to tie herself to one place, one identity. Yet to make a fruitful connection to her mother’s home and to the place of mother’s exile, Lorde transforms the mother’s birthplace, Carriacou, to a fictive originary place of her lesbian self. Lorde fabricates a portable myth of home that works in the various places of her present. “It was not onto the pale sands of Whydah, nor the beaches Winneba or Annamabu, with cocopalms softly applauding and crickets keeping time with the pounding of a tar-laden, treacherous, beautiful sea. It was onto the 113th Street that we descended” (Z 222), Lorde writes of her and her lover’s post lovemaking walk.

In all three texts, the “originary place” is eventually depicted as inaccessible; however, home does not constitute a physical site only. In the mothers’ stories in Zami and Dictée, diasporic subjects maintain notions of home through various practices: song, cooking, language, etc. As Tölöyan argues, the diasporic longing for homeland might not be a longing for an actual physical return, but a “re-turn,” which he conceptualizes as “a repeated turning to the concept and/or the reality of the homeland and other diasporan kin through memory, etc.”71 In Dictée, the mother’s mental maintenance of “home” while exiled in Manchuria becomes an act of resistance to colonizing forces. In Zami, Lorde puts the myth of her mother’s originary birthplace, Carriacou, to new usages. She fabricates a portable myth of home that “grounds” her identity as a displaced lesbian in the United States. Re-turns are not as evident in Lost in Translation. As we have noticed, Eva’s father, in particular, advocates forgetting.

In each text, we find that what is thought of as home constitutes one of the places of displacement. The diasporic mother in Dictée, who nurtures a salutary, national notion of home, is, as she returns to South Korea, excluded from it — “you smell filtered edited through progress and westernization” (D 57). The parental home in Zami is a place where Audre and her lesbian self cannot be recognized, a home she has to escape from. Cracow

71 Tölöyan 14.
to the Jewish-American Hoffman family is an ambivalent and contradictory home. Home and displacement are thus not antithetical concepts here.

To some extent, all three texts relate to a process of transformation/Americanization. The traditional linearity of immigrant narratives, with clear-cut starting- and end-points is troubled. The telos of arrival is put in question. As we have seen, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha resists *American Bildung* partly by her focus on the past and partly because of her representational choices. In *Zami*, America is consistently spelled with lower-case letters, suggesting a resistance to a notion of America as the grand finale of the immigrant experience. The narrator's family's attempt at assimilation through frugality and hard work renders the parental home stifling, a place she needs to escape from. And, as we have seen, immigrant rhetoric abounds in *Lost in Translation*. As these autobiographical narrators trouble rhetorics of Americanization, they communicate with it.
But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.

Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name?

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

### History, Ethnic Memory, and the Postmodern Conundrum

At this historical juncture we can witness a veritable obsession with the past and with the main means to grapple with it: history and memory. In the last two decades, hoards of books have been written about how to remember the Holocaust and how to represent it historically.¹ In particular since 1989, former Communist Eastern European countries have begun to tackle issues of remembering/forgetting, a process most easily seen in the removal of certain central Communist monuments. In South Africa, since the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1995, there are endeavors to retrieve the whole grim picture of the apartheid system, to somehow “get beyond it.”² And in the world of literature in the geographical/political terrain of our concern, the United States of America, we can hear the voices of the historically repressed. These voices, stemming from different marginalized groups — Native-Americans, Chicanos/Chicanas, African-Americans, Jews, Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Korean-Americans — attempt to account for, to use the words of postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha, “the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present.”³

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Writers such as Toni Morrison and the contemporary African-American philosopher Cornel West have repeatedly articulated that the US has chosen amnesia as its national pledge of allegiance.\(^4\) This state-induced amnesia, they argue, is bound to encounter the return of the silent/silenced voices of history. In the introduction to Michel de Certeau's *The Writing of History*, Tom Conley writes, "[t]he past will always enter the flow of current life because it is an absence on which the visible evidence of truth is based."\(^5\) The image of history as a boomerang, which Ralph Ellison introduces us to in his *Invisible Man*, is an apt metaphor here. It counters the embraced view (in the US in particular) of history as an arrow: linear and progressive. Ellison's protagonist urges us to: "Keep a steel helmet handy."\(^6\) In this scenario:

Ethnic memory, as reflected in many literatures of the United States [...] represents a real challenge to hegemonic construction of nation, culture, and history. As part of the ongoing argument between history and memory, marginalized groups often attempt to maintain at the center of national memory what the dominant group would like to forget. The process results in a collective memory always in flux: not one memory but multiple memories constantly battling for attention in cultural space.\(^7\)

My objective at this point is to introduce the "ongoing argument between history and memory" in the contemporary critical scene. No final word on history and memory will be offered. Rather, I will present the tensions and interferences between the two concepts. The tensions, I believe, have sparked/necessitated creativity among the diasporic writers included in my study. Subsequently, I will deal with the illustrative, but specific ways that Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* partake in the dialogue between ethnic memory and official history. Theresa Hak

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Kyung Cha and Maxine Hong Kingston are both critically engaged in a counter-hegemonic, counter-mnemonic discourse with the US and its history as it is presented in the official records—"the publicly sanctioned account."\(^8\) I will look at the two autobiographers' textual tactics and in(ter)ventions to recoup lost histories, which is an explicit part of the project in each text. I will show how these autobiographies offer "fragmentary, displaced memories of America's imperialism, refigured as alternative modes in which immigrants are the survivors of empire, its witnesses, the inhabitants of its borders. [...] They provide] a tireless reckoning with America's 'past' [...] its international past."\(^9\)

Pivotal to the arguments between memory and history are these questions: What passes for memory? What passes for history? Who makes history? Which histories/memories are privileged in history? To what extent does *history* accommodate her stories? How can memory be used to document the past? Do we, in fact, speak so much of memory because we have "so little of it left" as the French historian Pierre Nora suggests?\(^10\) Why does memory, as a concept, come across as political and liberatory at this historical juncture?

Traditionally, "memory" and "history" are construed as diametrically opposite ways to retrieve the past. In this framework, memory is subjective, affective, synchronic, and unstable; whereas history is objective, official, fundamentally diachronic and stable: the publicly sanctioned account of what happened. Although official history portrays the publicly sanctioned account of what happened, it is frequently the site where the pasts of marginal groups are underrepresented and/or misrepresented. The Martiniquian poet/novelist/theorist Edouard Glissant describes the Caribbean experience of historical imperialism and erasure from historical records as follows, "[t]he past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present."\(^11\) In the framework Glissant presents, history constitutes neither the events of the past, nor the experience of the past, but the past as it surfaces — or does not surface —

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in the narrative form of traditional historiography. As the narrator of Rushdie’s *Shame* puts it, this history

is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance, new species of fact arise, and old, saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking last cigarettes. Only the mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated leave few marks: field-patterns, axe-heads, folk-tales, broken pitchers, burial mounds, the fading memory of their youthful beauty. History loves only those who dominate her: it is a relationship of mutual enslavement.\(^\text{12}\)

In Glissant’s and Rushdie’s framework, history can be used interchangeably with historiography, the writing of history. Here, memory becomes a tool to account for archival omissions. This tool, it seems, enters the arena of historical discourse because something is missing, something is unaccounted for: the historical record is not set straight. In their introduction to a special issue on memory in *Representations*, Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn maintain, “memory is of course a substitute, surrogate, or consolation for something that is missing [...] an index of loss.”\(^\text{13}\) Thus, memory becomes a resurgent force for unrepresented pasts to “emerge as history,” to echo back to Glissant.

Marginal groups’ commitment to memory can further be seen as an expression of distrust of the “total history” historiography is prone to produce. Dominick LaCapra, one of the major voices of the deconstructive movement within historiography, writes, “[t]he dream of ‘total history’ [...] has of course been a lodestar from Hegel to the Annales school.”\(^\text{14}\) One could say that the commitment to memory is an expression of the commitment to other voices, other stories, other memories. In this context, memory becomes a concept used to counter history as the total story, the grand récit promoted by the Enlightenment and its aftermath.\(^\text{15}\) Foucault coined the term counter-memory to describe a variant of memory that – unlike memory that he thought was in the service of

history as a grand récit — resists the understanding of history as “true,” continuous, and teleological. George Lipsitz extends Foucault’s concept of counter-memory considerably, and defines it thus:

Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human experience and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the specific and then builds outwards toward a total story. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. Counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience.

The local, the immediate, and the personal, which Lipsitz enumerates as constitutive components of his version of countermemory, are also lodestars of the postmodern project. As a concept, ethnic memory, being group-specific, makes no universal claims — there can be no “universal memory” and in this sense the recent turn to memory partakes in the postmodern project. Thus, the “turn to memory” can be allied with the postmodern ideology of plurality. Further, most varieties of feminism share the postmodernist call for plurality. Susan Stanford Friedman, for example, argues for “feminists to engage in constructing histories in the plural, for recognizing that no single history can encounter the full dimensionality of the Real, and for reflecting upon our own processes of mediation.” As is evident, Friedman does not see a contradiction in “the need to make history by writing history as a political act; and the need to problematize that activity,” i.e., to resist announcing yet another grand récit. Feminists search for women’s stories to “emerge as history.” Yet, at the same time we are determined to resist that master narrative, to find other modes of narrating history. Opposition is not enough.

The project of feminist historiography, then, is at least two-fold. To use Audre Lorde’s much quoted words, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Radhakrishnan describes the double bind:

18 Friedman, *Mappings* 227.
19 Audre Lorde quoted in hooks 19.
repressed constituencies have to play a game of catch-up and at the same time commit themselves to the overthrow of that very terrain that legitimates notions such as power, authority and ideological normativity.20

Ethnic memory encounters similar representational problematics: the epistemological difficulty of telling untold stories within the representational system that rendered those stories unrepresentable.

The stark dichotomy between memory and history presented by Lipsitz is, in part, becoming blurred: the two concepts are increasingly viewed as simultaneously interrelated and in tension with each other. The binary history/memory is destabilized for several reasons. One reason is the one I have briefly described: the historical record is full of willful exclusions, and therefore always needs to be rewritten and re-thought. The totality of history is necessarily unachievable. Marginal discourse shows keen awareness of the fact that history ceaselessly needs to be rewritten. Second, with the deconstructive movements in both history and literature, the commonplace definition of history as objective, transcendental "truth" has suffered severe blows. Thus, the binary between subjective memory and objective history is destabilized. History, as a discipline, is produced and someone produces it. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, "[a]ll historicizing is narrativizing — putting in the form of a story." 21 The past is never available to us whole and transparent, it is always represented by an active agent — in a production setting with institutional regulations — who chooses which story/stories of the past to represent, and who represents the story/stories through organization, selection, allegorization: in sum, rhetoric.22 Conley states:

Historiography (that is, history and writing) bears within its own name the paradox — almost an oxymoron — of a relation established between the two antinomic terms, between the real and discourse. Its task is one of connecting them [...] of working as if the two were being joined.23

23 Conley xxvii.
The entanglement of the word's meanings, the paradox of "history" according to Conley, has contributed to the concealment of the production aspect of history. With deconstruction, however, the proximity between history and story has been illuminated.

Just as history involves production, so does memory. The past is neither unproblematically "there" in memory, nor in history. The past as it "really was" is unattainable. The image of memory as a storehouse, a metaphor we have lived by for quite some time, is no longer appropriate. Memory depends upon external forces for its existence. In fact, a number of neuropsychologists support the view of memory as continually constructed, rather than a storage-retrieval system. Daniel Schacter writes that represented memories are "fundamentally imaginative reconstructions – not slavish reproductions. [...] When we remember, we complete a pattern with the best match available in memory; we do not shine a spotlight on a stored picture." Cultural theorist Andreas Huyssen puts it similarly, "[a]t the other end of the Proustian experience, with the famous madeleine, is the memory of childhood, not childhood itself." In this respect, both history and memory are constantly created. Further, both history and memory are created at a specific point in time and place, i.e. from a specific enunciative position.

It becomes evident that the usefulness of ethnic memory at our fin de siècle is not so much linked to a notion of memory as some sort of direct means to retrieve the past, but as a concept, which, above all, functions as a method to critique national history. Is it even possible to speak of "retrieving" the past within a postmodern framework? Dictée, for instance, abounds with words such as "resurrect," "excavation," "restore." Yet neither Dictée nor China Men presents complacent returns to the past. Rather, their trafficking in the past insists upon being theoretically informed and theoretically informative. Both texts manifest what Barbara Christian describes as, "theorizing [...] in narrative forms." China Men offers several parallel versions of the past, versions that, at times, are mutually exclusive. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha explicitly relies upon both memory and imaginative creation to reconstruct her past. She writes, "to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew" (D 32). Kingston calls China "a country I made up"

24 Schacter 29, 71.
25 Huyssen, Twilight Memories 3.
Nevertheless, in both texts, the reader can discern the acute sense of underrepresentation and misrepresentation, as well as a call for making historical omissions visible. Hence, to a certain extent, these texts resist poststructuralist theorizing. Or, rather, they display poststructuralist insights firmly embedded in material contexts. Oral historian Wendy Singer posits the postmodern conundrum:

> Is there any point to our intellectual endeavour if we are all trapped, as Michel Foucault would claim, in the prisons of language and discourse? [...] Can we study anything but study itself?\(^{28}\)

History is partly, but by no means only, discourse in *Dictée* and *China Men*. The referent is rendered complex, yet it is not bracketed. Displaying poststructuralist insights and postmodern aesthetics, these texts tell historically and materially embedded stories, many of which were previously untold, or thwarted. Susan Stanford Friedman writes:

> Derridean *différance* — the endless play of signifiers without reference to signifieds, the endless deferral of reference itself — is a concept that is richly useful for the deconstruction of representation. But by itself, as an end point, it has little to offer those whose survival depends upon the reconstruction of their own histories, the reclamation, through language, of their experience of the "real."\(^{29}\)

Thus the "turn to memory" is deconstructive, but more importantly, it is reconstructive. The past is not revealed — it is grasped through imaginative reconstruction.

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\(^{29}\) Friedman, *Mappings* 236-237.
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée: Recording Absence and Inscribing Presence*

*Dictée* inscribes a specific past that Cha suggests is absent from Korean and American historical archives. When she remembers the past and situates herself in the present, Cha deploys a “double move”; she simultaneously records absence and inscribes presence. The text creates a *material* trace by transposing the immaterial, untold, unheard memories of colonized Korea and of diasporic experience. This double move involves problematizing the intricate issues of what is “there and not there,” temporally, from absence to presence, as well as spatially, from past to present.

Reducing the present to apparently insignificant “details that call themselves the present” (D 131), Cha demonstrates how she is simultaneously claimed by and claiming the past. As Norma Alarcón and Elaine Kim assert in the title of their collection of essays on *Dictée*, Cha is “writing self, writing nation.” Foremost, she writes the Korean nation. *Dictée* underlines the intimacy and intricacy of the relationship between personal identity and national identity. “Identity and personal history for Cha is embedded in other persons and histories.”

I will focus on Cha’s attempts to reclaim some of the memories/histories of Korea and of diaspora experience in order to leave a residue, while all the time retaining a vigilant eye towards the limits of representation.

Cha repeatedly calls Korea “a far” (D 1 and 20, for instance). She establishes her personal distance from her native country — “This is how distant I am. From then. From that time” (D 85) — yet she also implies the American attitude towards her Korean past. Published and primarily read in the United States by an English speaking audience, Cha’s text bring into the present the phantom ache of the amputated limb, the narrator’s native country, (South) Korea, and some of its pasts. Her exposure of American ignorance brings to mind Toni Morrison’s observation about the necessity of historical amnesia to sustain American idealism: “The American dream is innocence and clean slates and the
future.32 In this context, Korea, is “a far”: a non-specific and not-on-the-agenda for discussion site, among other equally non-specific “a fars.” With irony and pain, Cha writes

[t]o 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. (D 33)

“The others” here then are most likely the citizens of the country where she is a naturalized citizen, the United States of America, a place where the “a far” is under erasure, like “any other” distant a far. This is, of course, highly ironic, since the US has been a major agent in the modern history of Korea. The “liberation” of Korea on August 15, 1945, did not result in a Korea free from foreign powers. Rather, the liberation resulted in a “postcolonial” Korea under the neocolonial control of the United States. Yet, “[d]espite colonization and war [...] Korea remains an unimagined space for most American readers, a vacancy, an exotic name shorn of specific history or concern.”33 Cha shows a painful awareness of this. In connection with her mother's story in the “Calliope/Epic Poetry” chapter she writes:

One day you raise the 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. (D 56)

Accordingly, to pass the American port (“an American Passport”) you have to “pass the past,” as it were. Entering the United States of America, you have to make the past a foreign country, “distant like any other.” Kang states, “the teleology of ‘Americanization’ undergirding the conceptualization of immigrant cultures in the U.S. figures racial-ethnic difference as largely a matter of something ‘left behind.’”34 However, Dictée illustrates that

33 Rob Wilson, “Falling into the Korean Uncanny: On Reading Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*,” *Korean Culture* 12 (Fall 1991): 35.
34 Kang, “Re-membering Home” 250.
despite the mother's dictation of the dogmas of the United States, amnesia is not achieved.

It should be emphasized that Cha's retelling of Korean history is denied a place, both in Korea and in the United States. Her version contradicts the national grand narrative of Korea, i.e., the version sponsored by the nation-state. Her recitation of Japanese colonization and Korean resistance, of the subsequent South Korean (US sponsored) authoritarian regimes that followed, and of the attempts at resistance against those regimes, are not firmly moored in the public version of the narrative of the Republic of Korea.

Cha compares her retrieval of some traces of Korean history with the multiple destructions and reconstructions of the sanctuary Eleusis, near Athens in Greece. During the time of Classical Greece, Eleusis was a major sanctuary connected to the Eleysian Mysteries, the famous religious cult that celebrated fertility by the mother/daughter myth of Demeter and Persephone. "According to the Homeric hymn to Demeter of the seventh century BC, the mysteries were established by the goddess herself, on her reunion with her daughter Korê, or Persephone, who had been raped and abducted, in one version by Poseidon as lord of underworld, or, in a later version, by Hades or Pluto, king of death. Demeter revenges herself for the loss of her daughter by forbidding the grain – of which she is queen – to grow."35 The sanctuary was first destroyed by Christians in the fourth century AD.

35 Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1977; New York: Norton, 1986) 238. This is one of the few women-centered myths of Classical antiquity. It has been dealt with by several feminists, especially as mother/daughter relationships are in focus. See, for instance, Marianne Hirsch, The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989).
painfully personal into the Korean and American cultural archives. Cha's retrieval of the traces of colonization, imperialism, and exile is not about "making stand again, Eleusis," a site neglected in modern times, yet remaining firmly in historical and literary records. It is about making physically visible vague memories and bare traces, which otherwise would go unrecorded.

*Dictée* suggests the impossibility and undesirability of the enterprise, advocated both by the US and the Republic of Korea, to erase the past and clean the slate. *Dictée* deals with absent presences, bygones that are not at all gone. One of the main enterprises in *Dictée*, I argue, is to inscribe a highly specific past, with "discernable features in the narrative." This project, however, is imbued with anxiety. Cha time and again demonstrates her lack of faith in representation. There is a to-and-fro movement between the evident impetus to inscribe and the evident disbelief in representation. "Words cast each by each to weather [...] If it should impress, make fossil trace of word, stand as a ruin stands" (D 177, my emphasis). Cha orchestrates voices of ambivalence, marked by uncertainty and hesitancy. Her anxiety about representation comes across in the following passage:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Within those limits,} \\
\text{resurrect, as much as} \\
\text{possible, possibly could hold} \\
\text{possibly ever hold} \\
\text{a segment of it} \\
\text{segment by segment} \\
\text{segmented} \\
\text{sequence, narrative, variation} \\
\text{on make believe} \\
\text{secrete saliva the words} \\
\text{saliva secrete the words} \\
\text{secretion of words flow liquid form} \\
\text{salivate the words} \\
\text{give light. Fuel. Enflame. (D 129)}
\end{align*}
\]

This passage juxtaposes two contradictory forces. On one hand, Cha discusses the building blocks of traditional narrative, "segment by segment": arbitrary beginnings, middles and ends naturalized into set stories. Segments are segmented, "sequence, narrative, variation," glued together. History comes to us in the form of a story, in a
narrative that has been segmented together, most often chronologically, and imbued with a sense of causality. The liquid images constitute the contradictory force in this passage. The fluids invoked here (and, in fact, throughout Dictée), I suggest, disturb the fixed story historiographers are prone to produce. Liquid forms no demarcations. The bodily liquids in the text, blood and saliva, render the demarcations “beginning, middle, end” unstable.

Cha links her distrust of representation to the “wounding” nature of traditional historiography. Dictée repeatedly makes the connection between memory and history, “[h]istory, the old wound” (D 33). Above all, Cha relates unrecorded parts of Korean history during the time of Japanese colonization from 1910-1945. She locates the “wounds” missing from the chronicles, particularly during the bloody attempts at resistance. The single event given most space in Dictée is the March First Movement of 1919, in which nationwide peaceful demonstrates against Japanese rule were crushed by military forces, resulting in the deaths of 8,000 Koreans. This, I think, is the single event given most space in Dictée: two, possibly three of the photographs (24, 39, 122) are directly linked to the March First Movement. Further, Cha relates the division of the country into North Korea and South Korea in 1945, the Korean War of 1950-1953, and the post-war demonstrations and instability of the country’s political situation up to the time of writing.36

Dictée’s quarrel with history and historiography is multilayered. For the diasporic writing subject, “history the old wound” includes the experience of the events of the past – lingering through generations – and the ways that these events have been represented, or rather, misrepresented. To be stressed, history is not only discourse in Dictée. Cha’s use of “history” distinguishes between the past as it is recorded in the official records, the actual events of the past, and historical experience. The last designation, historical experience, is something passed on from generation to generation, not always consciously.37 “[T]his experience, […] this outcome, that does not cease to continue,” Cha writes (D 32).

Historiography is seen as “uni-directional,” a means of recording “neutralized to achieve the no-response, to make absorb, to submit to the uni-directional

36 See Simons, Rees, Ki-baik Lee, Peter Lowe.
37 I would like to make a link here to Toni Morrison’s Beloved, which ironically ends with the words “this is not a story to pass on” after having passed on the atrocities of slavery for almost 300 pages. Passing on history can mean transferring pain, keeping the unrecorded pain alive, as it were. Toni Morrison, Beloved (New York: Plume, 1987) 275.
correspondence" (D 33). What would the "uni-direction" criticized here be? The audience for the narration of Korean historical events does not seem to be the Korean people, nor displaced Koreans in the diaspora. The audience implied is a foreign audience, presumably a Western audience. "To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know" (D 32). "They cannot know," yet the correspondence is directed to them only. It is directed "[t]o the others," for whom "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" (D 33). Depicted here is traditional historiographic correspondence that invites no response. Korea’s history as a colonized nation, it is suggested, is the object of discourse written by a non-Korean subject for a non-Korean audience. Korea occupies an object position. The "uni-direction" is to and from the West. Similarly, in connection with the mother's story Cha writes, "[t]hey force their speech upon you and direct your speech only to them" (D 50). "They" in that instance is of course the Japanese colonizing power, which, as Chungmoo Choi convincingly demonstrates, mimicked Western colonizing powers. As previously cited, Choi argues that “Japanese imperialism reproduced [the] grand but empty narrative [of the European Enlightenment] in yet another form of colonialism.”

The “sovereign theoretical subject” imposes its worldview on its historical objects. Cha demonstrates one aspect of this imposition in the “Clio/History” chapter, the chapter that narrates the story of the young female freedom fighter Yu Guan Soon. In Dictée, this important participant in the “March First Movement” functions as a martyr/icon of female resistance, linked to Jeanne d'Arc and St. Thérèse de Lisieux. “The identity of such a path is exchangeable with any other heroine in history” (D 30). In Dictée women are both subjects and objects of and in history. In traditional historiography, women rarely occupy subject positions and seldom even acquire object positions. Elaine Kim informs us that

Korean women’s experiences of history have been buried under layers of male narratives, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and Western. Official Korean chronicles of “what happened” were written in Chinese characters, which were off-limits to females for centuries.

38 Choi, “Discourse” 84-85.
39 Kim, “Poised” 14.
Next to Yu Guan Soon's photograph we find the dates of her birth and death:

YU GUAN SOON  
BIRTH:  By Lunar Calendar, 15, March 1903  
DEATH:  12, October, 1920. 8:20 A.M. (D 25, my emphasis)

Thus, the Western time system is imposed upon her by the time of her death. She was born into the Lunar Calender, the Chinese time system.

The historical grand narrative carries with it a few narrative techniques that this text works against, for instance linearity and totalization. Dictée claims partiality, in both senses of the word. It is both willfully fragmentary and grounded in situational, physically grounded, partial knowledge. Again, Cha makes clear that she writes "[f]rom here," a certain enunciative position (D 56). These memorial representations are produced from a particular locus. Tom Conley writes,

historiography aims at the exclusion of the existential relation with language that would be implied by the seeming presence of an “I” or a “you.” Historians have traditionally attempted to transcend the contingency of discursive scenes by establishing “fact” through strategies of self-effacement or omniscience.40

There is in Dictée a presence of an I and a you. Even though the I is difficult to locate, it occasionally surfaces, claiming to manipulate the narrative. Yet the autobiographical narrator does not claim omniscience. For instance, Cha at times claims that like her audience, she also, lacks memory. “The memory is the entire. [...] Except. Some are without” (D 38). Rob Wilson’s reading of Dictée suggests that history in Cha’s view is “the document of an unfinished dialogue.”41 Cha writes, “[i]f words are to be sounded, impress through the partition in ever slight measure to the other side the other signature the other hearing the other speech the other grasp” (D 132). Without an audience these accounts “from another epic another history” would continue to be unaccounted for. Cha maintains that her relations come

40 Conley xx.  
41 Rob Wilson, “Falling” 36.
From another epic another history. From the missing narrative. From the multitude of narratives. Missing. From the chronicles. For another telling for other recitations. (D 81)

Cha desires entrance for her narratives into the Korean and American cultural archives, “for another telling for other recitations.” For the “wound” to be healed it has to be accounted by “the others” to whom her writing seems to be directed. In the passage below, Cha invokes a reply. She continually uses tropes of psychoanalysis to describe her vision of the healing of nation, healing of self. The wounds Cha represents demand to be heard and seen.

Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion. (33, my emphasis)

Cha’s vigilant eye towards historical representation is grounded in the anxiety that her representation will not be physical enough for the material and mental wounds of Korean history that she depicts. Relentlessly, she asks, how do you inscribe “memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh” (D 32)? Again and again, she makes clear that a representation capable of portraying the wounds she depicts cannot be found in the traditional writing of history. Dictée exposes traditional historiography as a recording that fails to record. It accuses “the larger perception of History’s recording” (D 32) of relating atrocities in a way that erases them, particularly in its inability to represent physical suffering. Not only does Cha question historiographic methods, she also questions the nature of “historical evidence.” Dictée is a text profuse with images of the corporeal. Cha sees “blood as measure, that rests as record, as document” (D 32). In Cha’s view, the blood on the ground from the killing of her brother cannot be erased. “I heard from the adults, the blood stains still. Year after year it rained. The stone pavement stained where you fell still remains dark” (D 85).
Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History's recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another. *Not physical enough.* (D 32, my emphasis)

In *Dictée* ink is seen as a bodily fluid and the script on the paper as the “body spilled out.” “Something of the ink that resembles the stain from the interior emptied into emptied upon this boundary this surface,” she writes (D 65). The physicality of the act of writing is also underlined by Cha’s constant display of her writing as a process. She denaturalizes her representation of memory and history by making the reader aware of her active production.

Despite her obvious distrust in representation, Cha inscribes some of the immaterial/untold/unheard/unstable memories of her past via a number of physical traces. The memories are described as being “[r]emembered not quite heard. Not certain. Heard, not at all” (D 67). She expresses a wish for her writing to “make fossil trace of words, residue of word, stand as a ruin stands” (D 177). *Dictée* contains a number of “memorial sites” and in itself, in its status as a “physical” book, constitutes a site of memory. It is a portable kit of memorial sites, as it were. I here draw from the French historian Pierre Nora’s concept of “lieux de mémoire,” or “sites of memory.” Memory, according to him, seeks physical habitats. Nora argues that an investment in physical “sites of memory” occurs at a certain historical juncture:

> a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.42

This historical juncture, of course, does not embrace the whole world at one simultaneous moment. However, *Dictée* most certainly announces that it contains torn memories and breaks with the past. It documents diasporic ruptures. As discussed in the previous chapter, Cha belongs to a third generation of Koreans in the diaspora. The autobiographical narrator is not surrounded by communal memory. Rather, Cha’s explicit

42 Nora 7. Nora uses this term to discuss France’s history and national memory. His seven-volume study is called *Les Lieux de Mémoire.*
obsession with memory suggests a “break in memory.” According to Nora, at a stage of rupture and displacement, memory ceases to be spontaneous; it must in a sense be created, made visible. The lieux de mémoire require an active agent. Nora writes, “without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away.” The lieux de mémoire, then, are “moments of history torn away from the movements of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded” (my emphasis). Cha demonstrates “commemorative vigilance.” Dictée bears further affinities to Nora’s concept in its focus on historical fragments (moments of history), and its lack of narrative line required to relate movements of history. To quote Nora at considerable length:

Lieux de mémoire are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are lieux in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional. [...] The lieux we speak of, then, are mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile. [...] For if we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the lieu de mémoire is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial [...] all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in a minimum of signs, it is also clear that lieux de mémoire only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.

Let us look at Dictée’s initial inscription with Nora’s concept in mind, “Mother / I miss you / I am hungry / I want to go home.” These are the translated words of the script in Hangul, on the first photograph on the first page of Dictée. The photograph appears a few pages before what is printed as page one; that is, it appears before the dedication, before the invocation from Sappho, and before the division of chapters named after the nine muses. It is a rather blurry and grainy photograph; in fact you can hardly tell if it is a photograph or a drawing. There is no caption to this photograph, as there is no caption to any of the ten photographs included in Dictée. It is a photograph of Hangul, the Korean script, etched into stone. This is the only instance of Korean script in

43 Nora 13.
44 Nora 19.
Dictée. In part, the photograph signals to the English-speaking reader that what follows will not be totally available to him/her. It is opaque, but its opaqueness does not erase it. Shelley Sunn Wong observes, “[b]y having the Korean sign virtually move off the page and out of the textual composition, Cha signals the instability of that Korean sign within the larger narrative framework of American life.”

In my reading, the inscription functions differently. I believe the inscription is an example par excellence of a lieu de mémoire within the lieu de mémoire, Dictée. The inscription is “simple and ambiguous,” “natural and artificial,” “collective and individual,” “immutable and mobile,” and carries a great capacity for metamorphosis. Let me elaborate. The inscription’s longing for home is both simple and ambiguous. For the diasporic subject, home is a contradictory notion and place (see Chapter 1). Etched into stone, the inscription is both “natural” and “immutable.” Most critics who discuss the inscription state that the inscription’s primary context is that of a coalmine in Japan and that it was etched by an anonymous Korean exile. During the years of colonization, thousands of Koreans were forced into labor in Japan by the Japanese. “In addition to the ‘voluntary’ immigrants were the 700,000 Koreans ‘mobilised’ as virtual slave labour to work in Japan’s mines and factories.” Elaine H. Kim contests the “accepted truth” of the inscription’s primary context as a mine in Japan. Informed by a Japanese history professor, Kim introduces us to an ongoing historical debate concerning who made the inscription. The primary context of the inscription, many historians now maintain, is not that of a coalmine but of a “tunnel leading to a castle being constructed during World War II to provide a safe haven for the Japanese Emperor.” Kim continues, “some scholars in Japan, while not denying the fact of Japanese exploitation of Korean labor, have argued that the language of the inscription marks it as having been done after the liberation.” These scholars suspect that “Korean nationalists in Japan carved the words as if the inscription had been done by a forced laborer.” The historical debate itself supports my contention that the inscription functions as a lieu de mémoire, whatever the “truth” of its primary context and primary creator. It is imbued with a symbolic aura; it is

45 Sunn Wong 108.
46 Most critics do not discuss it however. Among those who do are Shelley Sunn Wong and Elaine Kim, both in Writing Self, Writing Nation.
47 Simons 145-146.
48 Kim, “Poised” 25.
hybrid; it is capable of metamorphosis; it is mobile. Cha installs the inscription in a new context, but with a similar yearning, the diasporic desire to go home. That desire is both collective and individual. For the Korean-American diasporic subject the inscription installs a sense of Korean diasporic continuity.

Cha recycles a number of icons of Korea and the diaspora experience. Most often, she does not contextualize or attempt to explain these cultural icons. Rather, they "generate affective charge to their stenographic reduction of information." The majority of the photographs depict nationally loaded scenes that could easily be seen as memorial icons. For example, on page 122 we find a screaming, anguished crowd, with no explanatory directions from Cha. Shih contextualizes it, "[t]he photo depicts a crowd of onlookers, men, women and children, standing on one side of a street in front of a temple, supporting the independence marchers of March 1, 1919." Bits and pieces of Cha's writing also "generate affective charge through their stenographic reduction of information." Examples of this would be the "Bong Sun Flower," the "MAH-UHM" spirit, "April 19th," the names Yu Guan Soon and Ahn Joong Kun (both names appear in the "Clio/History" chapter).

As already discussed, the "sites of memory" inscribed here are presented as psychoanalytical tools to heal the nation, to heal the self. Cha's writing about her relations also establishes the feeling of responsibility, the desire for justice, and a sense of urgency. In the mother chapter, "Calliope/Epic Poetry," in a short sequence where the mother's parents are present, Cha writes, "[n]o death will take them, Mother, I dream you just to be able to see you" (D 49, my emphasis). This evokes what Nora calls "duty-memory." "The less memory is experienced collectively the more it will require individuals to become themselves memory-individuals," he writes. In "Clio/History" Cha writes, "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" (D 32). Commemorative responsibility requires acts of the imagination: invention and dream. The commemorative vigilance demonstrated by Cha is not grounded in a desire for factual accuracy. She is inscribing, re

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49 Conley xv.
50 Shih, "Nationalism" 151.
51 Nora 18.
inscribing, physical traces of memories, not always her own, not always "whole," but memories that nevertheless shape her present.

Milan Kundera has written about the dangers of forgetting and the importance of commemorative vigilance. He contends that, "[t]he struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." 52 There is, of course, a power dimension linked to the question of what is to be remembered and whose memories are to be favored. At this point, I would also like to add Marc Bloch's injunction "to maintain a continuing dialogue with the dead," 53 and Walter Benjamin's fear that "should the enemies of the dead be victorious, even the dead would not be safe from victors who do not cease to score victories." 54 The kind of death that Cha promises her mother to save her grandparents from ("no death will take them, mother") is the death of forgetting. The mother's parents did not live to see the day when their nation was "freed" from the enemy, the Japanese. They died not having seen "[t]he expulsion of the people who have taken you by force" (D 47). The enemy, Cha promises, shall not continue to score. Cha deflates the victors' victory by the act of writing. Walter Benjamin urges us to think of history as being in a perpetual state of emergency:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes 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. 55

In connection to Dictée, the "ruling classes" Benjamin speaks of could be read as different imperial powers. Indeed, Cha appears to be working towards a literary and historical materialism. Historical images resurge throughout Dictée, in an almost elegiac manner. In a sense, Cha's writing becomes a "funeral commemoration that simultaneously celebrates life." 56 Cha invokes the simultaneous absence and presence, the death and the life, the blossoming and the rotting, the sleep and the eruption of the personal/historical images.

52 Milan Kundera quoted in Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands 14.
53 Marc Bloch quoted in Mayer 5.
54 Walter Benjamin quoted in Mayer 5-6.
56 Chambers 125.
she exhumes. Several of these fragments evoke the flashes of memory Benjamin urges us to seize hold of, out of a desire for justice. For example, the following tropes visualize a commemorative urgency and a desire for justice:

Not burn, illuminate. Illuminate by losing. Lighten by loss. (D 87)

Seed, germ, sprout, less even. Dormant. Stagnant. Missing. (D 38)

Absence full. Absence glow. Bowls. Left as they are. Fruit as they are. (D 124)

Dead time. Hollow depression interred invalid to resurgence, resistant to memory. Waits.Apel Apellation. Excavation. Let the one who is diseuse. Diseuse de bonne aventure. Let her call forth. Let her break open the spell cast upon time upon time again and again. With her voice, penetrate earth's floor, the walls of Tartaurus to circle and scratch the bowl's surface. Let the sound enter from without, the bowl's hollow its sleep. Until. (D 123)

To survive the forgotten supercede the forgotten. From stone. Layers. Of stone upon stone her self stone between the layers, dormant. No more. (D 150)

salivate the words
give light. Fuel. Enflame. (D 129)

Korean-American Theresa Hak Kyung Cha uses her set of female personae, including diseuse, to illuminate endangered versions of the past. Diseuse is the French word for a "female artiste entertaining with spoken monologues"; the word is derived from "dire," "say." Cha calls forth the diseuse to fight the disuse of her ruptured past by setting selected images of this ruptured past "enflame." The historical fragments illuminated in Dictée are almost exclusively female. The death of Cha's brother is the only event in the text with a male cast (the brother, fellow students, the tutor). It is her voice that "shall penetrate earth's floor" (see the quotes above). It is predominantly her memories that are endangered. Cha insistently disturbs Catholic schooling, Japanese colonization, the US as a liberator/benefactor/enemy, and neocolonial Korean nationalism. These forces are not only imperial; they are explicitly patriarchal.

Even though Cha explicitly wishes to "resurrect" and "restore" fragments of her past, she consistently eschews narrative form, indicating a deep-seated distrust of narratives that attempt to encapsulate the past. Dictée's incongruent juxtapositions of various memorial flashes suggest that they are this diasporic, postmodern subject's only viable means of exhuming the past.

Maxine Hong Kingston's China Men – Neither Remembered Nor Forgotten

Maxine Hong Kingston's second book China Men⁵⁸ (1980) continues the autobiographical project that started with The Woman Warrior: A Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts (1976). The two autobiographies were initially conceived of as one book. Quite basically, The Woman Warrior is a book about the women in Kingston's family, and China Men is a book about the men. Kingston has said that the eventual division replicated "history and geography: the women stayed in China and maintained communities; the men sailed off to the Gold Mountain [the mythical Chinese name for the US] where they built bachelor Chinatowns."⁵⁹ Yet, both autobiographical texts are essentially grounded in the US territory and map "the trans-Pacific travel of ghostly ancestors and their incessant demands on the living."⁶⁰ The Woman Warrior follows a young Chinese-American girl growing up in Stockton, California, in the 40s and 50s, trying to make sense, to translate, and somehow insert herself into the abundance of stories about her Chinese past that her "champion-talker" mother feeds her. The mother "funnelled China into our ears" (WW 73, see my discussion of The Woman Warrior in Chapter 3).

⁵⁸ Maxine Hong Kingston comments on her title: "In the early days of Chinese American history, men called themselves 'Chinamen' just as other newcomers called themselves 'Englishmen' or 'Frenchmen': the term distinguished them from the 'Chinese' who remained citizens of China, and also showed that they were not recognized as Americans. Later, of course, it became an insult." Kingston quoted in Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific" 246-247.
⁶⁰ Avery Gordon 6.
Ambivalent Claims

*China Men* sets out to map Kingston’s male ancestors’ presence in America, a presence spanning three generations, in order to claim America. In several interviews Kingston has maintained that “claiming America” for Chinese-Americans constitutes a major part of her project. In fact, she can only claim America historically via her male ancestors. For a long time, Chinese women were allowed entrance to the US in very limited numbers. In “1924: An Immigration Act passed by Congress specifically excluded ‘Chinese women, wives, and prostitutes’” (CM 156). In 1930, “80 percent of the Chinese population [in America] was male.” These men, Kingston writes, “were the binding and building ancestors of this place” (CM 146). Yet, until the last twenty-some years, Chinese America has been virtually absent from the official historical records of the United States. Kingston focuses on her grandfather and other male ancestors to exemplify the invisibility of the China Men in the States. Ah Goong, together with thousands of other Chinese, partook in building the transcontinental railroad. The work on the railroad started in January 1863. Kingston tells us how her grandfather arrived a few months later and worked with the construction of the railroad until it was completed in 1869. The historian Ronald Takaki gives us the numbers: “Within two years, 12,000 Chinese were employed by the Central Pacific Railroad, representing 90 percent of the work force.” Kingston recalls how, as a child growing up in the only city in the States, Stockton, California, where three railroads meet (the Santa Fe, Southern Pacific, and Western Pacific), she was told by adults that “[y]our grandfather built that railroad.’ (Or ‘Your grandfathers built that railroad.’ Plural and singular are by context)” (CM 126). Illuminating the invisibility of her “binding and building” ancestors in America, she writes:

While the demons posed for photographs, the China Men dispersed. It was dangerous to stay. The Driving Out had begun. Ah Goong does not appear in railroad photographs. (CM 145)

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Hence, the China Men do not appear in the official railroad photographs. Even though China Men does not contain any photographic material, it is a text abundant with talk of photographs (CM 63, 67, 106, 108, 172, for instance). Traveling back and forth over the Pacific, the photographs from a private photograph collection furnish evidence for the Chinese presence in America, which the official records do not contain. Frequently, these images also seem to form the basis of Kingston's imaginative autobiographical storytelling. The relatives who remain in China use photographs differently, however. They use photographs to furnish evidence for their poverty and their need for financial support by their wealthier relatives in the States.

Ironically, the official historical traces of Chinese presence in America are most easily found in the laws of exclusion that were established to severely delimit Chinese Immigration to the States. The chapter called “The Laws” (CM 152-162) is central, and centrally placed, in China Men. It lists a number of laws that restricted Chinese Immigration to the United States, as well as laws that stultified Chinese life in America through legal discrimination. Kingston opens the section with the Burlingame Treaty of 1868. 1868 was the “year 40,000 miners of Chinese ancestry were Driven Out” (CM 152). The treaty formed the first part of the Chinese Exclusion Policy, which was in force between 1868 and 1943. David L. Eng discusses the continually “impossible arrival” of Asians in America:

Historically configured as either unassimilable aliens or perversely assimilated and thus “whiter than white” (the sojourner thesis versus the model-minority myth), Asian Americans have at best a dubious claim to citizenship and place within the U.S. nation-state.65

Kingston demonstrates her claims on America, claims of the “I was here” kind. Yet, she also shows how making claims does not concur with being claimed.66 The nation-state has not been readily available to Asian-Americans. The tracing of Asian-American

65 Eng 31. He also states that despite the ambiguity of claiming America for Asian-Americans that project has indeed been the main concern for the Asian-American movement.
66 Distantly similar, the ghost in Toni Morrison’s Beloved, the slave child killed by its own mother, lurks around 124 having claims. “Although she has claims she in not claimed.” Morrison, Beloved 274. They are both examples of the erasures of American history.
presences and absences reveals the historically complex racial dynamics within the United States.  

*China Men* abounds with silent places, silences and silencings that call for exploration. Three kinds of interlinked silences are evoked: historical, parental, and spatial. Kingston describes how she visits former plantations in Hawaii, where both of her great grandfathers had worked:

I have stood alongside the highway at the edge of the sugarcane and listened for the voices of the great grandfathers. But the cane is merely green in the sunlight; the tassels waving in the wind make no blurry fuzzy outlines that I can construe a message from them. [...] The winds blowing in the long leaves do not whisper words I hear. Yet the rows and fields, organized like conveyor belts, hide murdered and raped bodies; this is a dumping ground. (CM 88)

Kingston is spurred to imaginative autobiographical writing by the (briefly delineated) lacunae in the historical archives, by the silent places of her ancestors, and also by her father’s silence. She probes into these silences, into the “interior lives of people who didn’t write it,” and, I might add, who did not transmit their experiences orally.

In stark contrast to the “champion-talker” mother whom we meet in *The Woman Warrior*, the father in *China Men* is tight-lipped. On the occasions when the father does speak, it is often with a misogynistic flow of words: “Your mother’s cunt. Your mother’s smelly cunt” (CM 12). The former Chinese scholar who, like so many other China Men, makes his living in America by operating a laundry, does not funnel his version of China into his daughter’s ears, neither does he give her stories about her paternal lineage in America:

You say with the few words and the silences: No stories. No past. No China. [...] I’ll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I’m mistaken. You’ll just have to speak up with the real stories if I’ve got you wrong. (CM 14,15)

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67 Similarly, Jingi Ling has written about the contradictoriness of the authorial intent of “claiming America.” He claims that *China Men* “subverts, rather than gives credence to, the ‘claim on America.’” Ling 111.

68 See King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences* 74-125. Clearly, Cheung’s writing has informed my reading of *China Men*.

Silence in Kingston’s text is never a state but an event. Silence presented as a state would reinforce the stereotypical view of Asians as an inherently silent ethnic group. Not all men in China Men are silent. Kingston’s Great Grandfather Bak Goong, who immigrated to Hawaii, “the Sandalwood Mountains,” is described as a “talk addict” (CM 110). Yet, even so, he experiences several events of silencings. Although the father’s silence is his most striking characteristic feature in China Men, Kingston also presents instances when other versions of him surface. Seemingly addressing the father directly, she writes, “Father, I have seen you lighthearted” (CM 11). There is, of course, an interaction between the historically imposed silences in China Men and the willful ones demonstrated by the father who “punished us by not talking [...] You kept up a silence for weeks and months” (CM 14). As Homi K. Bhabha maintains, “private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy.”70 What triggered the event of silence in the father’s life? In what ways can the father’s silence be linked to silencings occurring on a national, historical level? The father functions as a metonymical figure in Kingston’s text. To a certain extent, the father constitutes one China Man among several China Men with similar stories, told and untold. Incidentally, in an opening scene, “On Fathers,” Maxine and her siblings mistake their father for another man who looks like him, “[f]rom the back, almost exactly” (CM 7). Further, the father constitutes several different fathers in the text, “the legal father,” “the illegal father,” “the father in China,” “the American father.” The father’s seething silence in the family house in Stockton, California, USA in the 40s and 50s constitutes an illuminating instance when the domestic and the historical infiltrate each other.

The daughter-narrator ponders: “Do you mean to give us a chance at being real Americans by forgetting the Chinese past” (CM 14)? She views her father’s silence as a decisive step taken by the father as an active agent of forgetting. Gabriel Motzkin suggests that, “[t]he past reappears not when it is forgotten [...] but when it can be neither remembered nor forgotten.”71 His suggestion fits in nicely with this narrator’s relationship to her/her father’s past. Kingston is compelled to imaginatively explore and excavate various silences because she can neither remember nor forget that past. Her father has not told her his past, but it is evidently highly present in Maxine’s life and imagination.

71 Gabriel Motzkin, “Memory and Cultural Translation,” Budick and Iser 281.
The daughter seeks “to find out how we landed in a country where we are eccentric people” (CM 15). The past is there — but in limbo. Kingston offers us several parallel versions of the past. The daughter-narrator does not look for the past; she gives us (and herself) several plausible versions of it. She urges her father to respond and give her his own stories if her partly fictionalized versions of his past are untruthful. In Kingston’s textual world, untruthful does not imply fictional, and factual does not mean truthful.

Kingston opens China Men with a vignette telling the mythic story of Tang Ao, a China Man who went looking for the Gold Mountain. Kingston here recycles and reinvents a story that appears in an early nineteenth-century Chinese novel, Flowers in the Mirror. Tang Ao departs, crosses an ocean, and arrives at what he judges to be his rightful destination. Tang Ao, however, has arrived in the Land of Women. In this land he is the target of an emasculation process by the women of the land, who are able to capture him, since he was not “on guard against ladies. [...] if he had had male companions, he would’ve winked over his shoulder” (CM 3). Apart from the very confinement, the feminization of Tang Ao includes having his ears pierced, face painted, feet bound, etc. When the women are about to pierce his ears, the captured man is horrified by the blackened needles and wants to know what they are doing. They tease and answer him: “Sewing your lips together” (CM 4). The women do not sew Tang Ao’s lips together, but, in a sense, they expose him to an event of “female silencing,” one of many male silences/silencings in China Men. Cheung states, “precisely because quietness is associated with the feminine, as is the ‘East’ in relation to the ‘West’ (in Orientalist discourse), Asian and Asian American men too have been ‘feminized’ in American popular culture.” As Donald C. Goellnicht notices, the story of Tang Ao, “acts metonymically for the emasculation of China Men in white America.” Tang Ao is the first China Man in China Men to occupy a female position. Kingston, as is her want, gives

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72 In fact, her father has responded — to Kingston’s satisfaction. See her “Personal Statement” 24. See also the photograph of Kingston’s father’s comments in the margins of the pirated Hong Kong version of China Men included in Cheung, Articulate Silences 116-117.

73 Cheung informs, “Flowers in the Mirror, by Li Ju-chen (c. 1763-1830) [is] a political allegory and probably one of the first ‘feminist’ novels written by a man. [...] In the Chinese work it is not Tang Ao but his brother-in-law Lin Chih-yang who is captured by women; to avoid sexual relations with the queen on the nuptial night, Lin pretends to be impotent.” Cheung, Articulate Silences 102, 102n.

74 Cheung, Articulate Silences 2.

us two alternative versions of the time and place of the Land of Women: “Some scholars say that that country was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (AD 694-705), and some say earlier than that, AD 441, and it was in North America” (CM 5).

The event of silence in the father’s life is connected to his mature life in the States. The chapter, “The father from China,” follows him from his birth in “1891 or 1903 or 1915” (CM 15) up to 1924, when, as a young provincial teacher and married man with two children, he decides to seek his fortune in the United States. In China his own children and his students “closed up the circle of children who harried his day” (CM 40). The father in China participates in homosocial talk-story on the evening when he decides to leave for the United States. “Baba became susceptible to the stories men told [...]. The Gold Mountain Sojourners were talking about plausible events less than a century old” (CM 41). In the United States, the activity of talk-story is almost exclusively relinquished to Kingston’s female relatives, the mother in particular.

Seemingly, the father’s silence did not “occur” during his first years in the States. Kingston’s father spent fifteen years in New York without Kingston’s mother, leading a “bachelor life” (like so many other China Men). “The Gold Mountain was indeed free: no manners, no traditions, no wives” (CM 61). During his bachelor years the father names himself Ed, after Thomas Edison, runs a laundry together with three friends, and, on his days off, goes to the movies. At Coney Island he takes pictures of himself and his companions, Woodrow, Roosevelt, and Worldster, to send to his wife. He also goes dancing. The China Men in New York paid to dance with white dancing girls. The father, however, “was so handsome that some danced with him for free” (CM 65). The father becomes self-confident and bold. With broken English, Ed asks the blonde dancing girl: “You like come home with me? Please?” (CM 66). He receives a polite no for an answer. In “The Laws” chapter, Kingston writes, “any Chinese man who married an American women caused her to lose her citizenship” (CM 156). At night when working long hours in the home/laundry the father sings,

Years pass and I let drop but one homesick tear.
A laundry lamp burns at midnight.
The laundry business is low, you say,
Washing out blood that stinks like brass —
Only a Chinaman can debase himself so
Shackled by legalized sexual deprivation, washing out menstrual blood as a part of his occupation, the father is forced to let go of a sense of masculinity. Only a Chinaman can debase himself so. Throughout the text, Kingston tries to grapple with the father’s misogynist remarks in both implicit and explicit ways. “What I want from you is for you to tell me that those curses are only common Chinese sayings. That you did not mean to make me sicken at being female” (CM 14). The father’s silence seems to accompany the arrival of his wife, and family life. China Men suggest that it is the emasculation that he has to face in front of the family that, above all, gives birth to his misogynist remarks and his staunch silence, a silence that rendered the rest of the family “invisible, gone” (CM 14).

Kingston’s father does not function as the sole provider in the household. He faces times of unemployment when the mother earns wages picking fruits and vegetables in the fields surrounding Stockton. The depressed father smokes Lucky Strikes and reads the Gold Mountain News. He frequently occupies a passive position within the household, which, clearly, is not compensated by an active position outside the home. The very pragmatic mother scolds him: “You poet. You scholar. You gambler. What use is any of that?” (CM 247). Thus the reversal of gender roles that occurs in mythical robes in the story of Tang Ao is at times highly material in the household. In Kingston’s writing, there are no stories about race that are not simultaneously stories about gender. Kingston suggests that there is no point where race is experienced “as such,” but that the experience of race comes with, and intersects with, experiences of gender and of class. It is with both pathos and anger that Kingston explores her father’s life and his misogynist acts. Her focus is on the various gendered positions he occupies within a racial society. Cheung maintains:

The author enacts a political double move in braiding racist and sexist abuse. She expands her feminist horizon to include men who have been voiceless in

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76 See Lisa Lowe’s fruitful extension of Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s theory of “racial formation” in “The International Within the National.” She writes, “racialization along the legal axis of definitions of citizenship has also ascribed ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ to the Asian American subject.” Lisa Lowe, “The International Within the National” 33.
historical records, but she resists subordinating her feminist concerns in the name of nationalism.\textsuperscript{77} 

There are plenty of other events of silence/silencing in the stories of other male ancestors in \textit{China Men}. The already mentioned talk-addict Bak Gong, "The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains," is silenced by his (white) superior, "the paymaster demon," while working on a plantation in Hawaii (CM 102). The China Men in Hawaii, together with Japanese, Korean, and Filipino men, labored to realize the imperialist, expansionist dream of clearing and cultivating land. To use Takaki's words, "they [the white landowners] felt a moral compulsion not to let the land 'lie in waste.'"\textsuperscript{78} When the laborers arrived, there was "no farm, no sugarcane ready to tend. It was their job to hack a farm out of the wilderness" (CM 98). While actualizing imperialist expansion, these workers were fined if found talking while working. Bak Gong declares to his fellow workers: "'If I knew I had to take a vow of silence [...] I would have shaved off my hair and become a monk. Apparently we've taken a vow of chastity too. Nothing but roosters in this flock'" (CM 100). The alignment between silence and emasculation is immediate. Bak Goong eventually digs a hole in the ground and gives voice to his frustration, his "congestion from not talking" (CM 115). Likewise, Ah Goong, Kingston's "Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains," the metonymic China Man who does not appear in the railroad photographs, suffers from loneliness and sexual deprivation. "The railroad he was building would not lead him to his family" (CM 129).

One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space. 'I am fucking the world,' he said. The world's vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. (CM 133)

This image reverberates with the frequently expressed imperialist vision of uncultivated, untouched land as "virgin land," there to be penetrated: "the world's vagina was big."\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{77} Cheung, \textit{Articulate Silences} 25.

\textsuperscript{78} Takaki 23.

\textsuperscript{79} As one example of many, think of the line in John Donne, "Elegy XIX: To his Mistris Going to Bed," \textit{John Donne: Poetry and Prose}, ed Frank J. Warnke (New York: Random, 1967), where he calls his mistress "O my America! My new-found-land" (96). See also Annette Kolodny's pivotal study, \textit{The Lay of the Land}:
Within the imperial imagination, nature is repeatedly rendered female. Kingston does not place her Chinese-American ancestors outside the imperialist project. Her China Men occupy a subordinate and ambivalent position within that larger project. Thus, remembering the ancestral past in the US entails shedding light on the highly international history of that country, a history where gender, class, race, and sexual practice interconnect in complex ways.

Let us return to Kingston's project of claiming America. *China Men* contains a chapter about her brother's experiences participating reluctantly in the Vietnam War. Evidently, the brother in Vietnam is claimed by the United States. A paradigm shift from "the sojourner-thesis" to the "model-minority myth" has seemingly occurred (see Eng's description of the terms on page 111). In the war, the brother is eventually rendered "super-American." The army checks his background because they want him to work as a spy against the Vietnamese. "The government was certifying that the family was really American, not precariously American but super-American, extraordinarily secure — Q Clearance Americans" (CM 299). Yet, the brother's first reaction to his being security checked is one word, deportation: "[t]he brother's breath caught — his family deported" (CM 298). Obviously, the father's ceaseless fear of deportation has been transferred to the son.  

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Before he becomes inducted, Kingston's brother teaches high school. When he tries to generate a questioning stance towards the war, he receives virtually no response from his students; their faces remain blank. "Any criticism he had of America they dismissed as his being gookish" (CM 279). His students drop out of high school to volunteer. The piece of advice he receives from his mother before finally going off to war constitutes an ironic example of the ambiguous signals he receives from home: "Bring a wife home. Look for a Chinese Girl, but Japanese are okay too, Koreans okay" (CM 285). With

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80 This fear of deportation has been transferred to the daughter-narrator as well. A 1993 interview with Maxine Hong Kingston reveals that the fact that she in *China Men* gives us several versions of her father's entry to the United States is grounded in the family's fear of deportation. "Now that my father has died, I can tell you that he actually came to the U.S. as a stowaway on a ship from Cuba, and he made the journey not once but three times. He was caught twice by immigration police and deported twice. I had to tell many legal and magical versions of my father's entry in case immigration authorities read my book and arrest and deport him again, and my mother too." Quoted in Rob Wilson, "Imagining 'Asia-Pacific': Forgetting Politics and Colonialism in the Magical Waters of the Pacific. An Americanist Critique," *Cultural Studies* 14 (2000): 564.
whom should he affiliate in the war? The brother’s anti-war stance prior to participating in the war does not diminish during his four years in the navy. It evolves into an acute recognition of the racial features of the war. To the brother, the Vietnamese enemy is not abstract. The enemy resembles himself. Kingston presents this recognition as at times conscious and at times unconscious. The brother’s recurrent nightmares carry racial undertones. The following nightmare features mutilated bodies and the familiar laundry tubs and ironing tables from the family’s laundry in Stockton:

A soldier of the rescuing army, he walks through a castle into the dungeons. Going down the stairs, he sees at face level – bodies hanging, some upside down, some brown and dried up, black hair and arms swaying, feet turning this way, then that, bodies with black hair in their middles, corpses with sections missing and askew [...]. Laundry tubs drain beneath the bodies. The live women and children on the ironing tables, the last captured, are being dissected. [...] He takes up his sword and hacks into the enemy, slicing them [...]. When he stops, he finds that he has cut up the victims too, who are his own relatives. The faces of the strung-up people are also those of his own family, Chinese faces, Chinese eyes, noses, and cheekbones. (CM 291)

Jingi Ling suggests that this scene displays the “ideological thrust of *China Men*. [...It] points to the author’s implicit recognition of the racial nature of America’s imperial wars in Asia as well as of the connections between America’s continued construction of racial others domestically.”  

The US wars in the latter part of the twentieth century provided shifting frameworks for Chinese-Americans. During World War II, “as the United States confronted the threat of Fascism in Asia and Europe, the nation would be asked to extend its democratic ideals to immigrants of color. [... It] expose[d] the contradictions within.” The father is drafted to participate in the war, but he is rejected because he is too thin. Within the Chinese community various methods to eschew war circulate. There are tales of China Men taking rat poison, ink, running and smoking cigarettes simultaneously to prove themselves in such bad condition physically that the army would not want them. Kingston exposes the ambiguity of the Chinese-American shifting fortunes in wartime America. In the 40s, there are houses in Stockton left empty. These houses belong to the interned Japanese-Americans. On their way home from the laundry

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81 Ling 136.  
82 Takaki 358.
the family passed “the Japanese’s closed up house, nobody home for years” (CM 12). The fact that both China (which partly was occupied by Japan) and the US shared the same enemy, the Japanese, promulgated a better situation for Chinese-Americans. Yet, when the Japanese family returned from camp her parents

gave them vegetables; we would want them to be nice to us when time came for us Chinese to be the ones in camp. No matter how late we walked home from the laundry, as we passed their house, they switched on their porch light to light our way. (CM 274)

Kingston demonstrates various and shifting allegiances. There are, for instance, white men in Stockton who “lived like China Men” (CM 243). Indeed, claiming America surfaces as an ambivalent project. Asian America in Kingston’s writing remains a liminal place despite the autobiographical narrator’s genealogical display of her American “roots.” Within the larger framework of American historical consciousness, Asian America remains invisible, yet full of racialized/sexualized meaning. In the historical American imagination, Chinese America constitutes an “empty lot,” just like the family’s “ancestral ground” in Stockton, California, where the family takes distant relatives, their “eyes filling with tears over a vacant lot” (CM 171).

Mythic and Material Pasts Juxtaposed

I will now focus on Kingston’s specific textual tactics to approach her ancestral past and create both memory and history. Kingston’s means to write history and autobiography have been under severe attack from voices in the Asian-American community, as discussed in my introduction. Here I will look at how her narrative strategies enable her to theorize in narrative form.

Kingston offers several parallel versions of the past, interrogates her sources, avoids narrative closure, and deploys an unstable point of view. She consistently blurs the dividing line between binaries such as fact and fiction, the oral and the written, tradition and invention, the specific and the general, the mythic and the material, and subjective experience and “objective” history. This sense of binaries breaking down proves crucial to
her project. In Kingston's textual world, ambiguity surfaces as liberatory. Let us look closer at the multitude of textual ambiguities and their implications.

Kingston's account of her father's arrival in the United States presents three mutually exclusive versions. The father's silence and his seemingly ceaseless fear of deportation give birth to the daughter-narrator's suspicion towards the father's rudimentary authoritative version of his journey. "Baba never told us about sailing on a ship. He did not say whether he went as a carpenter or crewman or passenger from Canton or Macao or Hong Kong" (CM 48). In the father's authoritative version of his arrival to the States, he arrives at Angel Island, is detained and questioned for months, and, granted permission, works his way from San Francisco to New York, where he opens a laundry together with Woodrow, Roosevelt, and Worldster. In this version Kingston calls her father "the legal father." The two other versions Kingston gives us vary considerably. One is extravagant and spectacular. The other one is highly plausible. Both are illegal. The extravagant version reads: "In 1903 my father was born in San Francisco, where my grandmother had come disguised as a man. Or, Chinese women once magical, she gave birth at a distance, she in China, my grandfather and father in San Francisco" (CM 237). In the plausible illegal version — "the journey you don't tell me" — the father first arrives in Cuba (a common route to the US), and from there is transported in a crate by smugglers (CM 49). He arrives in New York, stretches his legs and "followed a map that his kinsmen had drawn so clearly that each landmark to Chinatown seemed to be waiting to welcome him" (CM 53). This constitutes just one instance among several where Kingston offers us parallel versions of the same event. Recall how we are given several possible years of birth for the father (CM 15) and two options for the spatial and geographical location of the Land of Women in the story of Tang Ao (CM 7). Further, it is just one instance among many where the father functions metonymically, as one Chinese father among many Chinese fathers — legal and illegal — within commonplace Chinese immigration to the United States. Each story carries parallel stories in Kingston's textual world. Authoritative history here cannot be separated from a multitude of parallel histories, which have not yet emerged as history. Much has been written about Kingston's inclusion of the chapter called "The Laws." It has predominantly been viewed as an
example of authoritative, documentary, "truthful" history. As already pointed out, this chapter lists chronologically a number of laws that aimed at severe delimitation of Chinese immigration to the United States. Donald Goellnicht highlights the ironic undertone in the section. The irony, he argues, becomes evident "when we measure these 'laws' against the 'invented' biographies of China Men that make up the rest of the text. Paradoxically, the imagined/fictional history proves more truthful than the official version."

The parallel, marginal histories that Kingston focuses on in the major part of her book decentralizes "The Laws" chapter, centrally placed in China Men. In Kingston's textual world, no single story can serve for "what really happened." In China Men contingent, multiple, imaginative stories are privileged.

Kingston has maintained that her bent towards ambiguity is linked to her wish to imbue her writing with an oral quality. In an interview she has commented on oral tradition:

> The oral stories change from telling to telling. It changes according to the needs of the listener, according to the needs of the day, the interest of the time, so that the story can be different from day to day. ... Writing is static. ... What would be wonderful would be for the words to change on the page every time, but they can't. The way I tried to solve this problem was to keep ambiguity in the writing all the time.

Oral stories survive because of their capacity for alteration. They are necessarily non-verbatim stories. They are variable and partial. Kingston's talk-story is always already several stories. The original cannot be reached. As Walter Ong puts it in his seminal Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, oral stories "have no focus and no trace (a visual metaphor, showing dependency on writing), not even a trajectory. They are occurrences, events."

In concert with her statement above, Kingston privileges the oral story in China Men. Yet, I believe with Debra Shostak that she blurs the sharp binary between the oral and the written, "between the fluidity and diversity of oral transmissions and the fixity of the written word, which appears to carry the weight of authority in its

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84 Goellnicht, "Tang Ao" 196.
very stasis.”⁸⁷ For Kingston, written stories – rendered devoid of “original source value” – prove as alterable as oral stories. Kingston interrogates the original by being unfaithful to it. As we have seen, in the opening vignette she transforms a nineteenth-century Chinese novel into a mythic parable of China Men’s emasculation in America. The book is rife with this kind of ongoing alteration. Kingston renders the written oral, the oral written; she westernizes Chinese stories, and renders Western stories Chinese. Hybridity is celebrated in the text. The stories are never presented as purely Chinese, or purely Western. For instance, what is easily recognizable as a variant of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, Kingston asserts is “a book from China about a sailor named Lo Bun Sun” (CM 224). The mother reads the Crusoennade out loud, and the daughter finds it “one of the most boring tales she read – no magicians, no beautiful ladies, no knights, or warrior poets” (CM 225). The written spurs the oral in the chapter about Lo Bun Sun. In fact, the taciturn father is spurred to talk-story by the “Adventures of Lo Bun Sun.” The father whose main interest is gardening comes to listen to the part where Lo Bun Sun plants rice, and after having listened, “he told it again, retelling the gleaning several times” (CM 227-228).

Kingston’s version of the Crusoe story reverberates in the China Men’s American destiny. The shipwrecked Lo Bun Sun, alone on his island, becomes a “toiling animal, a toiling sexless animal [...] son and grandson, himself all the generations” (CM 226). The myths, or the stories that Kingston renders mythical and allegorical (such as the opening story about Tang Ao) are predominantly about silence/silencing and emasculation. As we have seen, “silencing” and “emasculaution” are often rendered inseparable. Yet, the mythical stories are not incorporated into the chapters that delineate her male ancestors’ presence in America. They constitute metacomments, but they are not made an integral part of the historical/biographical main chapters. As will be evident, this narrative technique puts China Men in stark contrast to The Woman Warrior, where the actual and the mythical are made inseparable. In China Men the two realms are merely juxtaposed. Yet, Kingston’s juxtaposition of myth and history implies that myths are situated in history and that history is supported by myth/ideology. Kingston has commented on the

structure she employs in *China Men*. “That book is like a six-layer club sandwich or a cake.”

Kingston transforms other written Western stories, as pointed out by King-Kok Cheung in particular. She transforms written stories by Ovid and Chaucer. Bak Goong, the already mentioned champion-talking great-grandfather in Hawaii, breaks the imposed rule of silence by telling stories to his fellow Chinese laborers. One of the stories he tells is about a king who yearns for a son. The king finally gets one, but the son has cat’s ears. To bear the shame, the king keeps the son’s physical flaw a secret. Eventually, the king cannot hold the secret and shout the fact that his son has cat’s ears into a hole he has dug in the ground. The Chinese workers in Hawaii, forced to unbearable silence, decide to copy the king’s act. The workers “dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets” (CM 117). The China Men release their loneliness and their longing for home by shouting into the hole in the ground. As Cheung points out, the story Bak Goong tells his fellow plantation laborers—presented as a Chinese myth—is a version of Ovid’s story of King Midas in book IX of *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid’s version, it is the king who has cat’s ears: a punishment sentenced by Apollo for making a bad judgement in a music contest. The king is much embarrassed, and decides to cover his ears with a turban. The king’s barber is the only person who knows the king’s predicament. In Ovid’s story, it is the barber who releases the secret into a hole in the ground.

But a thick growth of whispering reeds began to spring up there, and these, when at the year’s end they came to their full size, betrayed the sower, for stirred by the gentle breeze, they repeated his buried words and exposed the story of his master’s ears.

Chaucer lets the wife of Bath tell the same tale. In her version it is the wife that reveals the secret. In Hawaii, Kingston tries to hear the seething words her ancestors buried into Hawaiian soil, “what stories the wind would tell” (CM 118). In Kingston’s writing, both written and oral stories circulate and are multiply translated. As demonstrated, the oral and the written feed each other in *China Men*.

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89 Cheung, “Talk Story” 22-37.
The closing chapter, "On Listening," features orality, ambiguity, and stories that generate other stories. Kingston tells of a party she went to where she met a Filipino scholar eager to tell her tales of China Men's presence in the Philippines. Kingston listens to the scholar, speaking from his scholarly factual robe. The scholar claims that her ancestors came to the Philippines looking for the Gold Mountain [the US]. He gives her dates, "[t]hey came in a ship in March of 1603. [...] They had with them a Chinese in chains, who was to show them where to look for a gold needle in a mountain" (CM 305). In part the connection between the Chinese mythical version of America and a "needle in a haystack" (CM 306) underlines the fictional/mythical dimension of the Gold Mountain in the Chinese imagination, as well as its ultimate unattainability. Further, this story, which Kingston silently questions (despite the date and the scholarly robe), gives birth to a storytelling session at the party. A young male Chinese-American says, "a Chinese monk went to Mexico, looking for that mountain too, and either he came there with Cortez, or it was before that" (CM 308). Another Chinese-American exclaims: "The way I heard it was" (CM 308). The way I heard it was functions as a key-phrase in the short chapter "On Listening," but also in China Men as a whole. The storytellers, including Kingston, cannot relate the original, they can only relate their version, beginning with "the way I heard it was." In fact, Kingston's narrative technique questions the existence of an original, a source. Kingston repeatedly points out that she relies on fractured memories only partly related to her. Through a few physical traces, such as the large number of photographs discussed in the book, the diaries of Alaska China Men, a newspaper article, she tries to access her and her father's past. Centrally, however, she relies on her imagination. The oral stories and myths she presents are only half-remembered. Kingston comments on the version of China she presents:

I'd like to go to China if I can get a visa and - more difficult - permission from my family, who are afraid that applying for a visa would call attention to us [...] I want to compare China, a country I made up, with what country is really out there. (CM 87)

Similarly, Kingston makes us aware of the made-up quality of tradition. When Bak Goong and his fellow suffering Chinese laborers dig the hole into the ground to shout out their loneliness and frustration the point is made:
‘That wasn’t a custom,’ said Bak Goong. ‘We made it up. We can make up custom because we’re the founding ancestors of this place.’ (CM 118)

Through her narrative technique Kingston indicates her belief in the necessity of alteration, syncretism and hybridity for the survival of customs, oral stories, and cultural memory. Fixation means cultural stagnation and death in Kingston’s textual world. Indeed, when an oral story stops being told – transferred – it goes out of existence. “Oral tradition has no [...] residue or deposit,” as Ong points out. 91

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To recapitulate, let us look at the similarities and dissimilarities of the ways that these two autobiographies approach and present the past. Obviously, the two texts’ thematic concerns overlap. Each text implies that collective erasure from the official records of the past also means personal erasure in the dominant culture. To a certain extent, their narrative techniques overlap as well. Both Dictée and China Men could be called postmodern autobiographies, since each text eschews linearity and totalization and offers fragmented, hybrid versions of the past. Yet there are also striking dissimilarities. Cha carries an ongoing explicit meta-discussion of historiography and the possibilities and limitations of memory. Kingston’s metadiscussion is primarily carried out by her narrative technique. Kingston gives flesh to her multiple versions of the past, whereas Cha illuminates fragments that she leaves intact, as the fossilised handprint on page 134. Dictée is a text profuse with fossilised remains. It illuminates and imbues physical traces with symbolic meaning. Cha does not question the trace; she elevates the residue and makes it the carrier of her personal fractured memory. “[M]ake fossil trace of word. Stand as a ruin stands” (D 177). Kingston, in contrast, questions all traces, Chinese and American, and gives multiple “fleshed out” versions of the fragmentary remnants of her, and her father’s past, in particular. Kingston’s focus, I argue, is on problematizing and positioning historical (and personal) silences and omissions. Both autobiographical texts, however, display modes of representing the past that avoid narrative closure and totalization.

91 Ong 11.
3 | AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY-WORK AS A POETICS OF RELATION IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR* AND SARA SULERI'S *MEATLESS DAYS*

Since individuals are "never really alone," they construct their autobiographical recollections in reciprocal relation with the no-less-constructed reminiscences of others. Ultimately, then, individual and collective or social memories are a seamless web, whose patterns are imprinted with later understandings and concerns.

Arno J. Mayer, "Memory and History: On the Poverty of Remembering and Forgetting the Judeocide"

"I" is, itself, infinite layers. [...] Whether I accept it or not, the natures of I, i, you, s/he, We, we, they, and wo/man constantly overlap. They all display a necessary ambivalence, for the line dividing I and Not-I, us and them, or him and her is not (cannot) always (be) as clear as we would like it to be. Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak. Of all the layers that form the open (never finite) totality of "I," which is to be filtered out as superfluous, fake, corrupt, and which is to be called pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic? Which, indeed, since all interchange, revolving in an endless process?

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*

I could not understand "I." The Chinese "I" has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American "I," assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight?

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*

This chapter explores the relational character of memory and self in the autobiographies by Chinese-American Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* and Pakistani-American Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days*. Each text demonstrates how the story of the I is relational, always nestled within other stories and the stories of others. Because relational selves are thematically and formally enacted in these texts, the individual's story is understood only in relation to other stories. The two autobiographical texts accentuate the "ceaseless dialectic between connection and separation by which we

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find and make the social space we inhabit.” As Kingston explains in a comment on her work, “I am nothing but who I am in relation to other people.”

An image from *Meatless Days* crystallizes the web-like concerns of this chapter, “if not actually roots, then she had certainly begun to dangle filaments from her elbows and her wrists, like a gnarled but baby banyan tree” (MD 71, my emphasis). The image of the individual branching into others is, in fact, deployed by Kingston as well. She writes about her paternal aunt, “[u]nless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (WW 16). Stories of others and memories of others are incorporated into the autobiographical narrator who becomes a “combination of the polyphonic traces of the women that she has recorded,” as Feng writes in regard to *The Woman Warrior*. And, as will be evident, these diasporic chartings of community and belonging frequently invoke various forms of chosen affiliations, rather than roots and lineages. In the “Shaman” chapter, Kingston relates an incident from her mother’s life when she attended medical school in Kwangtung City, China, located far away from her home village. One night she has a frightening encounter with a ghost. In accordance with custom, her female classmates decide to chant her “descent line” to relieve Brave Orchid from the frightening experience and bring her back into her normal, down-to-earth, top-student self. Yet her fellow students were unfamiliar with her village and family history: her real descent line, and since:

No blood bonded friend to friend [...]. 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. (WW 73)

Hence, Kingston’s emphasis on “horizontal” affiliations suggests a suspension of the “vertical” affiliations of genealogical descent. Whereas “vertical” affiliations suggest a tracing of one’s bloodline; “horizontal” affiliations suggest flexible affiliations based on choice. To a certain extent, Kingston’s search for a “descent-line” is vertical; that is, she

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3 Kingston, “Personal Statement” 23.

searches for female ancestors that would be of use for her in the present. Her mother, then, constitutes the first person in that vertical line of descent. Nevertheless, her affiliations are always based on choice, not on fixed, ascribed affiliations, or the actually roots, invoked in Suleri’s image.

Each text pieces together various “horizontal” affiliations, which display the autobiographical self as a composite, relational self. In Suleri’s memory-work, no “vertical,” ancestral searches can be discerned, apart from Suleri’s decision to “deal with Dadi” (MD 2), the paternal grandmother. Instead, stories of Suleri’s parents, sisters Ifat, Tillat, Nuz, and friends Anita, Dale, and Fawzi abound in Meatless Days; these characters set the flavor of entire chapters, as indicated in chapter titles such as “Mustakori, My Friend: A Study of Perfect Ignorance,” “Goodbye to the Greatness of Tom,” “The Immoderation of Ifat,” “What Mama Knew,” or “Papa and Pakistan.” Yet, just as the narrative persona never occupies center stage in her autobiographical tales, neither do the predominant characters in each chapter dominate their tales; other tales, other characters ceaselessly come and go. As feminist philosopher Seyla Benhabib recognizes:

Others are not just the subject matters of my story; they are also the tellers of their own stories, which compete with my own, unsettle my self-understanding, and spoil my attempts to mastermind my own narrative. Narratives cannot have closure precisely because they are always aspects of the narratives of others; the sense that I create for myself is always immersed in a fragile ‘web’ of stories that I as well as others spin.⁵

In Meatless Days, “name” often equals “story.” Suleri writes, “[t]here is too much autonomy to names: let one in and a host of them is bound to follow, dancing round your room in evil capers and cornering your attention where it does not wish to stay” (MD 78).

Both Kingston and Suleri deploy what Suleri terms “quirky little tales” (MD 173) to meditate on the workings of memory. Through fragmentary and anecdotal vignettes both autobiographers display webs of interconnections between individual and group memory, forming what I see as a poetics of relation. Private memories turn out to be difficult to disentangle from those of the various groups one belongs to. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, co-worker to Emile Durkheim, was one of the first theorists to suggest the

social character of memory. In *On Collective Memory*, initially published in France in 1952, he writes:

Most of the time, when I remember, it is others who spur me on; their memory comes to the aid of mine and mine relies on theirs. [...] There is no point in seeking where they are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them.6

The very form, the series of vignettes that these texts deploy, I suggest, allows a space for the relational self. As Michael Fischer puts it when he discusses a group of postmodern ethnic autobiographies, including *The Woman Warrior*, “[i]t is a matter of finding a voice or style that does not violate one’s several components of identity.”7 Extending through a series of vignettes, the webs of voices in these texts demonstrate the theorizing potential of narrative form. Each text, in part because of its episodic small unit structure, “overcomes the boundaries drawn by the ‘now’ and ‘then’ and ‘here’ and ‘there’ [and, I would add, ‘self’ and ‘other’] of a linear, spatially demarcated, autobiographical recounting of the events in one’s life.”8 Both texts juxtapose disparate events and times, linked by subjective memorial association. Suleri wholly distances herself from a linear recording of her life when she declares, “I have washed my hands of sequence” (MD 76).

Suleri informs us that her understanding of memory has changed over the years. She used to think that memory was “a matter of catalog, some list I could draw with loving neatness” (MD 171). The memory-work she presents in *Meatless Days*, however, is not neat, compartmentalized, and easily separable from the memories of others. Rather, it is socially enmeshed. Suleri’s focuses on intersubjective, international memorizations. She and her siblings together constitute what she calls a “memory international.” Sara Suleri’s father views his dispersed adult children with the pain of loss and absence, “our adulthood would often seem to him betrayal’s synonym” (MD 141). To the widowed

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father, the children constitute a painful manifestation of a “memory international,” their visits keep “reminding him of some other thing that he once knew” (MD 129). In Maxine Hong Kingston’s family, politics of remembering and forgetting constitute a means of reward and punishment, incorporation and expulsion. The forgotten family member is the one with whom one cannot affiliate. Maxine’s mother warns her daughter: “Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born” (WW 13).

The central tropes of the subject “dangling filaments” and of other lives branching into the autobiographical subject challenge ideologies of individualism. Both texts unsettle notions of a unified self, based on patriarchal European traditions of individualism and mythologies of subjectivity. Since their inception in the late 1970s and early 1980s, theories about women’s autobiography have repeatedly suggested that female life writing demonstrates the female subject’s reliance on connection and relatedness rather than separation and individuality in the process of identity formation. Mary Mason’s 1980 essay, “The Other Voice: Autobiographies by Women Writers,” constitutes an important early demonstration of women’s relational means to create identities. Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice” (1989) forms another important and, indeed, germinating essay in the field of women’s autobiography. Friedman expands some of the issues Mason presented, and further uses the psychological theories of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan to theorize about women’s fluid sense of self and relational process towards identity formation. Friedman writes,

[a woman’s] autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community.

9 See Sidonie Smith’s and Julia Watson’s historical guide to the different tenets within the larger theoretical field of women’s autobiography, “Introduction: Situating Subjectivity.”


12 Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves” 38. Hertha D. Sweet Wong calls our attention to the fact that Friedman has reworked and problematized her initial ideas in the years since her seminal essay was published. Hertha D. Sweet Wong, “First-Person Plural: Subjectivity and Community in Native American Women’s Autobiography,” Smith and Watson, Women 170.
It is safe to say that these theorists essentialize "woman." They posit a unified female experience of identity formation in binary opposition to the individuating process of identity formation all men supposedly undergo.¹³ Positionalities other than sex/gender—race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.—are not taken into account. "Polarized concepts of gender identity (that insist that one is either relational or individual) are not adequate because subjects exist in kaleidoscopic relation to multiple, simultaneously overlapping positionalities," as Hertha D. Sweet Wong puts it.¹⁴ As will be demonstrated and problematized subsequently, *Meatless Days* and *The Woman Warrior* display the autobiographical self as a highly relational self. *Meatless Days* has been viewed as revolving around an "absent 'I.'"¹⁵ Joan Lidoff sees Kingston’s autobiographical self "encompass[ing] otherness to a maximum degree."¹⁶ Yet, in neither text does the plural, relational, and sometimes "absent 'I'" come across as a direct result of being female.

Notions of essence are thwarted in numerous ways in these texts, most vehemently in *Meatless Days*. The first chapter of *Meatless Days*, "Excellent Things in Women," for instance, repeatedly invokes and then denies a unified concept of woman. Apart from invoking Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the title suggests that there are things inherent in women that are excellent.¹⁷ Suleri opens the chapter by telling us, "[l]eaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount to giving up the company of women" (MD 1). Quite contradictory she goes on to tell us that her

reference is to a place where the concept of woman was not really a part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living, and conducting precise negotiations with what it means to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant. [...] there's imperial Ifat, there's Mamma in the garden, and Halima the cleaning woman is there too, there's uncanny Dadi with her goat. [...] [T]here are no women in the third world. (MD 1, 20, my emphasis)

¹³ There are examples of autobiographical texts by male writers that surface as relational rather than individual. Yet, to my knowledge, there are not as many. John Edgar Wideman, *Fatheralong: A Mediation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society* (London: Picador, 1996), David Mura, *When the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality and Identity* (New York: Anchor, 1996) are cases in point.

¹⁴ Sweet Wong 170.


As is evident, Suleri focuses on the different positionalities of the women who surrounded her while growing up. Class, age, religion, caste, and a multitude of other factors intersect with her understanding of “woman,” a concept that for Suleri clearly cannot be understood in isolation. Gender is only one axis of identity. Negotiation becomes a key word in Suleri’s text. In New Haven, in the midst of Anglo-American feminism whose at times monolithic, difference-negating way of dealing with the category “woman” Suleri obviously criticizes, she misses “the absence of women” (MD 19). With her many contradictory statements concerning “women,” Suleri clearly plays with her audience. One gets the feeling that her imagined audience is the New Haven Anglo-American feminist crowd. “My audience is lost, and angry to be lost,” she states (MD 2). She then attempts to reconcile herself to her audience’s understanding of “woman.” “I try to lay the subject down and change its clothes, but before I know it, it has sprinted off evilly in the direction of ocular evidence. It goads me into saying, with the defiance of a plea, ‘You did not deal with Dadi’” (MD 2). Suleri wants her audience to realize that they cannot know what being female meant to her grandmother, an eccentric, devout Muslim woman in the new Pakistan, who had been her deceased husband’s second wife and who therefore had experienced a complex status within the household. This is a woman who “resented independence for the distances it made” (MD 2). Inderpal Grewal finds Suleri’s discussion of the presence and absence of “woman” insufficient. “[T]here is very little belief in feminism of any kind in Suleri’s work apart from a strong concern with how women live with each other within families and outside them.” Certainly, Suleri does not present a feminist agenda in Meatless Days. Grewal compares Suleri’s text to Gloria Anzaldúa’s autobiography/political manifesto, Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza. Meatless Days is not a political manifesto. Suleri finds her primary motivation in complicating any reductionist, unifying conceptualization of “woman.” And, Suleri’s concern with “how women live with each other within families and outside them” is certainly not apolitical. The personal, we have learnt, is political.

The Woman Warrior is a more conventional feminist text than Meatless Days. As Kingston struggles to oppose traditional misogynist Chinese sayings, such as “girls are

19 Grewal, “Autobiographic Subjects” 236.
maggots in the rice,” she establishes a series of female avatars of Fa Mu Lan, the Woman Warrior (a famous Chinese legend of a girl who takes her father’s place in battle), including her own mother. It is a book full of “strong” images of women. The title suggests that this text is indeed feminist in intent. Moreover, Kingston repeatedly highlights the construction of “woman.” In school the adolescent Maxine realizes that she and the other Chinese girls have to “make ourselves American-feminine” (WW 155, my emphasis). At other instances, she notes practices that are “Chinese-feminine” (WW 18). Hence, both Kingston and Suleri establish “woman” as an unstable, relational category. The relational autobiographical selves they present do not come into being as a direct result of an exclusively female relational self.

Although the image of the autobiographical subject “dangling filaments” functions as a central metaphor for both Kingston’s and Suleri’s relational construction of identity, I wish to emphasize that the many chosen affiliations and filial obligations portrayed in these two autobiographies do not always secure a sense of belonging for the autobiographical personae. The autobiographical memory-work displayed here is full of dialogue, curiosity and conflict. I will explore the webs of interconnections in these texts; webs that at times enable subject formation and webs that at other times restrict it. As we will see shortly, the invoked dialogue between mother and daughter is somewhat strained in both texts. I will further discuss the way that these autobiographers explicitly draw from a repository of communal/familial stories to situate their autobiographical selves. As Suleri states, “[w]hat a Jonah my voice feels to the whale of that context” (MD 47). My discussion of individual translations of familial/communal stories leads to a further consideration of notions of relational and communal memory.

**Telling the Mother’s Story: Auto/biography**

As becomes evident, *Meatless Days* and *The Woman Warrior* collapse any neat boundary between biography and autobiography. As these autobiographical narrators tell their stories a number of other people’s stories are told. These autobiographies constitute a curious mixture of autobiography and biography. Most centrally, the mothers’ stories are sought for, and represented. In this the texts can be said to be typical of their time: the
70s and the 80s witnessed an outpouring of mother/daughter narratives, both literary and theoretical.20 "Hating one's mother was the feminist enlightenment of the 50s and 60s; but it is only a metaphor for hating oneself. Female literature of the 70s goes beyond matrophobia to a courageously sustained quest for the mother," Elaine Showalter has written.21 In Of Woman Born, Adrienne Rich urges all women to explore how their relationship with their mother has shaped them. She argues:

This cathexis between mother and daughter - essential, distorted, misused - is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement.22

The figure of the mother, to various degrees, is rehabilitated in all but one autobiography (China Men) dealt with in this study.23 However, in many ways the mother/daughter writing in these diasporic autobiographies departs from mainstream mother/daughter writing of their era. Rather than focus on a psychological mother/daughter bind/bond, the daughters in these texts share experiences of displacement. As Meatless Days and The Woman Warrior show, the daughters track their mothers' negotiations with cultural and geographical displacement, searching for the ambiguities, contradictions, pains and pleasures involved in their (im)migrant experiences. "I am curious to locate what she knew of the niceties that living in someone else's history must entail," Suleri writes (MD 164).

In Meatless Days, Suleri lets "Mamma be that haunting word at which narrative falls apart" (MD 157). She struggles to locate her mother's story. In fact, she is haunted, and at times angry with her mother's silence, constant resort to absentmindedness, and a "disembodied Englishness" (MD 163). Sara's stepsister Nuz compares their mother to Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse. Sara Suleri, however, claims that the analogy does not adequately account for her mother: "my mother was more invisible,

23 See my discussion of Dictée and Zami in Chapter 1 for an exploration of negotiations with the concept/notion/place "home" that, to a considerable degree, involve the mother.
more difficult to discern" (MD 154). The Welsh Mair Jones, her Pakistani husband's Mairi, and subsequently Surraya Suleri, is a woman and mother who adamantly refuses to be the central character in any tale. Sara's mother refuses to make claims on a territory, her children, or a fixed identity. "No, child, I will not grip" (MD 159). As Samir Dayal observes, "Mair Jones's advice to her daughter is to affirm in herself the Nietzschean woman, to seek ascesis, to appropriate a self-conscious alterity, a nomadism as well as a deterritorialization that is not intended as a prelude to simple reterritorialization."24 Years after her mother's death, Suleri wishes that her mother had left a record of her life. "[T]oday I would feel more protected if I knew that somewhere about the house I could pick up my mother's book," she writes (MD 184). As she lacks that shielding book of her mother, Suleri's narrative searches for the mother in the nooks and crannies of other stories, her father's "powerful discourse" (MD 157) in particular. Suleri relates a dream she has of her recently deceased mother. In her dream she finds

hunks of meat wrapped in cellophane, and each of them felt like Mamma, in some odd way. It was my task to carry those flanks across the street and to fit them into the coffin at the other side of the road, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Although my dream will not let me recall how many trips I made, I know my hands felt cold. Then, when my father's back was turned, I felt myself engaged in rapid theft - for the sake of Ifat and Shahid and Tillat and all of us, I stole away a portion of that body. It was a piece of her foot I found, a small bone like a knuckle, which I quickly hid inside my mouth, under my tongue. (MD 44)

In her dream and in her writing, Suleri refuses to allow her father's "powerful discourse" to incorporate her mother in full. Susan Koshy suggests that:

> By reclaiming her mother's discourse, Suleri's stories incorporate a poetics of silence that allows her to interrogate and dismantle the concept of agency, and the segregation of public and private on which a masculinist national narrative is founded.25

Even as Suleri devotes a chapter to her father and the nation that is so central to his identity, "Papa and Pakistan," one gets the feeling that she is searching for her mother's

25 Koshy 45-46.
story in the interstices of her father's story, a story that he, in contrast to the mother in relation to her own story, authorizes. As author of his own story, Z. A. Suleri, by his daughter tellingly called Pip (reverberating Dickens's character with a hunger for learning, upward mobility and, indeed, great expectations) "was brilliant at fresh starts" (MD 128). The ultimate example of Pip's extraordinary capacity for beginnings occurs when, after the unexpected death of his wife, Sara Suleri's mother, he decides to adopt another child, since his other children are adult and dispersed. "Pip cleared the family stage of his mind and ushered a new one in" (MD 129). Most ironically, he decides to name his adopted daughter Shahida, a variation of his first-born son's name, Shahid. Sara and her siblings make "transatlantic shiver[s]" (MD 129) over the phone. If we move back in time to the early days of Z. A. Suleri's marriage to Mair Jones, renamed Surraya Suleri, we can see her coming to live in Pakistan with a man who desired his life "to be as novel as the nation," a man who "kept himself preoccupied by inventing newspapers and procreating" (MD 117). The newspaper business came to form "the longest romance of his life" (MD 120). Z. A. Suleri continually writes "the Men and Matters series, as it was tellingly called" (MD 88). In the midst of relating her father's career, the births of several children, and the family's movement between Pakistan and England, Suleri intersperses comments such as, "Mamma was getting fatigued" (MD 118). Where can the Welsh-born mother, the "white-legged woman" (MD 3), as she is called by her mother-in-law (who believes that her son's coupling with a white woman is the work of the devil), be located in such a scenario? Where can Mair Jones/Surraya Suleri be found among the "Men and Matters"? Suleri wonders if perhaps "such a name [mother] will have to signify the severance of story" (MD 164). As Koshy aptly argues, re-membering the mother functions as

a fulfillment of daughterly duty, but also as a covert transgression of paternal jurisdiction over the maternal body. Memory enables her the retroactive theft of prohibited meanings symbolized by the mother's body; memory also allows the incorporation of the maternal body into the daughter's narrative.\footnote{Koshy 47-48.}

While recognizing the love between her mother and father — a love her mother will not let Sara diminish by posing somewhat prying, challenging inquiries concerning its first stages "[i]t was most incongruous, most perverse of you to take to Pip" (MD 165) —
Suleri nevertheless identifies her father’s love for her mother as a form of colonization, or rather, result of colonization. She identifies her postcolonial Pakistani father’s “colonization” of her British mother as a manifestation of his still colonized mind and body. She wonders if her mother could “see that his desire for her was quickened with empire’s ghosts, that his need to possess was a clear index of how he was still possessed” (MD 163). Another example of the father’s ambivalent yearning for things British would be the naming of his first-born child (the child of his first marriage to his cousin), Nuzhat Shelley Suleri – a compromise “between his inchoate regard for her and for Percy Bysshe” (MD 113).

Suleri tracks the positions that her mother negotiates – with tact and with a constant resort to a certain degree of absentmindedness. She sees her mother struggling with the knowledge that her very appearance reminds the postcolonial Pakistani people of an era that they wish to forget. Suleri wonders if her mother thought that “if she let my father colonize her body and her name she would perform some slight reparation for the race from which she came” (MD 163).

By the time of her death, Surraya Suleri is a popular teacher at the university. As her children grow older, Surraya Suleri eases her way out of the household (and simultaneously somehow out of the nation), which would never quite lend her its rules, and into the world of the university, a place that, as an “ivory-tower,” has promoted disembodiment and distance. This is a woman who is “[l]iberal to an extravagant degree on thoughts abstract” (MD 4). Suleri recognizes that her mother never let go of “her habit of seeming to announce, ‘It is good of you to let me live – in my own way – among you.’ She even had that habit with her children!” (MD 165). It seems as if she allows herself more and more distance and absentmindedness, the more familiar one would think that she becomes with her adopted country. When Sara’s oldest sister becomes a mother, the grandchildren

 initiated a slight displacement of my mother. Because her grandchildren would not speak any English, she could not read stories as of old. Urdu always remained a shyness on her tongue, and as the babies came and went she let something of her influence imperceptibly recede, as though she occupied an increasingly private space. (MD 9-10)
Surraya Suleri refuses to grip both as a mother and increasingly, as a grandmother. Her mother’s refusal to grip is at the heart of Suleri’s memorizations of her mother. An instance of Sara’s mixed surprise and anger at her mother’s distanced behavior occurs when she receives an unwanted marriage proposal via her father’s best friend. Sara is deeply distressed. Her mother “gave a ravishingly absentminded smile and disappeared into Welshness, as though she had stumbled upon some hidden cultural ritual that she was too polite to disturb” (MD 59). What purposes did her mother’s refusal to enmesh herself serve? What sort of migratory politics did she enact? Did she realize that her daughter felt anger at her because she “felt that someone was handing me a relic of her, some rag doll, and I refused to kiss those button eyes” (MD 147)?

Seemingly, the mother relies on posture to keep some private structure of knowing to herself, and away from her husband’s powerful discourse, which surrounded her night and day. As Suleri puts it, “when Papa talked, it was of Pakistan” (MD 5). At times, Suleri makes clear, the mother assumes postures that she presumes to be apt, but that turn out to be slightly ridiculous. Such an instance would be when Shahid, her oldest son, had moved to Britain, and “Mamma found herself assuming the classic posture of an Indian woman who sends away her sons and runs the risk of seeing them succumb to the great alternatives represented by the West” (MD 10). Surraya Suleri copies various cultural postures, but never in full, always with a considerable degree of absentmindedness. The mother lets others do what they will with her exterior. “Is it fair, Mamma, is it fair that you have reached a point where you no longer bother to differentiate between what the world imagines you must be and what you are” (MD 169)? Suleri calls the chapter that centers on her mother “What Mamma Knew.” “What Mamma Knew” lies buried, or perhaps, lies seething, in her marked silences. An important instance when Surraya Suleri makes use of her capacity to mark silences and make them articulate occurs when her husband is in jail for sedition. Put in charge of the Times of Karachi, Surraya Suleri decides to print only the title of the paper and leave the pages blank. Her husband comments, “[s]he made them know how angry she was when she turned censorship into sedition” (MD 118).

The ultimate displacement of the mother’s story comes with her burial “at the nerve center of Lahore” (MD 17). Her husband sees to it that her “tombstone bore some pretty
Urdu poetry and a completely fictitious place of birth, because some details my father tended to forget” (MD 17). Urdu, we recall, “remained a shyness on her tongue.”

In stark contrast to the mother in Meatless Days who refuses to grip, the mother in The Woman Warrior uses educational storytelling to take a determined grip on the daughter’s identity formation. As Kingston tells us, “my mother’s stories [are] always timely” (WW 90). In many ways, The Woman Warrior constitutes an un-easy dialogue of connection and separation between mother and daughter. Maxine’s mother, Brave Orchid, does not merely take a grip of her daughter’s narrative; she makes her way into her daughter’s head:

A spider headache spreads out in fine branches over my skull. She is etching spider legs into the icy bone. She prises open my head and my fists and crams into them responsibility for time, responsibility for intervening oceans. (WW 100)

In further contrast to the mother in Meatless Days, Brave Orchid makes herself a central character in most stories and is the most dominant figure in Kingston’s autobiography. Kingston’s attempt to relate her mother’s biography carries complexities of a completely different nature than those Suleri brought to the fore. Whereas Suleri searches for her mother’s story in the nooks and crannies of others’ stories, Kingston seems to search for a story about the mother that the mother does not control. This becomes a futile project; seemingly Brave Orchid is in total control of her own self-representation. Kingston cannot reach her mother’s story in any other way than through her mother’s story. And most of the mother’s stories are imaginative and fantastic. “In linguistic and behavioral postures, Brave Orchid orchestrates her public image, inscribes, that is, her own autobiography as extraordinary woman,” Sidonie Smith argues.27

Even though the mother is a central character throughout The Woman Warrior, it is predominantly in the third chapter, “Shaman,” that the autobiographical narrator attempts to reconstruct her mother’s biography. The mother, we are informed, immigrated to the US in 1940, when she was in her forties. By that time her husband had been living in the

27 Sidonie Smith, “Maxine Hong Kingston’s Woman Warrior: Filiality and Woman’s Autobiographical Storytelling,” A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 162. Of the great number of critical responses to The Woman Warrior, Sidonie Smith’s essay has perhaps influenced my reading the most.
States for ten years. In China the couple had suffered through the death of their first two children. Maxine is never called oldest daughter, she is “biggest daughter” (WW 96). In the States, Brave Orchid (in her mid-forties!) bears six children. “Shaman” mostly deals with the mother’s two years at Medical School in China. Her children had then been dead for ten years and her husband had been away at the “Gold Mountain” for just as long. The mother is one of the village’s many Gold Mountain grass widows. After having spent the money her husband sent from America on her appearance, shoes and clothes, Brave Orchid decides to make better use of the money by becoming a doctor. Kingston quietly wonders if part of the reason for her education resides in her father’s wish to have an educated wife coming to live with him in America. The daughter looks for the things the mother has left unsaid, the things that would muddle the image of herself that the mother has created. In the mother’s stories about herself she is forever brave. Maxine looks at photographs from this time to see “whether she was afraid. Year after year my father did not come home or send for her” (WW 60). When Maxine does detect diffidence in her mother’s voice when she answers her daughter’s questions about this period of her life, the tinge of insecurity is so unusual, and so unlike the mother she knows, that it fills Maxine with anger.

In “Shaman,” the mother’s voice is suspended at first. The narrator tries to reconstruct the mother from a few of the mother’s objects from China, her medical diploma and a number of photographs. Photographs set the scene for the daughter’s attempt to recollect the mother’s biography. Kingston compares her mother’s appearance to those of her fellow graduates in the class photo:

On the other women, strangers, I can recognize a curled lip, a sidelong glance, pinched shoulders. My mother is not soft; the girl with the small nose and dimpled underlip is soft. My mother is not humorous, not like the girl at the end who lifts her mocking chin to pose like Girl Graduate. My mother does not have smiling eyes; the old woman teacher (Dean Woo?) in front crinkles happily, and the one faculty member in western suit smiles westernly. (WW 58)

A photograph of the mother alone in her scholar’s gown shows her mother looking,

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28 See the discussion of China Men in the previous chapter.
straight ahead as if she could see me and past me to her grandchildren and grandchildren's grandchildren. She has spacy eyes, as all people recently from Asia have. Her eyes do not focus on the camera. My mother is not smiling; Chinese do not smile for photographs. (WW 58)

Posing, of course, constitutes a form of self-representation. Posing, Paul Jay suggests, "involves a struggle for control and authenticity, a struggle between intentionality and convention, the essential and the objectified." It thus forms a curious mixture of convention and idiosyncrasy. The mother does not smile on the photograph because "Chinese do not smile for photographs"; yet, the mother in the photographs seems to have control over her posture. Personal snapshots do not offer the mother the same opportunity for self-fashioning as studio photographs do. "There are no snapshots of my mother" (WW 59), the narrator claims. On the other hand, snapshots of the father abound. "He and his friends took pictures of one another in bathing suits at Coney Island beach" (WW 59).

Throughout The Woman Warrior, we are reminded of the mother's penchant for self-fashioning. By constant talk-story, the mother fashions herself as a highly contradictory figure to her daughter. In the daughter's eyes, the mother is simultaneously a killjoy keeper of tradition and thereby an upholder of misogynist patriarchal values and a self-reliant "forerunner." "She said I would grow up a wife and slave, but she taught me the song of warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (WW 26). We will leave the daughter-narrator's re-fashioning of her mother's talk-story aside for a later discussion, and concentrate here on the mother's means to inscribe her story as the story of an "exceptional woman." Kingston describes her mother in China as one of the "new women, scientists who changed the rituals" (WW 72).

In medical school, the mother, at least ten years older than most of her fellow students, sets out a plan of how to make herself extraordinary among her classmates. Away from the demands of her family, her husband's "tyrant mother" (WW 61) in particular, the mother gets to "live out the daydream of women – to have a room, even a section of a room" of her own (WW 61). Kingston, as is evident, invokes Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own." Brave Orchid, however, is not fully satisfied with her section of the room; it does not allow herself to fashion herself as the brilliant scholar she

wishes to be in the eyes of her fellow classmates. To create the image of herself as extraordinarily gifted, the mother seeks out a place where she could cram in secret, studying far into the night. The sought-after effect is achieved, “[s]he quickly built a reputation for being brilliant, a natural scholar who could glance at a book and know it” (WW 62). The daughter reveals that Brave Orchid takes pains to orchestrate the image of herself as a gifted scholar because of an underlying insecurity, “[s]he suspected she did not have the right kind of brains either, my father the one who can recite whole poems” (WW 63). Kingston implicitly suggests that had her father remained in China, the mother would not have gone to medical school, in part because she was not designated to be the scholar in the family, and in part because the demands on her to become educated and refined came from the husband who had been in the US for ten years. As Sidonie Smith notices, “Brave Orchid’s tales of bravery and exotism are underwritten by an alternative text of female vulnerability and victimization.”30 Yet, as the narrator observes, “[s]he could make herself not weak” (WW 65). Brave Orchid takes every opportunity to create a brilliant persona, downplaying the insecurities the daughter searches for as she retells her mother’s story. Having finished medical school she orchestrates a spectacular return to her home village:

She was welcomed with garlands and cymbals [...]. My mother wore a silk robe and western shoes with big heels, and she rode home carried in a sedan chair. She had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous. (WW 73-74)

Brave Orchid never readily acknowledges Maxine’s public achievements. When Maxine comes home from school with good grades, the following exchange takes place:

“I got straight As, Mama.”
“Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village.” (WW 47)

In “White Tigers,” Kingston parallels the mother’s glorious return with a homecoming that is denied her because of her sex.

I went away to college – Berkeley in the sixties – and I studied, and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy. I would have liked to bring

30 Smith, “Filiality” 162.
myself back as a boy for my parents to welcome with chickens and pigs. That was for my brother, who returned alive from Vietnam. (WW 49)

Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, the mother sends contradictory gendered messages. Presumably, Brave Orchid was able to transcend some of the gendered laws in her home village and become a doctor since so many of the men had immigrated to the States. Yet the mother does not recognize her daughter’s public achievements the way she made/was in a position to make her family recognize hers. Kingston writes,

> When I visit the family now, I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl; *I am* worthy of eating the food. From afar I can believe my family loves me fundamentally. They only say, “When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls,” because that is what one says about daughters. But I watched such words come out of my own mother’s and father’s mouths. (WW 53)

The mother’s acts and the mother’s misogynist maxims conflict. In this respect, Brave Orchid remains a liminal figure, at once a feminist “forerunner” and a sustainer of patriarchy.

Once she has returned to her village as a doctor, Brave Orchid continues to exert vigorous control over her self-image. She wears expensive clothes, “I always dressed well when I made calls” (WW 74); she gets herself a female servant/slave; and she treats only patients she judges have a chance to live. Brave Orchid, however, was “midwife to whatever spewed forth, not being able to choose as with the old and sick” (WW 81). A story about her mother’s experience as a midwife has etched itself into Maxine’s mind. It is a story about a baby without an anus. Her mother’s story is so vivid that Maxine “had to flick on the bathroom lights fast so that no small shadow would take a baby shape, sometimes seated on the edge of the bathtub, its hopes for a bowel movement so exaggerated” (WW 81-82). In the mother’s story, the baby is left in the outhouse so that the family could escape its constant crying. Brave Orchid leaves out the sex of the baby in her telling of the story. Kingston writes, “I hope this holeless baby proves that my mother did not prepare a box of clean ashes beside the birth bed in case of a girl. [...] She never said she herself killed babies, but perhaps the holeless baby was a boy” (WW 82). The daughter-narrator presumes that her mother withholds the parts of her life story that do
not sustain the self-image she keeps creating. She suspects that her mother might have
committed female infanticide in China.

As becomes evident, Kingston’s portrayal of her mother constitutes a mixture of
awe, admiration, deep-seated suspicion, and anger. In America, the elderly mother of six
children together with her husband operates a laundry and labors in the vegetable fields
surrounding Stockton. Her life with expensive clothes and a high social position belongs
to the pre-Revolutionary China of her past. She tells her daughter about how much she
has fallen by coming to America. The mother the narrator has witnessed is different from
the tiny doctor dressed in silk dresses in China. “This mother can carry a hundred pounds
of Texas rice up- and downstairs” (WW 97). Despite her fall in social status, the mother
remains a powerful figure within the family in the States. “In America my mother has eyes
as strong as boulders, never once skittering off a face” (WW 59). Tellingly, Brave Orchid
does not change her maiden name. “Professional women have the right to keep their
maiden names if they like” (WW 74). To make her daughter able to speak freely in any
tongue, Brave Orchid decides to cut her baby’s fraenum. “You’ll be able to pronounce
anything” (WW 148). This act of her mother fills Maxine with awe:

Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon
me. At other times I was terrified — the first thing my mother did when she saw
me was to cut my tongue. (WW 148)

This is a significant instance when Maxine’s pride for her mother is mixed with horror.
Maxine does not speak freely in any tongue; in fact, she has a hard time speaking both
Chinese and English. As a schoolgirl she spends three years in total silence. Hence, the
mother’s attempts to “toughen up” her daughter actually silence her, and cause Maxine to
accumulate anger and hatred. Maxine eventually decides to compose a “list of grievances”
and confront her mother. “I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I
had to tell my mother” (WW 176). Night after night, she presents items from her list to
her mother while she is working in the laundry. This does not become a scene of
confrontational climax between mother and daughter; it becomes a passage of
reconciliation. The chapter (and the book) ends with Kingston explicitly translating a
story her mother told. “The beginning is hers, the ending, mine,” Kingston writes (WW
184). She concludes, “[i]t translated well” (WW 186). She thereby announces herself as a
storyteller, and as such, she succeeds her mother, affirming both continuity and a fundamental reconciliation with her. Let us turn more specifically to storytelling practices and their connection to memory and identity formation. The autobiographical narrator, it becomes evident, shares her mother’s penchant for self-fashioning.

Stories Told and Multiply Translated
Maxine Hong Kingston’s Practices of Translation

The girlhood Kingston depicts is vexed — full of racial and gendered traumas. We have already encountered a few of the contradictory gendered messages that Maxine receives from her “champion-talking,” ceaselessly self-fashioning mother. The book is rife with stories about familial and communal tyranny. I agree with King-Kok Cheung, who notes that “Maxine is much more aware of the antifemale prejudice of her family and community than of the cultural bias of the larger society.”

“Even now China wraps double binds around my feet,” Kingston writes (WW 49). Kingston uses these, at times, very disturbing stories that “scramble [the autobiographical subject] up” (WW 180) as “raw material” to re-configure her selfhood. The narrator projects current necessities, most often gender-related, into her mother’s stories.

Maxine finds herself surrounded by crazy girls and women: the woman next door, Crazy Mary, Pec-A-Nah, and her maternal aunt. She ponders:

Perhaps the sane people stayed in China to build the new, sane society. [...] I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be It at our house? Probably me. (WW 166, 170)

Like Maxine herself, these women are caught between two manifestations of patriarchal rule, Chinese and American, and two very different notions of what femininity entails. Maxine’s in between place is a liminal space where imperatives conflict. “The space in between is the site of mutual influence and intercultural intermingling, however unequally conditioned that exchange might be,” as Friedman points out.

31 Cheung, Articulate Silences 80.
32 Friedman, Mappings 82.
Working through, altering, making sense of her mother’s story becomes crucial for the narrator’s identity formation and sanity. She renders her mother’s stories habitable. Ironically, by tampering with her mother’s educational talk-story, the daughter-narrator meets up with Brave Orchid’s standards for sanity. “The difference between mad people and sane people,” Brave Orchid explained to the children, ‘is that sane people have variety when they talk story. Mad people have only one story which they talk over and over’” (WW 143). Kingston makes her mother’s abundance of stories carry meaning in a new context.33

Kingston delves into a repository of communal/familial stories to create fictions for living. She puts her mother’s stories to entirely new uses, uses surely not intended by the original teller. Yet, alteration is innate to any oral tradition. As Karl Kroeber reminds us:

> Stories are like plant species that move readily but unobtrusively over surprising obstacles including vast spans of time and space, quietly adapting to foreign environments, and then changing those environments.34

By deploying the communal/familial stories for her own ends, she inserts herself into a storytelling tradition, a collective memory. Melchior recognizes that “by focusing the book on an ‘autus’ that is created by and through stories, Kingston affirms its communal nature, for stories live and are modified in the communal memory.”35 Thus, Kingston proves that her mother is wrong in claiming that “[h]er American children had no feelings and no memory” (WW 107). Moreover, in The Woman Warrior, the domain of memory is adjacent to, and even runs into, the domain of the imagination. In an interview with Paula Rabinowitz, Kingston says “memory or imagination or ‘talk-story,’”36 thereby conflating the concepts. In a discussion of testimonial literature, George Yúdice maintains, “[t]he speaker does not speak for or represent a community

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33 Throughout my study I make a distinction between the autobiographical subject, the speaking I in the narrative, and the autobiographical narrator, the I that orchestrates the story. When I use the first name I refer to the autobiographical subject and when I use the last name I refer to the autobiographical narrator. At times, especially when dealing with Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior this is a hard distinction to make. Kingston frequently minimizes the distance between the girl in the narrative and the adult narrator.

34 Karl Kroeber, Retelling/ Rereading: The Fate of Storytelling in Modern Times (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992) 3


but rather performs an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective" (my emphasis). The agency and creativity involved in storytelling are underlined. If we see Kingston's alteration of Chinese stories, songs, and myths as performative rather than as representative, the fierce debate concerning the "authenticity" and "representativeness" of The Woman Warrior (outlined in the introduction) is called into question.

The first story in The Woman Warrior, "No Name Woman," is, in part, the mother's response to the physical signs of Maxine's oncoming womanhood. "No Name Woman" revolves around the fate of Maxine's father's sister in China, who had a child out of wedlock and was severely punished by the village, and who ultimately killed herself and her baby in the family well. Maxine's mother tells her adolescent daughter: "Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us" (WW 13). Here Brave Orchid inscribes patriarchal laws upon her daughter's body. Evidently she wishes to render Maxine’s oncoming womanhood a threat, and to make clear to her daughter that improper behavior has its proper punishments. The story (and the book) begins with Brave Orchid's injunction to silence: 38

'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you.' In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she has never been born. (WW 11)

As is obvious, Kingston transgresses her mother's injunction to silence. Intent on making her aunt's story speak to her, she thwarts her mother's outspoken intention, to link womanhood and sexuality with threat and punishment. She declares, "unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (WW 16). For the paternal aunt, "my forerunner" (WW 15), to give her ancestral help, the narrator makes clear, a certain degree of fabrication is necessary. In order to understand her aunt's act of adultery, as well as the village's punishment, she fabricates multiple versions of the incident. She begins by stating that:

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38 For a discussion of The Woman Warrior and the feminist topos of imposed silence, see Cheung, Articulate Silences. See also her article "'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in The Color Purple and The Woman Warrior," PMLA 103 (1988): 162-774.
Adultery is extravagance. Could people who hatch their own chicks and eat the embryos and the heads for delicacies and boil the feet in vinegar for party food, leaving only the gravel, eating even the gizzard lining – could such people engender a prodigal aunt? (WW 13-14) 

Kingston works by trial and error to establish a field of options that would have been open to an aunt married to a Gold Mountain sojourner in a closed village society in Canton, China, in the 1920s. Guided by the imperatives of necessity, Kingston judges that her aunt could not willingly have set out on an illicit affair. “My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. [...] Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. [...] She obeyed him; she always did as she was told” (WW 14). According to this version, the village could not possibly have engendered a prodigal aunt. In this version, the aunt's rapist joined the village in its raid against the aunt and her family. “He was not a stranger because the village housed no strangers” (WW 14). By killing herself and the baby in the family well, the aunt kept his name hidden from the village. However, this commonsensical version does not meet up with Maxine’s search for a context: a nation, a family, an ethnic group, a village that does not fully determine its subjects. Our narrator searches for agency and creativity within cultural scripts. Seemingly, she needs to set up a scenario where, to use the words of Paul Smith, “a person is not simply the actor who follows ideological scripts, but is also an agent who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them or not.” Kingston displays a penchant for extravagant readings of cultural scripts. She acknowledges that she prefers to twist and turn a plain story “into designs” (WW 147). She sets up an analogy:

Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. 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 any more. If I had lived in China I would have been an outlaw knot-maker. (WW 147)

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39 See how Sau-Ling Wong appropriates the tropes “necessity and extravagance” that Kingston employs in The Woman Warrior to structure her book Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance. “The terms Necessity and Extravagance signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness and autotelism,” she writes. Sau-Ling Wong, Reading Asian American Literature 13.

40 Paul Smith, Discerning the Subject (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) xxxiv.
In accordance, this self-proclaimed "out-law knot-maker" sets up a scenario where her paternal aunt was indeed prodigal, "the lone romantic who gave everything up for sex."

"Fear at the enormities of the forbidden kept her desires delicate, wire and bone. [...] For warm eyes or a soft voice or a slow walk — that's all — [...] she gave up family" (WW 15).

In yet another version, the aunt does not take to the subtleties of warm eyes or a slow walk, but conducts numerous affairs. Kingston abandons this extravagant version of her aunt with the explanation, "[i]magining her free with sex doesn’t fit, though. I don’t know any women like that, or men either" (WW 16). Kingston clings to the version where the aunt is an extravagant and vain romantic who "combed individuality into her bob. [...] Once my aunt found a freckle on her chin, at a spot that the almanac said predestined her for unhappiness. She dug it out with a hot needle and washed the wound with peroxide" (WW 16-17). In this favored version of her aunt, the aunt does not willingly follow her staked out "predestiny." Kingston’s tampering with her mother’s basic story about her aunt not only presents us with an aunt with desires that no village structure or gender system could subdue, it also complicates the mother’s covert binary division of her stories into stories about good and evil, victims and victor. Is the aunt good or evil? Is the aunt a victim or victor? Kingston blurs the binary between winners and losers. In Kingston’s version, the allegedly “good” Gold Mountain grass widows, the “heavy, deep-rooted women [who] were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning” (WW 15), surface as the victims, despite the fact that her aunt’s transgressive act leads to her death and erasure from the family chronicles. As is evident, it is as a transgressive female ancestor that Kingston finds the “No Name Woman” useful. She identifies with the aunt, who, like her, “crossed boundaries not delineated in space” (WW 15). Despite her evident usefulness, Maxine cannot be sure that her paternal aunt, as a haunting ghost, only has good intentions. “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” (WW 22).

In “No Name Woman,” Kingston also attempts to grapple with the village’s punishment. Could this severe punishment of her aunt have been “business as usual,” a routine act? She suggests, “[t]he villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them” (WW 19). Sensitive to the tangled workings of gender, class, race, and ethnicity in a US context, Kingston wonders if this “traditional”
treatment of illicit sexual affairs might be tangled up with the particularities the village faced in the early 20s.

If my aunt had betrayed the family at a time of large grain yields and peace, when many boys were born, and wings were being built on many houses, perhaps she might have escaped such severe punishment. But the men—hungry, greedy, tired of planting in dry soil—had been forced to leave the village in order to send food-money home. [...] Adultery, perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the village needed food. (WW 19)

Kingston grapples with the world colored by the experience of having grown up in a working-class immigrant community in Stockton, California, where her mother tells her about the fall in social status she has undergone by immigrating to the States.

Another story of a female figure that Kingston uses to “read herself into existence” is the story of the legendary Fa Mu Lan, the girl who, dressed as a boy, takes her father’s place in battle. The story of Fa Mu Lan is indeed a traveling story. It originated in a folktale, the “Ballad of Mulan,” and was initially written down in the fifth century. “There are versions of the Mulan story in the Tang, Ming, and Quing dynasties as well as the modern period, in genres ranging from the ballad, the novel, and the opera libretto to the *baihua*, or vernacular, play.” Today there is also a Disney version. In a comment on her work, Kingston has made clear that her version of the story “is not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America, a sort of kung fu movie parody.” Brave Orchid transmits the story of Fa Mu Lan via song. The usefulness of such a legendary female figure, a Chinese Joan of Arc or Woman Warrior, who lends the autobiography its name, appears obvious. “When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that if we failed we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen” (WW 25). Given that Kingston’s creative storytelling blurs the dividing line between victor and victim, winners and losers, Fa Mu Lan eventually resurfaces as a somewhat contradictory forerunner. Whereas the story of the “No Name Woman,” according to Brave Orchid, had to be erased from the familial memory; Fa Mu Lan is a story about “perfect filiality” (WW 47), a story about a young woman who “would be

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41 Smith, “Filiality” 151.
remembered by the Han people for [... her] dutifulness” (WW 28). Does, then, this filial dutifulness involve the transgression of gender norms that Kingston celebrates in her first story?

In Kingston’s version of the story of Fa Mu Lan, a little girl of seven leaves her family on a magical bird to be trained to be a woman warrior by an elderly couple. In a faraway place, she dutifully practices day and night, year after year. Occasionally the couple lets the girl look into a magical water gourd, where she can see her parents conducting their everyday lives far away. In her absence the girl watches them marry her off to her childhood friend. Via the water gourd, she can hear her mother saying: “Thank you for taking our daughter. Wherever she is, she must be happy now. [...] We are so grateful” (WW 35). The day eventually comes when Fa Mu Lan is ready to take her father’s place in battle. The young woman returns to her village. Upon her return “[m]y parents killed a chicken and steamed it whole, as if they were welcoming home a son” (WW 37-38, my emphasis). The parents participate in the cross-dressing affair, the masquerade. Before sending her off to battle, the parents carve words of revenge on their daughter’s back. “I saw my back covered entirely with words in red and black files, like an army, like my army” (WW 38-39). She puts on a male outfit and hides her hair. She is thus allowed to “escape confinement and conventional female scripts and to enter the realm of masculine pursuits – of education, adventure, public accomplishment, and fame.” Yet as in her mother’s story about herself as a grass widow in pre-Revolutionary China, where she could enter precisely these “masculine” realms of education, adventure, public accomplishment, and fame, the story of Fa Mu Lan “is underwritten by an alternative [standard] text of female vulnerability and victimization.” Emphatically, Fa Mu Lan cannot reveal her identity: “Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations” (WW 42). After fighting bravely and successfully, the Woman Warrior returns home and doffs her male attire, as if no gender transgression has taken place.

44 Smith, “Filiality” 157.
45 Smith, “Filiality” 162.
Wearing my black embroidered wedding coat, I knelt at my parents-in-law's feet, as I would have done as a bride. 'Now my public duties are finished,' I said. 'I will stay with you, doing farmwork and housework, and giving you more sons.' (WW 47)

Fa Mu Lan almost totally lacks agency in her acceptance of the familial script carved into her flesh. In this rendition of the story, she is merely an actor of already existing scripts, to use Paul Smith's terminology. In this case, the act of cross-dressing supports a long-established gender structure. The familial order is re-established, with the sense of abrupt closure that we find in Shakespeare's comedies. Yet, as Smith notes, in the margins of Fa Mu Lan's story appears a side story with clearer feminist undertones. While disguised as a man and warrior, Fa Mu Lan releases a group of "cowering, whimpering women," presumably "pleasure women," locked into a room at the baron's palace.

Later, it would be said, they turned into the band of swordswomen who were a mercenary army. They did not wear men's clothes like me, but rode as women in black and red dresses. They bought up girl babies so that many poor families welcomed their visitations. When the slave girls and daughters-in-law ran away, people would say they joined these witch amazons. (WW 47)

Fa Mu Lan may not function as a truly subversive figure, yet she enters "male" domains, and in that capacity she is an attractive and important female figure to young Maxine. The story of Fa Mu Lan is immediately followed by a section where we find young Maxine struggling with the sexism that surrounds her. She refuses to act like a girl. She tells the emigrant villagers that she wants to be "a lumberjack in Oregon" when she grows up (WW 49). She does everything in her power to escape traditional female scripts. She cracks dishes; she refuses to cook; she behaves like a "bad girl." She asks herself: "Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?" (WW 49). The narrator finds yet another way to identify with Fa Mu Lan:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. [...] What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.' The reporting is the vengeance - not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words - 'chink' words and 'gook' words too - that they do not fit on my skin. (WW 53)

46 Smith, "Filiality"159.
Kingston transforms the swordswoman into a wordswoman and, as such, Fa Mu Lan becomes important in Kingston’s search for an identity as a professional practitioner of talk-story. Maxine Hong Kingston’s “list of grievances” does not fit on her skin, so she has to disseminate them as a writer.

Up to this point, the narrator has experienced cultural inter-reference as a painful and silencing experience of splitting and doubling. However, the story of the poetess Ts’ai Yen, the last of her mother’s stories, reads as a celebration. She judges that this story “translated well.” In Kingston’s idiom, translation means to put to work in a new context, and this story, then, which translates well, is successfully put to work in a new context. Kingston’s rendition of the story of Ts’ai Yen celebrates hybridity almost as vehemently as Salman Rushdie does in his novels. In the following passage, he defends The Satanic Verses:

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotch-potch, a bit of this and that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it.47

Kingston’s autobiography, of course, paints a less jovial image of hybridity than the manifestations Rushdie has forwarded. Like Gloria Anzaldúa in her important autobiography/political manifesto, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (as full of pain as The Woman Warrior), Kingston asserts herself defiantly: “I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture — una cultura mestiza — with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.”48 Kingston eventually shows that she can make herself gain from the intercultural experience. In contrast to the narrator, her mother remains mono-cultural throughout The Woman Warrior. This loyalty turns into slapstick comedy in the episode where Brave Orchid takes her frail sister Moon Orchid to America in order to claim her surgeon husband who had “made it” in America (become a resident of Beverly Hills and remarried). She advises her sister: “you march

47 Salman Rushdie quoted in Friedman, Mappings 83-84.
48 Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987) 22.
right in. You push him aside and go in. Then you sit down in the most important chair, and you take off your shoes because you belong” (WW 130). The acute cultural clash literally drives Moon Orchid insane. The sister ends up in a mental institution within a year from her arrival to the States. The narrator, on the other hand, learns to synthesize her cultural intermingling into an amalgamated, yet sane self highly aware of her “bricks and mortar.” As Cheung puts it, “[t]he narrator progresses eventually from being buffeted by opposing cultural ideologies to blazing a syncretic trail of her own.”

Kingston uses the story of the historical figure/poetess Ts’ai Yen, born in AD 177 and author of “Eighteen stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” to envisage and celebrate cultural hybridization. As a daughter of a well-known statesman, the talented scholar, speaker, musician, poetess, Ts’ai Yen was captured by horsemen and taken to barbarian lands. Ts’ai Yen stayed for twelve years in the barbarian land, and was made to marry a commander, with whom she had two children. In her foreign environment, the poetess is initially disturbed by the flute music she is surrounded by, “its sharpness and its cold made her ache” (WW 186). Eventually, however, out from her abode the barbarians could hear

a woman’s voice singing, as if to her babies, a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts’ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. [Returning to China] [s]he brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” a song that Chinese sing for their own instruments. (WW 186)

Kingston renders the story about Ts’ai Yen (and her own autobiography) into a story of cultural translation/cross-fertilization. In recent years, the concept of translation has become increasingly deployed as a means to distance cultural and ethnic studies from notions of “authenticity.” It seems to allow for a discussion of cultural complexity that takes into account the constant contact and interchange between cultures. Kingston

49 Cheung, Articulate Silences, 79.
50 For further information about the “original” story see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, “Kingston’s Handling.”
51 The theorists and writers who have invested in the hybrid dimensions of translation are, perhaps most noticeably, Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) and Salman Rushdie in Imaginary Homelands.
recognizes the pitfalls of "authenticity discourse." She asks her fellow Chinese-Americans: "What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (WW 13). In his coda to a collection of articles concerning cultural translatability, Wolfgang Iser contends, "translating different cultures into each other results in a recursive looping between them." In Kingston's appropriation of traditional Chinese talk-story we witness one instance of such looping between cultures marked by hybridity.

**Meatless Days and Transmogrifications**

In her autobiography, Sara Suleri does not draw upon a repository of cultural/communal memories to create herself. She views the familial stories and anecdotes she retells in *Meatless Days* as "something I carry around without noticing, like lymph" (MD 42). Thus, Suleri announces that she does not have to create fictions for living. Rather, she explores the memories of the small unit, the family, that surface as one imagined community among several. Whereas Kingston had to make her mother's stories habitable, Suleri maintains that the communal stories embedded in names constitute her true habitat. Her memories appear to be anchored not in places, but in the names of family members and friends. Her friend David asks her for whom she writes, and she answers: "I cannot help it, David, if my names sound hollow to you, residences that you must condemn: to me, they are the words most shaped like beds, and I am glad to find them empty, attendant on my rest" (MD 173).

As she tells a number of family anecdotes, Suleri investigates how the various members of a community tell its constitutive story. She illuminates the fact that even though her family/her community shares the same image of various events, what they remember is not the same. To use the term Suleri employs, the different stories of family members and friends comprise several *transmogrifications* of the same event (MD 34, 84). Characters share forms of remembering and modes of transmission, yet do not share the exact same memory. I agree with James Young, who in the preface to his *The Texture of Memory*, states

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52 Iser 296.
individuals cannot share another’s memory any more than they can share another’s cortex. They share instead the forms of memory, even the meanings in memory generated by these forms, but an individual’s memory remains hers alone. By maintaining a sense of collected memories, we remain aware of their disparate sources, of every individual’s unique relation to a lived life, and of the ways our traditions and cultural forms continuously assign common meaning to disparate memories.53

Further, as Annette Kuhn notes in launching her personal memoir/critical investigation of the family and of memory, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*:

an image, images, or memories are at the heart of a radiating web of associations, reflections and interpretations. But if the memories are one individual’s, their association extend far beyond the personal. They spread into an extended network of meanings that bring together the personal with the familial, the cultural, the economic, the social, and the historical.54

Our interest here, then, is the transmogrifications of memories in *Meatless Days*, and also how these memory-formations of the small network extend into a “network of meanings,” the cultural, the national, etc.

Since food, a substance with a great capacity for transmogrification, is the “staple metaphor” (MD 38) of *Meatless Days*, let us approach Suleri’s treatment of networks of memory by focusing on the k*apura* episode. At a rare instance when Sara is visited by her sister Tillat in New Haven, Tillat asks if Sara knows what the Pakistani dish *kapura* is. Sara quickly tells her sister that *kapura* is sweetbread, and it is cooked together with kidney and tastes delicious. She is offended by her sister’s inquiry. “Natives should always be natives, exactly what they are, and I felt irked to be so probed around the issue of my own nativity” (MD 22). Amused, Tillat informs her sister that *kapura* equals testicles. Sara feels duped, and wonders how many times her Welsh mother has duped her understanding of what exactly it is that she cherishes and incorporates. “[H]ow many other simple equations had I now to doubt? […] “What else had I eaten on her behalf?” (MD 23). Sara is further ridiculed by her fellow expatriate friends who drawl, “[b]alls, darling, balls” (MD 22). Suleri’s *kapura* story takes us further than a recognition of the fact that a shared

53 James Young xi-xii.
“mnemonic peg,”\textsuperscript{55} that is, a shared memorial image does not necessarily mean that what is remembered is the same. Suleri demonstrates this time and again.

This food story takes us to the title of her autobiography, \textit{Meatless Days}. Suleri’s constant evocation of food reminds us of memory’s connection to the senses: touch, smell, sight, hearing, and \textit{taste}. It appears as if Suleri’s memoir is built on memories that are evoked when food is sensed. Food surfaces as Suleri’s most important cue to retrieve memories of her past. She invokes Proust’s famous madeleine when she writes, “I had eaten, that was all, and woken to a world of meatless days” (MD 44). In regard to Proust’s \textit{Remembrance of Things Past}, neuropsychologist Daniel Schacter writes:

\begin{quote}
his ability to recapture the past depended on finding the right retrieval cues that could unleash the torrents of memory that he sought. He ultimately came to realize that he could not allow his mental time travels to depend solely on encounters with smells and tastes, and so he instead pursued the past by actively seeking out cues and hints that would help him to remember.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

Similarly, Suleri employs food to return to her childhood and to Pakistan.

Suleri’s recollection of the meatless days of Pakistan reveals how personal memories are brought together with the familial, the cultural, the economic, the social, and the historical. The nation Pakistan came into existence in 1947 and to economize its resources, the government decreed that meat would not be available in the stores two days of the week. Yet, Sara and her family did not find themselves deprived,

the people who could afford to buy meat, after all, were those who could afford refrigeration, so the only thing the government accomplished was to make some people’s Mondays very busy indeed. The Begums had to remember to give the cooks thrice as much money; the butchers had to produce thrice as much meat; the cooks had to buy enough flesh and fowl and other sundry organs to keep an averagely carnivorous household eating for three days. (MD 31-32)

The familial memories recollected here are memories of privilege. The intake of food is intimately connected to a certain class experience, which Suleri reminds both herself and her readers of.

\textsuperscript{55} “Mnemonic peg” is a phrase I borrow from Keith Basso, who uses it to describe the function of landscape to Western Apache cultural memory. See his \textit{Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache} (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1996).

\textsuperscript{56} Schacter 64.
Food certainly gave us a way not simply of ordering our week or a day but of living inside history, measuring everything we remember against a chronology of cooks. Just as Papa had his own yardstick — a word he loved — with which to measure history and would talk about the Ayub era, or the second martial law, or the Bhutto regime, so my sisters and I would place ourselves in time by remembering and naming cooks. “In the Qayuum days,” we’d say, to give a distinctive flavor to a particular anecdote, or “in the Allah Ditta era.” (MD 34)

The fact that one of the narrator’s sisters, Nuz, consistently calls one of the cooks by the wrong name reveals the privileges and power of the Suleri family to an even greater extent. Suleri writes, “how easy it was for Nuz to call Lazarus her cook Nazareth and not notice her mistake even though they lived in the same Karachi house for a substantial period of time” (MD 78). The Suleri sisters’ ability to deploy their memories of the cooks as cognitive tools to retrieve different periods of the family’s past has nothing to do with the tools/cooks themselves. Like Proust’s madeleine, the cooks constitute cues for remembrance. In another anecdote that takes place on one of the busy Mondays of the Suleri household, the very same sister, Nuz, and Sara go off to the chicken monger to store up for the coming “meatless days.” Faced with live chickens, Nuz asks: “Are they fresh? [...] Can you promise me they’re fresh?”(MD 32). In this instance, it eventually dawns upon Nuz, freshness is connected to death, albeit a recent one. The “Meatless Days” chapter moves between Sara Suleri’s home in New Haven and the 9-T Gulberg house in Lahore, featuring stories where Sara Suleri, Nuz, Tillat, Shahid, and the mother appear as protagonists. “A good deal of movement exists between people, places, and time periods as memory forms associative chains. [...] Details are blended. Edges blur” (my emphasis), Warley notes. 57

Let us turn to another transmogrification of food in Meatless Days, one linked to the kapura story, as “memory forms associative chains.” As a starting point for this food-centered anecdote stands, once again, one of the Suleri family’s many cooks, Quyuum. This cook, Suleri remembers, had a daughter, Munni, with whom she and her siblings “were occasionally allowed to play” (MD 24). Being older, and certainly more powerful in that their family employed the girls’ father, Sara and her sisters could fool Munni into believing that pebbles were actually pan, the adult stimulant. For Suleri, the “stones get

linked to kidneys in my head, as part of the chain through which Munni got the better of me and anticipated the story I really intend to tell” (MD 24). The story she really was going to tell was the story of her habit as a girl to sneak out into the garden and eat the tops of cauliflower plants. As a consequence of this illicit eating, Sara was punished, and the punishment involved being force-fed kidney. This punishment was invented by Munni's father, Qayyum. The transmogrification of kidney comes when her sister Ifat reveals to an astonished Sara that kidneys produce urine. Sara feels “[b]etrayed by food,” for the first time (MD 26). She came to be “watchful for hidden trickeries in the scheme of nourishment” (MD 28). Yet, as her *kapura* story reveals, she does not become watchful enough.

As shown, in *Meatless Days*, it is a short step from food to questions of class, culture and politics. Further, the dividing line between public and private memories is never sharp. At the time of her mother’s death, “Bhutto was in prison and awaiting trial, and General Zulu was presiding over the Islamization of Pakistan. But we had no time to notice” (MD 17). The death of her grandmother Dadi coincides with the hanging of Bhutto, and the family is “consumed by that public and historical dying” (MD 17). The most painful remembrance of the private merging with the public is the murder of the beloved sister Ifat. Even though the murder remains unresolved — “[i]n some police station in Lahore a file of an unresolved murder from 1980 lies forgotten” (MD 150) — it is suggested that the father’s political standpoint was the cause of the murder. For the police investigation, Sara Suleri is forced to relinquish a letter her sister had sent her just before her death. The public makes its way into the most private domains. The siblings

picked up our idea of her as though it were an infant, slippery in our hands with birthing fluids, a notion most deserving of warm water. Let us wash the word of murder from her limbs, we said, let us transcribe her into some more seemly idiom. And so with painful labor we placed Ifat’s body in a different discourse. (MD 148)

*Meatless Days* leaves out the details of Ifat’s death.

Hoping to have extracted a few illustrative threads from the communal “radiating web of associations, reflections and interpretations,” I believe we find in *Meatless Days*, I would close by suggesting that Suleri’s way of constantly evoking her different audiences
invites members of her reading audience to become a part of the memorial web. In the very first paragraph of the book, the narrator wonders which of her friends can receive the statement, “[l]eaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount to giving up the company of women” (MD 1). She decides that she can give this particular piece of information to Anita, Dale, and Fawzi. In the chapter where her friend Mustakori appears as a protagonist she invites “all of you to join me in a posture of communal flabbergastion, so that we jointly understand how soothing it can be to point our accusations at her each time existence generates some fresh ineptitude” (MD 45). At other places, she deploys markers of inclusion. “In Pakistan, of course,” she writes (MD 6, my emphasis). Examples of similar audience invitations abound. The book carries a meta-discussion of how it will be received, what its readers will be able to consume. Suleri deploys theatrical tropes throughout the text and sets the stage for her autobiographical recollection in a visual manner. Like her eccentric grandmother, Dadi, Sara Suleri displays “a flair for drama” (MD 2). And recurrently her writing evokes both a stage and an audience. She comments on the possibilities and impossibilities of autobiographical memory-work, “[u]nequal images battle in my mind for precedence” (MD 20). And, as we have, seen these images and stories are not hers alone, frequently other characters, “got the better of me and anticipated the story I really intend to tell” (MD 24). In Meatless Days several characters’ versions of a story compete with Sara Suleri’s own memorial version.

To sum up, through a series of episodic stories both Meatless Days and The Woman Warrior display a highly relational autobiographical self who often leaves center stage for other characters. Both formally and thematically, these texts disturb the reader’s expectations of a linear life story told through the autobiographer’s unique memorial access to her own life. To return to the image I initially invoked, the social entanglements—the dangling filaments—of the self and the self’s memories are in focus.
4 | THE BODY: INSCRIPTIONS, TRANSMISSIONS, AND BEYOND

I can make myself up and this is the enticement, the exhilaration, the compulsive energy of America. But only up to a point. And the point, the sticking point, is my dark female body. I may try the voice-over bit, the words-over bit, the textual pyrotechnic bit, but my body is here, now, and cannot be shed. No more than any other human being can shed her or his body and still live.

Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines*

The body has traditionally been exiled from autobiography. Sidonie Smith, who has written extensively on autobiography, argues that in traditional autobiographical practice the self presented is most often, “[u]nique, unitary, unencumbered, [and this] self escapes all forms of embodiment.”1 Analogously, Shirley Neuman, another feminist theorist of autobiography, concludes that the “discursive effacement of the corporeal [...] constitutes one] characteristic of autobiography.”2 Bodies traverse these (im)migrant autobiographies. None of the autobiographers dealt with in this study seek to transcend their bodily experiences; they represent embodied lives. So, what does it mean to favor the body in autobiographical writing? What kind of work do the bodies represented in these (im)migrant texts perform? What stories do they tell?

Before addressing these questions, let us first briefly return to James Olney’s description of the genre. Via Olney, I will here reiterate a few of the observations concerning the genre of autobiography that I made at the opening of this study. Olney, we recall, writes about the self in autobiography, “we can understand it as consciousness, pure and simple, consciousness which refers to no objects outside itself, to no events, and to no lives; we can understand it as a participation in an absolute existence far transcending the shifting, changing unrealities of mundane life.”3 I noted in my introduction that Olney’s definition of autobiography would render the texts dealt with here non-autobiographies: they are explicitly embedded in time and place; they write others to write the self; and they are, as we will see here, situated in the body. Clearly,

3 Olney 239.
Olney’s notion of consciousness “pure and simple” does not include the body. In his framework, the shackles of the sexed, gendered, raced body marked by the “shifting, changing unrealities of mundane life” need to be transcended for the true self (the detached Master Subject’s core?) to be found. His narrator sets out on a vertical journey, “delving downward into itself to find the irreducible core, stripping away mask after mask of false selves in search of that hard core at the center, that pure, unique or true self,” to use the words Sidonie Smith employs to describe one version of traditional autobiography. Olney elicits a host of well-familiar binaries of western epistemology: immanence/transcendence, inner/outer, surface/depth, self/other. The binaries at work in Olney’s description of the autobiographical act can all be linked to the split Descartes and other Enlightenment thinkers established between mind and body. In this paradigm, the body becomes a “brute givenness which requires overcoming, a connection with animality and nature that needs transcendence.” These binaries, as feminists remind us, are gendered ones. Bodily matters are assigned to woman, and matters of the mind are assigned to man, or, more specifically, the white, heterosexual, upper/middleclass European man. The persistence of these binaries has rendered the body somewhat complex for feminist analysis. Yet, of late, plenty of attention has been given to the body by cultural critics, social theorists, deconstructionists, and feminists in particular. The body in recent theory, Elizabeth Grosz argues,

provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and other, and all other binary pairs associated with the mind/body opposition.

Although this bodily focus is not new to feminism, the points of interrogation have shifted somewhat. In one way or another, virtually all waves and modes of feminism have

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4 Smith, Subjectivity 18. The other journey of traditional autobiography, according to Smith, is the horizontal one. The “self may move consecutively through stages of growth, expanding the horizons of self and boundaries of experience through accretion, but always carrying forward through new growth that globe of an irreducible, unified core” (18).


7 See, for instance, McDowell, Gender, Identity, Place; and Duncan, Bodyspace.

8 Grosz 20-21.
dealt with the body when addressing central issues concerning reproduction, violence directed towards women, etc. Early second wave feminist theorists often turned to the body to "ground" their theorizing. In the emerging feminist canon of the early 1970s, we find a good number of mostly female bodies that bleed, hurt, experience pleasure, or endure restrictions. Experiences, and lived experience in particular, were keywords in theoretical and creative writing during this time.⁹ Concerning herself with the texts of Janet Frame and Doris Lessing, Gillian Whitlock notes, "[t]he body evoked here is ahistorical and asocial. [...] Neo-feminist representations of the community of women celebrated the female body as a site of feminist truths, testifying to women's oppression and women's liberation."¹⁰ Even though Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* belongs to the emerging American feminist canon of the early 1970s, the body that surfaces in her text does not allude to a common female experience, a female bodily truth. As we will see, Kingston illuminates the specific gendered, racial, cultural forces working on Maxine's body at a specific historical juncture. Thus, the recourse to the body here should not be seen as a recourse to a bedrock where essential truths can be found, but rather to a junction where the biological and the cultural, the material and the discursive meet.

I argued in my introduction that the texts included in my study participate in the postmodern project of "conferring dignity to the fragmentary, the particular, and the local."¹¹ Seemingly in response to notions of the universal, transcendent subject, Eva Hoffman writes, "I cannot always be out on the heath — we exist in actual houses, in communities, in clothes" (L 139-140). On one level, the emphasis on the body that we find in these texts is part and parcel of this postmodern project, which rejects Cartesianism, implodes the binaries enlisted, and elevates the specific to question dominant humanist notions of universalism. As Chris Prentice explains, "[o]ne aspect of a wide-ranging project of post-colonial historiographic critique has been to seek the terms of a past whose authority does not reach back to the master-narratives of Empire abstracted from their sites of enunciation, but to local micro-narratives attached to

¹¹ Hollinger 64.
I have also pointed to the connection between this postmodern/postcolonial tenet and a feminist politics of location. I find it useful to read the body in its pliability and many positionalities with a feminist politics of location in mind. In fact, Adrienne Rich invokes her infant body in her seminal essay, "Notes toward a Politics of Location." Rich notes that since she was born in the white section of an American hospital in 1929, she was defined as "white before she was defined as female." She also notes

> to write "my body" plunges me into lived experience, particularity: I see scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, losses, as well as what pleases me. Bones well nourished from the placenta; the teeth of a middleclass person seen by the dentist twice a year from childhood. White skin, marked and scarred by three pregnancies, an elected sterilization, progressive arthritis, four joint operations, calcium deposits, no rapes, no abortions, long hours at a typewriter - my own, not in a typing pool - and so forth. To say "the body" lifts me away from what has given me a primary perspective. To say "my body" reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions.

My readings of the bodies in these texts draw to a large extent on feminist theory influenced by the later writings of Michel Foucault. Within this framework, the body is primarily viewed as a text where various powers can make their inscriptions. Yet, importantly, within the same framework the body may also be seen as a "a site of resistance, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails a possibility of counterstrategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways," as Grosz argues. As these (im)migrant autobiographies amply demonstrate, the body carries contestatory possibilities. While reading the body as text reveals important aspects

13 I do not wish to equate postmodernism and postcolonialism. Yet, undeniably, there are concerns that overlap. In The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin write, the "rejection of the Cartesian individual, the instability of signification, the location of the subject in language or discourse, the dynamic operation of power: all these familiar post-structuralist concepts emerge in post-colonial thought in different guises which nevertheless confirm the political agency of the colonized subject. Post-colonialism is not simply a kind of 'postmodernism with politics' - it is a sustained attention to the imperial process in colonial and neo-colonial societies, and an examination of the strategies to subvert the actual material and discursive effects of that process." Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., The Postcolonial Studies Reader (London: Routledge, 1995) 117.
14 Rich, Location 215.
15 See, for instance, the articles concerning the body collected in Caroline Ramazanoglu, ed., Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism (London: Routledge, 1993).
of the powers at play in the social construction of the self, the body cannot be reduced to an inscriptive surface, even if, in part, it undeniably is that. The general tendency of critical postmodern writing about the body is to focus almost exclusively on what is written on the body. Yet the body cannot be reduced to what can be seen:

It is a concrete physical space of flesh and bone, of chemistries and electricities; it is a highly mediated space, a space transformed by cultural interpretations and representations; it is a lived space, a volatile space of conscious and unconscious desires and motivations – a body/self, a subject, an identity: it is, in sum, a social space, a complexity involving the workings of power and knowledge and the workings of the body's lived unpredictabilities.17

Hence, the body is simultaneously “signifying and signified.”18 We cannot see the body only as a blank, arbitrary page to be given meaning, but also as an agent, a carrier of knowledge and memory. A few social theorists, such as Paul Connerton, point to the ways in which cultural and ethnic memory are incorporated as a result of iterated actions. Connerton's *How Societies Remember* demonstrates the performative characteristics of collective forms of remembrance, such as commemorations, “in habitual memory the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body.”19 I will argue that in some of these texts, the body comes across as the only site where diasporic cultural knowledge is preserved. Stored via performative practice, this knowledge often complicates notions of the individual and the communal, individual performance and ethnic group.

My general aim here is to argue for the centrality of the body in these texts. I offer readings where I probe into the complexities of the body as a surface for inscriptions and of the body as a memory site. As will be evident, the body is permeable, “part of a network of forces that dismember and warp it, that it dissolves under the weight of history.”20 The figure of the body points beyond itself to how it operates on multiple levels: the psychological, the social, the national, the spatial, etc.

17 Barbara Hooper quoted in Soja 114.
18 Grosz 18.
Lost in Translation's Body/Language Alignment

It seems appropriate to open a discussion of the body in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* with an exploration of two significant photographs in the text. One is the photograph of Ewa and her sister that we find on the cover (the only photograph to be seen in the book), the other is a photograph described in the “Exile” section. As these passages demonstrate, Hoffman’s narrative aligns the bodily and the linguistic, again and again. The importance of the linguistic dimension of displacement is announced in the subtitle, “Life in a New Language.”

The sepia-colored photograph on the cover depicts Ewa and her sister Alina in a Polish forest, years prior to the family’s departure for the New World. Ewa appears to be six or seven years old, and her sister is a few years younger. Ewa stands upright, and holds her arm protectively around her little sister. Her sister, Alina, is named after the mother’s sister who, along with the family’s other relatives, was killed in the Holocaust, which at the time this photograph was taken, is less than ten years past. Hoffman writes, “my mother often feels a strange compassion for her younger daughter, as if with the name, she has bestowed on her some of the fate’s terrible burden. [...] I inherit some of this fear, and look on my sister as a fragile, vulnerable creature who needs all my love and protection” (L 7). Hence, the older sister’s protective arm. In the photograph, Ewa exudes confidence and happiness. Ewa, we recall, was born two months after the end of the Second World War, and signals “beginning” and “future” to her parents. Despite its recent history, Ewa’s childhood home of Cracow, Poland constitutes a paradise for her. *Lost in Translation* constructs Cracow as a cultured, sensuous, Old World city, “which [Ewa] loved as one loves a person” (L 4) and as the site of childhood, the time of “absolutes,” when, according to Hoffman “[w]e are not yet divided” (L 74). This “wholeness” is shattered by emigration. Ewa and her family leave for America when she is thirteen years old. She thus enters adolescence and the “New World” (which during her teenage years equals “Exile”) simultaneously. Marianne Hirsch, who reads Hoffman’s story in tandem with her own story of emigration from Eastern Europe, notes the “double displacement” at work here. “If most girls leave their ‘home’ as they move into
adolescence, Hoffman and I left two homes - our girlhood and our Europe." In the childhood photograph, Ewa appears to be at home with her body. The photograph described in the "Exile" section is taken a year after the family’s arrival in Canada. Eva is fourteen years old. The adult Eva looking at the photograph,

reject[s] the image it gives myself categorically. This clumsy looking creature, with legs oddly turned in their high-heeled pumps, shoulders bent with the strain of resentment and ingratiation, is not myself. Alienation is beginning to be inscribed in my flesh and face. (L 110).

The adolescent immigrant girl on the photograph is not at home with her body; rather, she is exiled from it. On the photograph, Eva posits her body in the objective mode, for the vantage of a cultural other; yet she does so with a visible sense of unease. Posing here seems to be an almost fully conscious act, a not-quit-successful attempt to be that which she does not feel herself to be, a teenager in the Canada of the 1950s. Her center has not shifted with emigration. "I have been dislocated from my own center of the world, and that world has been shifted away from my center" (L 132). Her feeling of bodily exile is intimately linked to the loss of language she experiences. Leaving Crakow meant leaving a time of "linguistic bliss," where the signs were intimately connected to their signifieds; they had "living connection" (L 107). At school in Vancouver, Ewa and her sister are given new, more American sounding names.

Mine — "Ewa" — is easy to change into its near equivalent in English, "Eva." My sister’s name — "Alina" — poses more of a problem, but after a moment’s thought, Mr. Rosenberg and the teacher decide that "Elaine" is close enough. My sister and I hang our heads wordlessly under this careless baptism. [...] nothing much has happened, except a small, seismic mental shift. The twist in our names takes them a tiny distance from us - but it's a gap into which the infinite hobgoblin of abstraction enters. Our Polish names didn’t refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can’t yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself. (L 105)

The refrain of disembodiment is central to the "Exile" section. In fact, throughout the remainder of the book, Hoffman debates the possibility of giving flesh to the English

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language "that has served for detachment and irony and abstraction" (L 273). Can she, in English, establish a connection between the sign and the signified, her new name and her old body? The adolescent Eva struggles with language, at the same time wanting fluency in the new tongue and resisting it. "I can't imagine wanting to talk their harsh-sounding language" (L 105). She feels that she is rendered invisible, faceless.

Because I'm not heard, I feel I'm not seen. My words often seem to baffle others. They are inappropriate, or forced, or just plain incomprehensible. [...] the mat look in their eyes as they listen to me cancels my face, flattens my features. [...] What do I look like here? Imperceptible, I think; impalpable, neutral, faceless. (L 147)

With painful acuteness, Eva experiences the powerful social inscriptions working on her body, erasing her features, as well as her ability to express herself. Alienation is described as being inscribed upon her body. Filled with an ambivalent wish to fit in the teenage life of Vancouver of the 1950s, Eva lets one of her benefactresses, a Polish lady who has lived a long time in Canada and who feels obliged to teach Eva the ways of the New World, transform her bodily surface into the Canadian feminine norm. Hoffman denaturalizes femininity by investigating how it is constructed in Poland and Canada, respectively. "The allegory of gender is different here" (L 189), Hoffman writes. "Mrs. Lieberman, in the bathroom of her house, is shaving my armpits. She has taken me there at the end of her dinner party, and now, with a kind decisiveness, she lifts my arms and performs this foreign ablution on the tufts of hair that has never been objectionable to anyone before" (L 109). Femininity in Vancouver involves hairless skin, bright lipstick, high heels, crinolines, bouffants. Yet, "[i]nside its elaborate packaging, my body is stiff, sulky, wary" (L 110). Eva expresses anger and resentment towards the culture she finds herself in and which fails to recognize her. "I am enraged at the false persona I'm being stuffed into, as in some clumsy and overblown astronaut suit. I'm enraged at my adolescent friends because they can't see through the guise, can't recognize the light-footed dancer I really am" (L 119).

Further, Hoffman shows that her adolescent encounters with the opposite sex become the strenuous work of translation. She senses that she is always breaking some rule of decorum. Her notions about femininity and bodily pleasure do not fit in her new
context. In her new setting, femininity is connected to inhibition and overcaution and involves constant production. The boys, she writes, “are supposed to come and get us, of course, but only after we have made ourselves into these appetizing and slightly garish bonbons” (L 129). Yet Eva “wants so much to throw myself into sex, into pleasure” (L 130). To Eva, bodily pleasure does not seem to exist in the New World. I showed in Chapter 1 how Hoffman reiterates a series of well-known Old World vs. New World dichotomies, such as surface/depth, historical/ahistorical, new/old. She so frequently describes the American body as a mechanistic apparatus, and the Polish body as natural, sensuous and indulgent, that I would add nature/machinery to the list of dichotomies between the Old and the New World at work in Hoffman’s text. For instance, being sick in Poland involves bodily indulgence, “a sick body is cured by being coddled and by conserving energy” (L 51). In America, on the other hand, she is urged to, “[b]uild your body up so that it’s as hard as a board, as muscular as an athlete’s, as invulnerable as a steel machine” (L 51). American houses and American bodies are described in a strikingly similar way. As previously quoted, she writes of American houses, “there are no curves, niches, odd angles, nooks or crannies” (L 102). To Eva, American bodies/houses seem to consist of infinite surface. American bodies are impenetrable “steel machines,” lacking interiority, flat. She finds her adolescent girlfriends having a mechanic, rule-bound attitude towards sex. Eva senses a “discomfort in the air, a lack of ease between the boys and girls, in which the early sexuality is converted not into friendliness but into coy sexiness” (L 130). Years later, when, as a college student in Houston, she falls in love with a Texan, she likens their transactions to “reading text.”

“I love you, Eva,” he says in his mellow and terribly intense voice, and it’s an oddly disembodied phrase I hear. [...] We talk and talk to fill in those tiny, enormous lacunae between us. We explain ourselves like texts. We learn to read each other as one learns to decipher hieroglyphs. But we never meet in that quick flash of recognition. (L 190)

As she graduates from college she grows more and more obsessed with words, language, sound and unsound voices, etc. She describes her work to expand her vocabulary as a carnivorous act. “If I take in enough, then maybe I can incorporate the language, make it part of my psyche and my body” (L 216). If she fails to incorporate the
language, she feels she risks “becoming bowdlerized” (L 211). When she eventually
marries, she marries a brilliant conversationalist in the American grain. “When I fall in
love, I am seduced by language. When I get married, I am seduced by language [...] when I
listen to him improvise about Whitman’s poetry, or his Jewish aunts and uncles, or a
Wasp Connecticut wedding, I think, maybe this bebop speech can carry me right into the
heart of America” (L 219). Perhaps she believes that her bodily connection with him will
give her back an alignment between language and the body. However, the marriage fails,
mainly, she writes, due to her inability to “read the language of his feelings” (L 227).
Finally, with yet another lover she senses that she has reached at least a temporary
alignment between body and language. “We speak, my lover and I, until words tumble out
without obstacle, until they deliquesce into pure flow, until they become the air we
breathe, until they merge with our flesh” (L 246).

In an important passage, Hoffman expresses sentiments of embodied cultural
knowledge by aligning the face, subjectivity, and language. She describes the face of her
mother’s best friend in Cracow, Pani Ruta:

It’s not an innocent, or a particularly cheerful face; it bespeaks, instead, both a
quick perspicacity and an unforced seriousness. [...] It’s a face that has seen a lot,
and is not easily astonished. It knows, in its cultural memory, the limits of human
ideals, and the limitations of human passions. [...] It has a stored knowledge,
passed on through generations. (L 211)

This face, Hoffman suggests, carries sedimented cultural knowledge, knowledge that Eva
also senses that she carries and that she does not want to betray. She writes of her small
family group of four, displaced in Vancouver:

I don’t want to betray our common life. I want to defend our dignity because it is
so fragile, so beleaguered. There is only the tiny cluster, the four of us, to know,
to preserve whatever fund of human experience we may represent. And so I feel
a kind of ferociousness about protecting it. I don’t want us to turn into
perpetually cheerful suburbanites with hygienic smiles and equally hygienic
feelings. I want to keep even our sadness, the great sadness from which my
parents have come. (L 145-46)

Hoffman makes explicit the intimate connection between human experience and the body
when she equates hygienic smiles with hygienic feelings. Again, Americans, according to
Hoffman, suffer from a condition of infinite surface, whereas the face of Pani Ruta primarily expresses depth. She lets the face of Pani Ruta function as an emblem of the sort of bodily/linguistic alignment she desires to make.

It's that face that I keep as a beacon in my furious mono-dialogues and my triangulations. I want a language that will express what that face knows, a calm and simple language that will subsume the clangor of specialized jargons and of partial visions, a language old enough to plow under the superficial differences between signs, to the deeper strata of significance. (L 212)

Thus, if she could speak that face, make that body/language alignment, she could avoid the immigrant fate of "being bowdlerized." If she could speak that face she could live in America without invoking imaginary dialogues between American Eva and Polish Ewa.

The immigrant body that surfaces in Lost in Translation is the locus of the diasporic dialectics of here and there, continuity and change. The body becomes a complex site only after emigration, which in Eva's case coincides with adolescence. Then, Hoffman suggests, the "whole" body becomes the fractured body. Then, painful inscriptions begin to hide the "whole" individual hidden under her skin. Language, culture and gender are the central components in Hoffman's tale of the body displaced from its European origin.

Dictée: Maps, Boundaries, and Fluids

Dictée is a text replete with corporeal tropes. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha criticizes traditional historiography's inability to represent physical suffering, installing a physical language more capable of representing some of history's wounds. For example, blood is treated as a historical record. Dictée establishes an intimate connection between the private body and the national body, which is the nation that this diasporic subject has left, Korea. Tropes are used to indicate the body's presence in the narration of nation, and, conversely, the nation's presence in the narration of the body. To employ Hortense Spillers' words, "the human body [is] a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements."22 The nation, it follows, is one of these arrangements. I will explore the

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links Cha establishes between the body and the nation. In contrast to Eva Hoffman, who problematizes her (im)migrant Polish (Jewish)-American/Canadian body, the body in Cha’s text does not negotiate the (im)migrant “here and there,” “continuity and change” dialectic. *Dictée* focuses on the land left behind. In further contrast to Hoffman, Cha’s experiences of displacement do not begin with the moment of emigration to the States; she tells of multiple experiences of imperialism and displacements preceding emigration.

Cha, a Korean in the diaspora, denotes a metonymical relation between the private body and the national body. She depicts herself as a “stray ejection misplaced” (D 20). The trope implies an organ dis-membered from the body, the Korean nation. We have already noted the etymological connection between diaspora and sperm. Another image which supports the notion of the diasporic subject as a dis-membered subject reads:

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You remain dismembered with the belief that
magnolia blooms white even on seemingly dead
branches and you wait. You remain apart from
the congregation. (D 155)
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In fact, images of the nation as a body were deployed by the colonizing power, Japan, but with quite different aims. Using corporeal tropes to illustrate a diasporic sense of belonging to a homeland (however ambiguous that concept eventually is) could be seen as a way of naturalizing the notion of oneself as a displaced, but still national, subject. The Japanese colonizers used corporeal tropes to naturalize their appropriation of Korea. They invoked the illusion of “one-body’ (ittai), the bodily connection of Korea to metropolitan Japan.” As Chungmoo Choi explains further, “Korea was embodied as a part of Japan’s national body only to extract human and natural resources from the former so that it could satisfy the needs of metropolitan Japan as a capitalistic body. [...] Colonized Korea became the organs without a body, and Japan the body without organs.”

In Cha’s terminology the Korean nation, the Korean body, is “imprisoned” during the years of Japanese colonization. The female freedom fighter/martyr, Yu Guan Soon, whose story is told in the “Clio/History” chapter, is imprisoned after the confirmation of

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23 See my discussion of *Dictée* in Chapter 1.
24 Choi, “Discourse” 85.
her activity in the March First movement. "She is given seven years prison sentence to which her reply is that the nation itself is imprisoned" (D 37).

The nation and the body do not merely stand in metonymic relation in Dictée. Both the body and the nation are presented as territories to be chartered, classified, and occupied by imperial powers. Maps of the body are presented on a par with maps of the nation. Power relations are inevitably inherent in maps and mapping.

The strategies used in the production of the map — the reinscription, enclosure and hierarchization of space — provide an analogue for the acquisition, management and reinforcement of colonial power. In the cataloguing process the world is normalized, disciplined, appropriated and controlled.

The maps included in Dictée are full-to-the-brim with imperial ideology. In three consecutive illustrations, we find the body and the nation chartered: on page 63 a minute anatomical chart of the body with classifications in Chinese script, on page 74 an anatomical chart of the vocal organs, on page 78 a map of North and South Korea with a thick demarcation line at the 38th parallel. "We are severed in Two by an abstract enemy an invisible enemy under the title of liberators who have conveniently named the severance, Civil War" (D 81). The national body at the same instance constitutes the body of the Korean people who have been cleft in two by the cold war superpowers and the partitioned national territory. In Dictée, the nation is not only imbued with a fractured body, it is also given female gender and as the following quote shows, various taxonomies:

Others anonymous her detachments take her place. Anonymous against her. Suffice that should be nation against nation suffice that should have been divided into two which once was whole. [...] Violation of her by giving name to the betrayal, all possible names, interchangeable names, to remedy, to justify the violation. (D 88)

As noted, the female gender is traditionally imbued with the "natural" and the "bodily." Also, the female figure has frequently been deployed as a tool for nationalistic projects. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis argue, "[a]t the symbolic level, the characteristics ascribed to women are also used to foster national or ethnic interests, for example, in

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25 Nash 49.
links between the concepts of mother and nation, symbolism around the nation as a woman nurturing and caring for her sons.” I suggest that the representation of the nation as female here naturalizes the anterior nation, and, it follows, “unnaturalizes” the partition, renders it grotesque, like a mother rejecting her child. “Repels her rejects her expels her from her own. [...] Insect that eats its own mate” (D 88).

In Dictée linguistic grids imposed on the body and the nation are defined as structures that chop up continuums. To quote cultural geographer Geoff King:

Different languages impose very different grids and meanings, chopping up the flow of experience in different ways. Meaning comes from the map imposed on the territory rather than from the territory itself, although a host of extra-linguistic forces may also be involved. The linguistic grid becomes sedimented into experience, taken to be an objective map of a prior reality rather than an arbitrary imposition.

In relation to the map of the two Koreas, Cha writes, “[t]he illusion that the act of viewing is to make alteration of the visible. [...] Total severance of the seen. Incision” (D 79). The remark is ambiguous. It suggests, simultaneously, that maps produced by imperial viewing of a specific territory do not change the territory and that the mapped imperial viewing indeed causes a “total severance of the seen.” This tension of the territory mapped and the territory preceding the map surfaces time and again, and not always in direct connection to the graphic chartings in the text. The discussion of language as a colonizing force is particularly intense in connection to the presentation of the unnamed Catholic schoolgirl. Linguistic grids are explicitly imposed upon her. She is submitted to actual French dictation exercises in Dictée. “She allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm. All barren cavities to make swollen” (D 3). No cavity is left uncharted. Cha relates the difficulties the Catholic schoolgirl experiences to speak, to give voice. “The voice wraps another layer” (D 4). Giving/taking voice in Dictée is a fraught corporeal act. Motifs of giving/taking voice amidst various colonial language impositions animate Dictée, as the title suggests. Dictée is French for dictation.


27 Geoff King 41.
The following passage suggests that the Catholic schoolgirl comes to embody the linguistic imposition.


Another instance in the “Urania/Astronomy” chapter where various classificatory superimpositions – linguistic and others – render the preceding body or territory non-existent, reads: “One empty body waiting to contain. Conceived for a single purpose and for the purpose only. To contain. Made filled. Be full” (D 64). In these two passages, there is no tension between the mapped, superimposed territory and the territory presumably preceding it. Here the territory becomes the map, so to speak. However, neither the body nor the nation is merely a linguistic matter in Dictée. Cha, for instance, plays with the word “relay.” In the passage above “relay” is a person/thing, a device to transmit messages. On the same page, however, “relay” functions as a verb, an active act. “She relays the others” (D 4). There is also a recurrent play with the verb “contain,” active and passive and the noun “contents.” At one point, ink is described as a bodily fluid, of “its body’s extention [sic] of its containment” (D 65, my emphasis). Hence, Dictée makes complex the movement between containing as an active act with an active agent, and containing as a state of being dominated, filled, rendered passive. The text installs superimpositions and subsequently subverts them.

The inscriptions on the body are disturbed by various kinds of liquid flowing in the text. The bodily liquids in the text, blood and saliva, render the superimposed demarcations unstable. Elizabeth Grosz queries suggestively:

Can it be […] that the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with much more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as a formless flow; as viscosity entrapping, secreting, as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment – not a cracked or porous
vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order.28

Grosz' suggestion dovetails well with Cha's text. A few passages from the quoted passage where the Catholic schoolgirl relinquishes to the imperial powers, and becomes the demarcations, Cha writes

*Inside her voids. It does not contain further. Rising from the empty below, pebble lumps of gas. Moisture. Begin to flood her. Dissolving her. Slow, slowed to deliberation. Slow and thick.* (D 5)

The female subjects in _Dictée_ "made for the purpose only," "to contain," do not hold, do not remain solid: they leak. The flow, the liquid that makes categories leak comes across as liberatory in _Dictée_ 's signifying system. The body in the text traverses both object and subject positions. The unruly leakages occur at instances when the body comes to occupy a subject position. In _Dictée_ fluidity is symbolically presented as capable of dissolving the nation state, which is represented as a male-erected taxonomy. In the “Melpomene/Tragedy” chapter, the one that predominantly deals with the partition of the nation, the uniformed borderguards (bodyguards) constitute the only upholders of the new nation, upholders of the new taxonomy.

*at least all the maps have them at least walls are built between them at least the militia uniforms and guns are in abeyance of them. Imaginary borders. Un imaginable boundaries.* (D 87)

Cha addresses the uniformed soldiers as follows: "You are your post you are your vow in nomine patris you work your post you are your nation defending your country from subversive infiltration from your own countrymen" (D 86). Fluidity in Cha's text, I suggest, destabilizes the _in nomine patris_. It attempts to undo the nationalist taxonomies, but also other imperial impositions. The bodily liquids that run through the text disturb the objectifying, classificatory, one-way movement stemming from sites of power. Yet,
for the most part, body (and territory) are represented as turfs upon which various forces superimpose and naturalize their imperial intentions.

(Dis)embodiment in *Meatless Days*

Sara Suleri deconstructs the grand narrative of the nation of Pakistan, which her father, the famous journalist Z. A. Suleri, spends most of his time narrating/inventing, by foreclosing the radical dichotomy her father perceives between that grand récit and everything else: the personal, the everyday, the bodily, popular pleasure. “Papa’s delight in his babies often implied that they were a respite after he had dealt with the day’s true significance. [...] He would forget that we weren’t facts and would martial us too, up and down the nation” (MD 118, 115). Tellingly, when, after college Sara decides to join a touring theatre company, she is not allowed to use her surname: “my father the orator felt wary of allowing his name to be associated with such public frivolity. It would interfere, he felt, with its single-minded linkage to the genesis of Pakistan” (MD 179). Suleri’s narrative links the word “papa,” almost interchangeably, with nation and history, powerful discourses all. The chapter that predominantly deals with her father is called “Papa and Pakistan.” And, in Suleri’s text, the inception of Pakistan is rendered coeval with the inception of Z. A. Suleri the journalist. “They must have hit upon their names in about the same era, that decade of the 1930s, when Ziauddin Ahmed – a Rajput Salahria, employee of the imperial government in India – decided to become Z. A. Suleri the writer, and some Indian Muslims in England decided it was high time to talk about Islamic independence and invented that new coinage, Pakistan” (MD 110). It is impossible to miss the connection that Suleri so insistently wants to establish between Papa, Pakistan and history as a masculine grand récit. Suleri’s remarks about her father may appear caustic in the extreme, yet her pronouncements about “Papa and Pakistan” surface with great affection and compassion for his single-mindedness and blindness to other narratives. For instance, Suleri relates how when she toured with the theatrical company and, “watched my Pakistani audiences from town to town, I could tell that they were less interested in genesis than in the stage: it made my heart pang for Papa” (MD 179).
In a 1990 interview, Suleri hesitates to call *Meatless Days* a memoir or autobiography, but opts to call it an “alternative history of Pakistan.” Her impetus, she says, is to create a “new kind of historical writing, whereby I give no introductions whatsoever. I use the names, the places, but I won’t stop to describe them [...] to make them register as immediately to the reader it would to me.”

Whether this is achieved can, of course, be debated, but it seems safe to say that her episodic and fragmentary life/nation writing does offer a version of the history of the nation that would not be encompassed by her father’s yardstick “a word he loved” (MD 34). Suleri focuses on the episodic, the idiosyncratic, and the bodily, qualities that risk being subsumed under her father’s master discourse. She calls her highly self-conscious text “quirky little tales.” She professes to be disinterested in the grandiose; however, her love of metaphor and curious syntax at times seem nothing but grandiose.

*Meatless Days* illustrates the cheek-by-jowl existence of the supposedly private, the public, and the historical. Suleri does not replace the grand with the petit, but translates the one’s presence in the other. As an illustrative example, Suleri relates an incident that occurred when she was a teenager in Karachi. When her younger sister, Tillat, returned home inappropriately late after a date, Sara lashed out with violence towards her sister. Although she acted as if she were performing the patriarchal business of guarding female bodies, in fact, she was simply sexually jealous.

It set a sorrowful bond between us, for we both felt complicit in the shamefulness that had made me seem righteous whereas I had felt simply jealous, which we tacitly agreed was a more legitimate thing to be. [...] Till then we had associated such violence with all that was outside us, as though somehow the more history fractured, the more whole we would be. But we began to lose that sense of differentiated identities of history and ourselves and became guiltily aware that we had known it all along, our part in the construction of unreality. (MD 13-14, emphasis added)

On one level, as Sangeeta Ray observes, the bodily focus here, “provides an antidote to the impersonal Father whose repression of personal histories mirrors the repressive state of Pakistan.” I would add that it also provides an antidote (albeit considerably more ambivalent) to their equally impersonal but not as powerful Pakistani-Welsh

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30 For a discussion of the aesthetics of *Meatless Days*, see Carter; Dayal, “Style.”

31 Ray 54.
mother, who carries herself with a considerable degree of disembodiment in her adopted land, demonstrating a need to speak over time and place. As a child at bedtime Sara watched her mother retreat to smoke. "If I lay in waiting long enough before sleep fell on me, then I could catch the tenor of her mouth in the tiny illumination of her cigarette: it was startling to me, piercing, to grope at what I saw, making me repeat, 'She is not where she is; she has gone somewhere different'" (MD 179). Throughout the text, her mother embodies the meatlessness of the title, a meatlessness that, as Dayal notes, is aligned with "silence or absence."32 This quality of the narrator's mother frequently fills the daughter with anger, but at the same time it inspires her, creating a wish to emulate her mother's ways. As we noted in the previous chapter, this mother will not grip, take possession, be accountable. Suleri writes of her mother, "[i]t was always hard to keep her in one place, make her stay with you in a way that let you breathe, 'Now she has no secrets'" (MD 156). Dayal argues, "Sara learns from her mother how a woman must signify her disruptive excess and alterity. It is her mother's deconstructive and disillusionising force that Sara realizes she has absorbed into herself, albeit without full understanding."33 Curiously, despite the abundance of bodies - the first chapter, for instance, gives detailed descriptions of what happens to human flesh when burnt - there is a disembodied quality to Suleri's text. The book wavers between disclosing and withholding the body, ending with the word disembodiment. In some respects, Meatless Days is a perfect emulation of the mother's disembodied, abstract and aloof ways. The text, if you will, could be characterized by the narrator's own description of her mother quoted above. Indeed, for the reader, it is hard to keep the text in "one place, make her stay with you in a way that let you breathe, 'Now she has no secrets'" (MD 156).

It is mainly the siblings who embody Sara Suleri's tales, and perhaps above all her elder sister, Ifat, who is to be murdered in 1980, as a young mother. "Before my mechanical bellows hit the air to take up their fanning habit, Ifat had preceded me, leaving her haunting aura in all my mother's secret crevices: in the most constructive period of my life she lay around me like an umbilical fluid, yellow and persistent" (MD 131). Yet, despite the fact that she writes of her sister to a large extent through descriptions of her sister's immoderately beautiful body, there is as well a curious disembodied quality to the

32 Dayal, "Style" 252.
33 Dayal, "Style" 260.
chapter she devotes to her, “The Immoderation of Ifat.” The (dis)embodied quality in the text consists partly of Suleri’s tendency to establish a dichotomy between mind and body, which her mother with her disembodied intellectual ways taught her. For instance, she writes,

Ifat’s story has nothing to do with dying; it has to do with the price a mind must pay when it lives in a beautiful body. (MD 132)

In that era she hated her body, which had become beautiful in a way that was too womanly for her tastes, hungry for childhood’s swifter grace. So Ifat would hold her face fastidiously, a walking crown above such bodily disdain, as though she would concede to walking beside her body but would not inhabit it, not yet. [...] Thus Ifat left her body sitting by the fire and sauntered off to stare out the window in the opposite direction, for there were always several Ifats with us in a room. Hinged to her like a hotel door, what could I do but keep ushering them in, those successions of her face? (MD 139)

So I warned her against Javed and the ways he could be alien: “He sees your face,” I warned, “and not the spirit that constructs your face.” (MD 140)

The mind/body dichotomies above are striking in a text that so explicitly wishes to include and interrogate the body in connection to nation, location etc. Yet, if what Dayal suggests is true, “it is her mother’s deconstructive and disillusionising force” that leaves its mark on the text. Besides, Suleri’s description of Ifat as several Ifats, who are able to stray from the body, can be read as being part of her evident attempt to decentralize and deessentialize the subject.

Ifat herself, however, has a different understanding of her body than her sister the narrator, especially as she becomes a mother. Ifat contests the will of her father when she, at the age of nineteen, marries Javed, a polo-playing military man from an affluent Pakistani family. Her marriage causes a years-long break between Ifat and her father. “But what does he know,’ Papa asked in horror, ‘about the genesis of Pakistan?’” (MD 121). The narrator, on the contrary, suggests, “Javed signified to Ifat a complete immersion into Pakistan [...] And what greater gift could she give my father than literally to become the land he had helped to make?” (MD 140). Yet, as Ifat explains to her little sister, her complete immersion into Pakistan as a wife and mother has rendered her
placeless. She voices an awareness of her contingency as a gendered subject. "Men live in homes, and women live in bodies. [...] a woman can't come home," she states, displaying an acute understanding of the gendered historical forces working on her body and its ability to occupy space (MD 143, 147). Ifat makes the comment as she sees her sister Sara’s pained expression on noticing how she is treated by their parents and in her husband’s family, alternatively. Sara is sensitized to the volatile and contingent qualities of the body by observing the treatment of her sister Ifat.

In the pink house on the hill – the brigadier’s invention - Ifat was public, praiseworthy for her beauty, while in ours she was treated with a strict formality. My father would never properly forgive her, and my mother’s quaintly decorous way sought to extend privacy to Ifat now that she thought her daughter belonged to a different life. So in the end there was no place where Ifat could return: in each room she was new. (MD 143)

Living her life in these scenarios, Ifat cannot emulate her mother’s way of being neither here nor there (and especially not within the boundaries of her body). She cannot imitate her mother’s ability to dwell on aesthetics. Ifat tries to maneuver her situation differently. “I could watch her make a dwelling of her demeanor, a startling place in which to live,” Suleri writes (MD 143).

At times, Suleri downplays the tug of war of embodiment and disembodiment and opts, instead, to straightforwardly demonstrate the historical, gendered inscriptions made on bodies. In the final chapter, “Saving Daylight,” she muses on her diasporic existence as a professor of English in New Haven. She writes of her and her siblings’ predicament of perpetual geographical and cultural displacement:

I used to think that our sense of place would be the first to go, after the hurly-burly of our childhood’s constant movement. We would not pay much attention to setting, I believed, but would dwell on face instead. [...] But now I must admit that my faces do not remain distinguishable from their contexts, that their habitation must lend feature to the structure of significance. It is hard for me to picture Nuz without seeing simultaneously Karachi’s maniacal sprawl, its sandy palms and crazy traffic. Shahid looks like London now, in the curious pull with which London can remind, “I, also, was your home.” Tillat in desert-land is busy, surrounding herself with oases, pools of infancy, converting in my mind a grain of sand into signs of impressive fertility. And it is still difficult to think of Ifat
without remembering her peculiar congruence with Lahore, a place that gave her pleasure. (MD 181)

She writes about her life in her two languages, Urdu and English, "[s]peaking two languages may seem a relative affluence, but more often it entails the problems of maintaining a second establishment even though your body can be in only one place at a time" (MD 177). This statement speaks against her mother's attempt to be neither here nor there, and instead, speaks of how the body cannot escape being shaped by the specific geographical, historical place it inhabits.

Zami: Aesthetics and Renaming, Reclaiming

The cover to my edition of Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, inaugurates two central, and as I will show here, interlinked topoi: aesthetics and renaming/reclaiming. In bold golden letters running across the black page, we find the Carriacou name for "women who work together as friends and lovers" (Z 223), Zami, a name that Audre Lorde claims for herself. The writing is superimposed on a photograph of black dreadlocks. I will argue that style is connected to oppositional acts of renaming and reclaiming in Zami.

The female African-American body has been a productive site for "the business of dehumanized naming," as Hortense Spillers notes. It has been the focus of much literary production. Spillers writes:


In a 1980 interview, Audre Lorde states, "[a]s a Black woman, I have to deal with identity or I don't exist at all. I can't depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never

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34 I use the Pandora 1996 edition.
35 Spillers 69.
36 Sethe’s, the protagonist of Toni Morrison’s Beloved, marked body comes immediately to mind. See Carole Boyce Davies’ discussion in Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject 130-151.
37 Spillers 65.
will. If the world defines you, it will define you to your disadvantage. So either I’m going to be defined by myself or not at all.”

She defines her identity in her 1982 autobiography through defiant aesthetics practices, with the body as canvas, and frequently with a great deal of pleasure involved. One incident from her childhood, in particular, links transgressive aesthetic practices with the powers of renaming. Practicing writing at her mother’s kitchen table, the young Audrey Lorde renames herself Audre out of aesthetic concerns.

I did not like the tail of the Y hanging down from below the line in Audrey, and would always forget to put it on, which used to disturb my mother greatly. I used to love the evenness of AUDRELORDE at four years of age, but I remembered to put on the Y because it pleased my mother, and as she always insisted to me, that was the way it had to be because that was the way it was. (Z 14)

In his discussion of style in the African diaspora, Stuart Hall urges us to consider “how these cultures [of the African diaspora] have used the body – as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation.” As he explains, “linguistic innovations in rhetorical stylization of the body, forms of occupying an alien social space, heightened expressions, hairstyles, ways of walking, standing, and talking [... become] a means of constituting and sustaining camaraderie and community.”

For Audre Lorde, a Caribbean/African-American lesbian, style is a weighty issue. In Zami, the way that one carries oneself carries a lot of meaning. It proclaims sexual orientation, for example. Significantly, as I will try to show, “ways of walking, standing, talking” carry legacies of other knowledges, knowledges not to be found in the US-American cultural archives, knowledges which have not always consciously been passed on to Audre, born in the US to recent black West Indian immigrants. Significantly, Lorde sees her body as “living representation of other life older longer wiser” (Z xvi). In Zami, performative bodily acts sustain and constitute a link to a black West Indian ancestry; they do not reflect a racial essence. Although some passages invoke notions of “essential Blackness,” they must be framed within an understanding of what Lorde calls a “biomythography.” Lorde self-consciously conjures up diasporic links and

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38 Quoted in Elisabeth Alexander 695.
mythical connections to Africa that are useful in her diasporic situation (see my discussion of *Zami* in Chapter 1). Granted, Lorde is in no sense unique when, as a Caribbean/African-American woman writing in the early 80s, she forges diasporic links to Africa. Many black artists and writers inspired by the cultural nationalist movement invoked notions of an African homeland, some of them with strong essentialist leanings. Yet, the expressions of diasporic links to Africa exist on a continuum ranging from finding to fabricating links to Africa. Lorde ends up at the fabricating end.

Audre Lorde’s autobiography hesitates to begin. Before the prologue we find Lorde paying homage to the women who have enabled her to become the woman she is. In both the opening that is placed anterior to the prologue, and the opening that follows it, we find images of how people occupy space, “walk, stand, talk.” In response to the question “To whom do I owe the woman I have become?” (Z xiii) she describes DeLois, the first woman she introduces in the pro-prologue:

DeLois lived up the block on 142nd Street and never had her hair done, and all the neighborhood women sucked their teeth as she walked by. Her crispy hair twinkled in the summer sun as her big proud stomach moved her on down the block while I watched, not caring whether or not she was a poem. [...] She moved like how I thought god’s mother must have moved, and my mother, once upon a time, and someday maybe me. [...] One day I watched DeLois step off the curb of 142nd Street against the light, slow and deliberate. A high yaller dude in a white Cadillac passed by and leaned out and yelled at her, ‘Hurry up, you flat-footed, nappy-headed, funny-looking bitch!’ The car almost knocking her down. DeLois kept right on about her leisurely business and never so much as looked around. (Z xiii-Zxiv).

The opening following the prologue reads,

Grenadians and Barbadians walk like African peoples. Trinidadians do not. When I visited Grenada I saw the root of my mother’s powers walking through the streets. [...] There is a softer edge of African sharpness upon these women, and they swing through the rain-warm streets with an arrogant gentleness that I remember in strength and vulnerability. (Z 1)

In both passages, ways of occupying space become acts of proud defiance. This is particularly true of DeLois who carries herself with her own rhythm and pride in a place

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where she is perceived as a "flat-footed, nappy-headed, funny-looking bitch." Once upon a time, Lorde muses, her Grenadian-born mother must have walked in a similar way. Yet, the immigrant mother in New York keeps up an assimilationist front in public to be able to collect money and return to Grenada. The mother walks with pride, but not with the pleasure DeLois displays. "[S]he would launch herself down the street like a ship under full sail [...] Even when she was not in a hurry, my mother walked with a long and purposeful stride" (Z 8, 30). Linda Lorde keeps a proud posture in a place where what she knows is dismissed.

In Cha's text we noted the powerful imperial project of mapping — attempting to determine what is and is not real, what can and cannot be seen/known. Young Audre insistently searches for Carriacou, the island where her mother was born, on maps in various libraries. It is not until she is in her mid 20s and well into library science that she finds Carriacou on a map. "It appeared only once, in the *Atlas of the Encyclopaedia Britannica* [sic], which has always prided itself upon the accurate cartology [sic] of its colonies" (Z 6). For years she had suspected that "my mother's geography was a fantasy or crazy or at least too old-fashioned" (Z 6). In Chapter 1, I argued that the fact that the island is not on most maps enhances the mythic quality of the place for the narrator, enabling her to create a self-sustaining myth of her mother's birthplace. Here I want to make another suggestion. The fact that her mother's knowledge stems from a place which is not on the average American map and thus not in the US-American cultural archive, enhances the importance of the sort of knowledge her body can pass on, because that knowledge exists nowhere else. The mother carries uncharted sensory regimes of knowledge. For instance, in Harlem "[i]mpassable and impossible distances were measured by the distance 'from Hog to Kick 'em Jenny' [reefs between Grenada and Carriacou]'(Z 21). At first glance, it seems her American born children find her knowledge, her sayings inapplicable. Lorde writes,

What else did Linda know? She knew how to look into people's faces and tell what they were going to do before they did it. She knew which grapefruit was shaddock and pink, before it ripened, and what to do with the others, which was to throw them to the pigs. Except she had no pigs in Harlem, and sometimes those were the only grapefruit around to eat. She knew how to prevent infection in an open cut or wound by heating the black-elm leaf over a wood-fire until it wilted in the wound for a bandage. But there was no black-elm in Harlem, no
black oak leaves to be had in New York City. [...] there was no call for this knowledge now. (Z 3-4)

Yet, \emph{Zami} is full of incorporated habits and rituals, frequently connected to cooking, where the link between what the mother knows and what her children incorporate becomes obvious. In an indirect manner the children come to know the distance “from Hog to Kick ‘em Jenny.” Paul Connerton writes that through habitual bodily behavior, “facial expression, posture, gait or eye movements [...] we re-enact the past in our present conduct. [...] Every group, then, will entrust to bodily automatisms the values and categories which they are most anxious to conserve.”\footnote{Connerton 80, 72, 102} I suggest that performative bodily transmissions of knowledge assume heightened importance in diasporic situations, where that knowledge is uncharted and unrepresented in the dominant cultural archives. In the passages where these rituals, habits, postures are described the division between the performing I and the ethnic group is frequently blurred:

Sitting between my mother’s spread legs, her strong knees gripping my shoulders tightly like some well-attended drum, my head in her lap, while she brushed and combed and oiled and braided. [...] The radio, the scratching comb, the smell of petroleum jelly, the grip of her knees and my stinging scalp all fall into — the rhythms of litany, the rituals of Black women combing their daughters’ hair. (Z 22)

This passage provides a poignant description of diasporic connections being made through ritual practice. To her mother’s great relief, the narrator has just started her menses. A whole summer has been spent taking her to various doctors to inquire into her condition of having fully developed breasts but no menses. In this scene, she gets to use her mother’s mortar to make \textit{souse}, a traditional West Indian dish. As the protagonist describes her mother’s mortar in great detail, she conveys her own deep attraction to it.

Every West Indian woman worth her salt had her own mortar. Now if you lost or broke your mortar, you could, of course, buy another one in the market over on Park Avenue, under the bridge, but those were usually Puerto Rican mortars, and even though they were made out of wood and worked exactly the same way, somehow were never really as good as West Indian mortars. [...] My mother’s mortar was an elaborate affair, quite at variance with most of her other possessions, and certainly with her projected public view of herself. It stood,
solid and elegant, on a shelf in the kitchen cabinet, for as long as I can remember, and I loved it dearly. [...] The heavy sturdiness of this useful wooden object always made me feel secure and somehow full; as if it conjured up, from all the many different flavors pounded into the inside wall, visions of delicious feasts both once enjoyed and still to come. (Z 56-57)

Laura Marks notes the important motif of what she calls "auratic objects" in intercultural film productions. Certain objects are presented as encoding memories and knowledges. Through diasporic processes of location, dislocation, and relocation, these objects, she convincingly argues, gather and erase meaning as they move.

While those volatile commodities encode social more than individual histories, the meaning of personal objects resides in their power to release memories that are specific to individuals. These processes are not "merely" personal, however; rather, they suggest how the personal and idiosyncratic may be the only visible aspect of broader cultural histories. [...] How often has it been the case that memories that were seen as "only" private proved to be the sole repositories of diasporic cultures? It is important to take seriously what seem to be isolated, idiosyncratic, or seemingly private phenomena, because they may prove to be the only level at which widespread cultural movements are able to speak. (my emphasis) 42

I would like to place Lorde’s mortar within Marks’ framework of diasporic recollection objects. The mortar is one of her mother’s few belongings imbued with a sensuous quality. Rather, the text emphasizes Linda Lorde’s frugality and correctness. For the daughter, the mortar, somehow, links hardworking Linda to the sensuous quality of DeLois’s walk. In the kitchen cabinet of the New York apartment, the mortar constitutes a tangible physical link to that magic place called home, Lorde suggests. When the mortar is used, the narrator makes new kinds of physical connections with her mother’s culture. Through usage, "thud push rotate up;" "thud push rotate up" (Z 59), Audre is transported “into a world of scent and rhythm and movement and sound that grew more and more exciting as the ingredients liquefied” (Z 59). “What does not register in the orders of the seeable and sayable may resonate in the order of the sensible,” to use Marks’ words again.43

We saw in Chapter 1 that when Lorde manages to establish fruitful connections with her mother, she simultaneously establishes diasporic affiliations that affirm her

42 Marks 106.
43 Marks 111.
identity as a lesbian. This scene of connections being made through the ritual production of food constitutes no exception:

As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach. [...] Years afterward when I was grown, whenever I thought about the way I smelled that day, I would have a fantasy of my mother, her hands wiped dry from washing, and her apron untied and laid neatly away, looking down upon me lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other's most secret places. (Z 63, 62)

Sharon Holland suggests, “Lorde has accepted the invitation to touch her mother's c(o)untry. She has imploded the taboo of incest and touched not only the place from which she was born — her mother's vagina — as well as her mother's place of origin.”

Lorde certainly invokes a physical re-membering, which often includes her mother. I find that she plays perilously close with stereotypical understandings of lesbianism, as an inability to detach from that first pre-oedipal attachment to the mother. To a certain extent, she invites essentialist readings of origins. Nevertheless, I read her essentialism as performative and strategic.

I would now like to move from the incorporating practices in Zami to one of the most crucial ethnic signifiers in the text, hair. On the cover we find dreadlocks. DeLois, we found out in one of the passages already cited, “never had her hair done.” Again and again, Lorde turns our attention to what is done to black hair. She informs us that inspired by a visit to her school by African-American dancer Pearl Primus, she has worn hers “natural” since high school. She also tells us of her mother's reaction when first seeing her teenage daughter in a “natural hairdo,” “my mother beat my behind and cried for a week” (Z 158). To the outwardly assimilationist mother, the hairdo obviously signals inappropriate counter-hegemonic defiance. To Audre it signals appropriate counter-hegemonic defiance, and, self-affirmation. Her mother is not the only black woman to react strongly to her natural hair in the New York of the 40s and 50s.

44 Sharon Holland quoted in Lynda Hall, “Passion(ate) Plays 'Wherever We Found Space': Lorde and Gomez Queer(y)ing Boundaries and Acting In,” Callaloo 23.1 (2000): 408.
Like when your Black sisters on the job think you’re crazy and collect money between themselves to buy you a hot comb and straightening iron on their lunch hour and stick it anonymously into your locker in the staff room, so that later when you come down for your coffee break and open your locker the damn things fall out on the floor with a clatter and all ninety-five percent of your library co-workers who are very very white want to know what’s it all about. (Z 157)

What is it all about? Hair in Lorde’s text is obviously no decorative “extra,” but fraught with meaning. Kobena Mercer writes, the Afro’s “morphology suggested a certain dignified posture, for to wear an Afro you have to hold up your head in pride. [...] Both these hairstyles [the Afro and dreadlocks] were never just natural: they were stylistically cultivated and politically constructed in a particular historical moment as part of a strategic contestation of white dominance and the cultural power of whiteness.” Mercer notes further, “[t]hey are specifically diasporan. However strongly these styles expressed a desire to ‘return to the roots’ among black peoples in the diaspora, in Africa as it is, they would speak of a modern orientation, a modeling of oneself according to metropolitan images of blackness.”

In *Zami*, the natural hairdo is intimately connected to Audre’s diasporic acts of reclaiming and renaming an Afro-Caribbean identity. Audre has her “natural hairdo” done “by a Sufi Muslim on 125th street” (Z 158, emphasis mine). Hair, then, is part of a diasporic signifying system where cultures and traditions are woven together in new ways.

As a lesbian, Audre has to learn how to navigate among different styles and their loaded meanings. For her lesbian crowd, style is both a way to signal transgression from the compulsory heterosexual environment, and a way to make known one’s specific orientation. Style marks off fine calibrations in sexual orientation. In the gay bar scene, “[i]f you asked the wrong woman to dance, you could get your nose broken in the alley down the street by her butch. [...] And you were never supposed to ask who was who, which is why there was so heavy emphasis upon correct garb. The well-dressed gay-girl was supposed to give you enough cues for you to know” (Z 192). Claiming a lesbian identity via clothing and the bodily canvas never comes across as an act as full of pleasure as reclaiming/renaming an Caribbean/African-American identity through the bodily canvas. Audre vocally refuses to do the butch/femme act. As early as in the prologue she

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states, "I have always wanted to be both man and woman [...] I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered" (L xvi). Clothing becomes an act of tightrope dancing.

When I lived in Stamford, I had worn old dungarees and men's shirts to work. [...] When I lived in Mexico, I wore the full peasant skirts and blouses so readily available in the marketplaces of Cuernavaca. Now I had my straight clothes for working at the library [...] I had very few clothes for my real life.[...] Mostly I wore blue or black dungarees which where increasingly being called jeans. I fell in love with a pair of riding pants which Muriel gave me, and they became my favorite attire. They became my uniform, along with cotton shirts, usually striped. (Z 181-82)

The body in Lorde's text is not used merely as a canvas of defiance and as a point of transmission and incorporation of diasporic knowledge. At all times, Lorde uses the body to narrate her life. The text is full of relations of bodily comfort, discomfort, pain, and pleasure. Her life story is told through the body; the body remains within view at all times. Audre spends her childhood as "legally blind" and, on top of that, she seldom speaks. Lorde comments, "although the doctors at the clinic had clipped the little membrane under my tongue so I was no longer tongue-tied, and had assured my mother that I was not retarded, she still had her terrors and her doubts" (Z 14). We are presented with the pain Audre's body undergoes as a result of an illegal abortion. We meet her body dehumanized as a factory-worker in Stamford where Audre chews some of the X-ray crystals she was supposed to read in order to make as much money as possible. "Nobody mentioned that the X-ray machines, when used unshielded, delivered doses of constant low radiation far in excess of what was considered safe even in those days" (Z 106).46 Audre Lorde, having grown up in a household with a penchant for bodily euphemisms - "anything between your hipbones and your upper thighs was consigned to the 'lower region,' a word I always imagined to have french origins, as in 'Don't forget to wash your l'origen before you go bed" (Z 21) - speaks the body with a vengeance in her autobiography.

46 Cancer will be the cause of Audre Lorde's death in 1992. She relates her battle with cancer in The Cancer Journals (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1980).
"'I skinned her,' I would have to confess": The Body in Maxine Hong Kingston's* The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*

We have already noted that the girlhood Maxine Hong Kingston depicts is a vexed one—full of racial, cultural, and gendered traumas, which often intersect in complex ways. We saw in the last chapter how in *The Woman Warrior* the narrator's voice works through her mother's talk-story to make sense of conflicting cultural scripts.

Here we will examine how in each of Kingston's autobiographical texts the body frequently constitutes the turf where cultural, racial and gendered forces are played out. The figure of the body is used to dramatize racial, ethnic, and gender dynamics. The two books explore the fact that what the body, the signifier, signifies is contingent and subject to change. Both figurative and literal inscriptions on the body can be found in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. The first story in *The Woman Warrior*, "No Name Woman," is the mother's response to physical signs of her daughter's oncoming womanhood. The mother inscribes patriarchal laws upon her daughter's body via a warning tale of illicit female sexuality, a tale that Kingston will give multiple versions. As discussed in the previous chapter, the story(ies) is of illegitimate sexual acts and their consequence: death. The story of the aunt who has a child out of wedlock and who ultimately kills herself in the family well gives flesh to the misogynist sayings that surround Maxine.

When my sisters and I ate at [their great-grandfather's] house, there would be—six girls eating. The old man opened his eyes wide at us and turned in a circle, surrounded. His neck tendons stretched out. "Maggots!" he shouted. "Maggots! Where are my grandsons? I want grandsons! Give me grandsons! Maggots!" He pointed at each one of us, "Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! (WW 171)

The opening vignette of *China Men* tells the tale of Tang Ao, a traveler who is captured in the Land of Women and rendered feminine by forcibly having his feet bound, ears pierced. The story constitutes a parable of the emasculation Chinese men have undergone in the United States. Again and again, Kingston reminds us of the social forces rendering the body "Chinese-feminine," "American-feminine," "Chinese-masculine," "American-masculine." She writes, "[w]alking erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed which is Chinese-feminine) and speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn
myself American-feminine" (WW 18). Maxine makes the following comment about newly arrived male Chinese immigrants, “FOBs, Fresh-off-the-boats [...] Their eyes do not focus correctly — shifty-eyed — and they hold their mouths slack, not tight-jawed masculine” (WW 173). Comments such as these denaturalize “masculine” and “feminine.” I agree with Michele Janette, who notes that above all, Kingston explores the social construction of the body. However, I depart from Janette’s views when she argues, “Kingston’s texts do not endorse […] a location of truth value in bodies. The moment of embodiment is a moment of limitation, of encounter with the interpretations always already applied to bodies.” Detrimental social inscriptions on the body are most intensely explored in Kingston’s work, but I believe that another corporeal story, with “truth-value,” surfaces as well. First, however, I will explore some of the bodily inscriptions, literal and figurative, Kingston presents.

In the story of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior, told in the “White Tigers” chapter of The Woman Warrior, the parents to the female avenger (in male disguise) literally carve their list of grievances on their daughter’s back before sending her off to battle their oppressors.

My mother caught the blood and wiped the cuts with a cold towel soaked in wine. It hurt terribly — the cuts sharp; the air burning; the alcohol cold, then hot — pain so various. [...] The list of grievances went on and on. If an enemy should flay me, the light would shine through me like lace. (WW 38)

This is not the only instance when bodily inscription and ideas of flaying are connected in The Woman Warrior. I would like to pause at the implications of skinning and skin in general in Kingston’s text. At this instance, were the woman warrior to be flayed, the family’s script would still be visible. However, elsewhere in the narrative, the significance of “flaying” resides in a desire on the part of the over-inscribed, denigrated female Chinese-American subject, to come clean, to become flesh, “that zero degree of social

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48 To the best of my knowledge, the preponderance of “flaying” in The Woman Warrior is only discussed by Timothy Dow-Adams, Light Writing & Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000). He links her metaphoric usage of flaying to photography.
The narrator compares herself to the woman warrior in these words, "[a]nd I have so many words – 'chink' words and 'gook' words too – that they do not fit on my skin" (WW 53). Skin, of course, is symbolically loaded. It is the sign of race. It could be said to constitute a bridge between surface and interior, self and other, self and world. Conversely, it could be said to be that which separates the self from the world, and so on. It is, it follows, a productive metaphor for the self's relation to the world. The skin's vulnerability/exposure to the defining powers of the gaze is important. Our narrator feels that she is over-defined; her skin does not have room for further attempts by the dominant culture to define her. Maxine's encounter with the quiet Chinese-American girl, who often has been called her "double," provides another illustrative example of my reading of the desire to "flay" in Kingston's text. At a time in school when Maxine refuses to be the silent, passive, obedient Asian girl in the American imagination, she punishes a girl in her class who embodies those qualities. Maxine here valorizes things/bodies American. This valorization should be read as naiveté on part of the protagonist, not assimilationist politics on part of Kingston the author.

We were similar in sports. We held the bat on our shoulders until we walked to first base. [...] She would whisper-read but not talk. Her whisper was as soft as if she had no muscles. [...] I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team. I hated her for her China doll hair cut. I hated her at music time for the wheezes that came out of her plastic flute. (WW 155-156)

As Sau-ling Wong has demonstrated, the common motif of the double or the doppel-gänger in Euro-American literature, needs to be expanded in Asian-American literature to deal with complexities of race. The passage above can easily be read as an instance of projection. Projection, in Wong's reading, "keeps at bay the threatening knowledge of self-hatred. By projecting undesirable 'Asianness' outward onto a double – what I term a racial shadow – one renders alien what is, in fact, literally inalienable, thereby disowning and

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49 Spillers 67. Spillers makes a distinction between body and flesh. In her view, that distinction constitutes "the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense before the body there is flesh" (67).

50 Cheung argues similarly about Maxine's valorization of speech, "speech in this tormenting context has a valence not unlike 'the bluest eye' in Toni Morrison's novel of that name, another work that demonstrates how 'the dominant culture exercises its hegemony through the educational system' (Gibson 20)." Cheung, Articulate Silences 89.
distancing it.” In a disturbing scene when school is out and the sun has set (Sau-ling Wong has pointed to the eerie qualities of the setting of this scene), Maxine tortures the quiet girl in the girls’ basement lavatory.

“Talk!” I shouted into the side of her head. Her straight hair hung, the same all these years, no ringlets or braids or permanents. [...] I hated her clothes – the blue pastel cardigan, the white blouse with the collar that lay flat over the cardigan, the homemade flat, cotton skirt she wore when everybody else was wearing flared skirts. I hated pastels; I would wear black always. [...] I had stopped pinching her cheek because I did not like the feel of her skin. I would go crazy if it came away in my hands. *I skinned her,* I would have to confess. (WW 158, 159, 163, my emphasis)

The disturbance Maxine expresses about the quiet girl’s skin is connected to the social inscriptions imposed upon it, and, of course, upon her own skin. Despite her efforts to establish differences between herself and the quiet girl, we know that her American tomboyish pushiness is recent. She has spent three years silent in school and “[a]t times shaking my head is no more self-assertion than I can manage” (WW 155). Further, despite the fact that Maxine wears black, and keeps her hair disorderly in stark contrast to the neat, quiet girl, “the larger society will not bother to distinguish between the two,” as Sau-ling Wong notes. Her self-inscribed “Americanness” is secondary to the sign of race. The racial body is the sticking point. Similarly, in *China Men*, Maxine’s father, during his “bachelor years” in New York, spends time, money, and effort to make himself into an American male, only to be ultimately reminded that it is the sign of race that counts. “At a very good store, he paid two hundred dollars cash for a blue and gray pinstripe suit, the most expensive suit he could find. In the three-way mirror, he looked like Fred Astaire” (CM 63). We know from *The Woman Warrior* that in China Maxine’s father was viewed as “the ideal in masculine beauty, the thin scholar with the hollow cheeks and the long fingers” (WW 110). In America, the dancing girls let him dance for free because of his style and beauty, but refuse to go home with him. Marrying a Chinese, at that time, caused a white American woman to lose her citizenship. Race trumps over style.

Let us return to the woman warrior, with the words of revenge carved on her back.

51 Sau-ling Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature* 78.
52 Sau-ling Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature* 89.
much hardship, she takes off her clothes for him to see the words her parents carved on her back.

“You’ve done this,” I said, and ripped off my shirt to show him my back. “You are responsible for this.” When I saw his startled eyes at my breasts, I slashed him across the face and on the second stroke cut off his head. (WW 46)

The inscriptions do not control what is read. The female body here constitutes the sticking point. Janette convincingly argues, “the baron’s startled gaze reconfines her into the single category ‘female.’ Where she offers a contextualized, self-scripted body, he sees only an essential sex characteristic. In frustration at this privileging of gender, at the fact that ‘female’ trumps all other forms of identification, the warrior narrator lashes out with violence.”53 As Janet Beizer writes, “[t]he potential scandal of the speaking body is neutralized by virtue of its production by an external agent. In fact the body does not speak: it is spoken, ventriloquized by the master text that makes it signify.”54 This disjunction between self-inscribed difference and the difference inscribed by dominant society is central in Kingston’s texts.

Paradoxically the conflicting forces acting on the turf of Maxine’s body are felt most acutely at home. She even becomes physically ill at home. The adult Maxine visits her parents and tells her mother:

“When I’m away from here [...] I don’t get sick. I don’t go to the hospital every holiday. I don’t get pneumonia, no dark spots on my x-rays. My chest doesn’t hurt when I breathe. I can breathe. And I don’t get headaches at three o’clock. [...] Here I’m sick so often, I can barely work. I can’t help it, Mama.” (WW 100, 101)

The paradoxical inscriptions made on Maxine’s body and most acutely felt at home produce a sick body. That is, the bodily exterior, the arbitrary bearer of meanings, becomes inseparable from the bodily interior. The torture incident, where the desire to flay her double was expressed, results in a sick body. Kingston writes, “I spent the next

53 Janette 82.
eighteen months sick in bed with a mysterious illness. There was no pain and no symptoms” (WW 163).

In The Woman Warrior, Chinese culture in America “the invisible world the emigrants built” (WW 13) surfaces as a culture of practice and habit, as a constant conveyance of “the unspeakable.” The “unspeakable” here constitutes ethnicity as performed practice, performed group belonging. Kingston writes, “those of us in the first American generations [are] always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable” (WW 13). And Kingston suggests that this becomes a rather futile activity. Seemingly it is impossible for her to “name” knowledge that is practiced, not spoken. She ponders,

> How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don’t even make you pay attention, slipping into ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice any specialness. The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up before you ask. If we had to depend on being told, we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death. (WW 166)

Julia Watson contends.

> Refusing to name the unspeakable not only protects what is sacred in Chinese tradition by enshrouding it in silence, guarding it from the uninitiated; it also marks cultural boundaries within which what is operative does not need to be spoken.55

Just like the invisible world that Grenadian immigrant Linda Lorde built in Harlem, New York, we are introduced to an invisible world in Stockton, California. Ritual and diasporic knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation through practice. In similar lines, Bourdieu conceives of bodily practices as a kind of memory. Bourdieu argues,

> [t]he principles em-bodied in this way [unspoken bodily knowledge transmitted from generation to generation] are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and therefore, more precious, that the values given body, made body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through

55 Watson, “Unspeakable Differences,” Smith and Watson, De/Colonizing 139-140.
injunctions as insignificant as “stand up straight” or “don’t hold you knife in your left hand.”

In my reading, the attention given to “the unspeakable” in The Woman Warrior contests Janette’s assessment that Kingston’s text does not endorse “truth value” in bodies, that detrimental social inscriptions issued from various sites of power constitute the sole bodily focus.

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At one point, Hoffman compares her explicitly socio-politically, geographically and historically embedded autobiographical writing with that of Vladimir Nabokov who, in keeping with traditional autobiography, transcends the historical and the material in his Speak, Memory. For instance, he gives the reason for his émigré existence, the Russian Revolution, only passing mention. With a considerable degree of irony, Hoffman writes,

How trite and tedious, in contrast, to see oneself as a creature formed by historic events and defined by sociological categories. I am a Jew, an immigrant, half-Pole, half-American.... I suffer from certain syndromes because I was fed on stories of the war.... [...] His observations are those of an entirely free man; but perhaps such aristocratic freedom to rise above confining categories and merely material conditions can spring only from a specific circumstance, the circumstance of aristocratic privilege. (L 198)

It seems as if the figure of the body has provided these autobiographers with a point from where to complicate notions of inside/outside, public/private, everyday/historic. At various stages, in various ways, these autobiographers show how they, in Suleri’s words, “began to lose that sense of differentiated identities of history and ourselves” (MD 14). These binaries, as Elizabeth Grosz has pointed out, are intimately connected to the mind/body opposition. The binaries are not reversed in the texts; rather, one term of each binary is always present in the other. Investigating the body becomes a means to investigate a number of forces, discourses, histories that mediate the subjectivities of these diasporic autobiographers. The network of forces that shape these autobiographical

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subjects is consistently made visible. On the most general level, the concern with the body in these texts puts into crisis metaphysical notions of the subject.

Cha, Hoffman, Kingston, Lorde, and Suleri refute the notion of the body as a material given that operates on one level. In part through their experiences of cultural and geographical displacements, these autobiographical narrators have been sensitized to the contingency and volatility of the body. They have often been made painfully aware of how differently their bodies are read in different places. The wavering between a belief in the speaking body and the possibility of the body being always already spoken for could be said to be at the heart of these bodily tales. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, writing out of a colonial/postcolonial/neocolonial experience, puts her emphasis on what is done to the body, how it is inscribed by powerful forces. However, even in her text, the body gains agency, mainly through the trope of fluidity, which discards the inscriptions made on the denigrated colonial subject. Audre Lorde focuses on a speaking body that is able to subvert the inscriptions made on it (in her case, inscriptions concerning race, gender, sexual orientation). Hoffman and Kingston also disclose a belief in the speaking body as a carrier of diasporic knowledge, memories, and practices. By enacting various forms of belonging the bodies in these texts decentralize the present place, the present nation.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

I would like to begin my conclusion by first returning to the story the passport tells. To be sure, it not only allows its holder to "pass the port" (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's words). The passport has the power to tell the state-sanctioned story of its holder. This story may be reductive for every citizen, as it fixes identities into a few boxed categories; but it is particularly so for (im)migrants when cultural identity is incongruent with national identity; when it is inconceivable to imagine oneself in univocal alignment with narratives of the nation(s); when passing the port does not entail passing the past. In his recent Passport Photos, Amitava Kumar presents a complex story about the information the passport supplies: Name, Place of Birth, Date of Birth, Profession, Nationality, Sex.... Kumar writes,

[its forgery is most apparent in places where the information does not fit on the dotted line. Where the individual takes on the shape of the collective. Where the category, as with the question of nationality, splits. Where the answers beg only more questions. Where the rich ambiguities of a personal or cultural history perhaps resist a plain reply or, in still other cases, demand a complex though unequivocal response.1


Produced in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, these autobiographies by female writers mark multiple locations, dislocations and relocations. Each of these women

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1 Amitava Kumar, Passport Photos (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000) xi.
2 Kumar xiv.
writers negotiates culture and identity by considering notions of home and displacement, loss, memory, and practices of translation. The writers are first, 1.5, or second-generation immigrants to the US. Some of the texts are well-known (The Woman Warrior is widely used in ethnic, minority, multi-cultural university courses in the US), some are lesser-known (Dictée), and some have rarely been read as immigrant texts (Zami, in particular). In my book, I have sought to foreground the poetics and politics these (im)migrant writers propose and enact as they seek to represent the diasporic negotiations of identity, of here and there, home and displacement, continuity and change, in sum, the complexities involved where, in Kumar's words, "the information does not fit on the dotted line. Where the individual takes on the shape of the collective. Where the category, as with the question of nationality, splits."

The term (im)migrant has been employed to indicate a certain distance from traditional studies of immigration in the United States. These tend to assume the transformative experiences of cultural and geographical relocation, the three-generational journey from alien to American. In none of the autobiographies dealt with here can we follow a linear journey from place A to place B, culture A to culture B. I have let the autobiographical texts, which I have suggested are both theoretically informed and theoretically informing, enter into dialogue with recent theoretical explorations mushrooming around the concept "diaspora" and various exigencies of locational feminism. I have found the concept diaspora useful because it allows for dialectics between here and there, roots and routes, continuity and change. Further, I find diaspora discourse open to explorations of "different differences" (related to class, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) in the context of immigration. Various expressions of locational feminism have enabled me to remain sensitive to historical and material particularities in my study of shifting, unstable, postmodern identities. Attention to the multiplicities of place de-essentializes difference and demonstrates how specific differences are acute in some settings and dormant in others. Through close readings, I have sought to put "place" back into displacement. Metaphorical usages of displacement tend to de-historicize the subject. Thus, diaspora discourse, locational feminism and postmodern understandings of the subject have allowed me to juxtapose and bring into dialogue rather disparate (cross-race and transnational) autobiographical texts of displacement.
I view my project as part of a larger recent effort to decentralize the US when looking at immigrant cultural productions. Throughout this study, I have pointed to the ways in which these (im)migrant texts gesture beyond the US as setting and context for belonging, communion, and self-formation. I have argued that (im)migrant dialectics linger through generations. Audre Lorde and Maxine Hong Kingston, for instance, were both born in the US, yet they are continually trying to forge/find – re-member – affiliations with the cultures and places left behind.

Traditionally, the autobiographical form has undergirded mythologies of both individualism (habitually masculine) and nationalism. In particular, immigrant autobiographical narratives in the US have been read as confirmations of American uniqueness, manufacturing versions of the American Dream of “innocence and clean slates and the future.” Cha, Hoffman, Kingston, Lorde and Suleri find several ways to trouble the rhetorics of assimilation/transformation that shape this American dream. Engagement with the past, the means to reach the past through history and memory, and the narrative possibilities of representing the past are at the heart of these texts. Memory is used to write self and history at the same time that it is assessed and dramatized as a process shaped by present concerns, by others, and by the imagination. Memory is presented as embodied in Eva Hoffman’s Lost in Translation, Audre Lorde’s Zami, and Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior. By illuminating habitual bodily performances, these writers suggest that the body is a memory site, a place where diasporic knowledge is preserved. The mere fact that these immigrant texts insistently dwell in the past and in the ways the past continually informs the present constitutes one example of the many ways in which these texts are written against metanarratives (clean slates and the future) of the nation.

I have shown how Maxine Hong Kingston in China Men and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in Dictée display a distrust of the possibilities of history writing at the same time as they demonstrate the desire to write/right wrongs of official history through telling untold stories. Their concern with the possibilities and limits of history writing is quite similar, yet their writerly tactics are very different. Cha presents multiple memorial sites of

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4 This is Toni Morrison’s description of the American Dream. Quoted in Avery Gordon 184.
Korean history and refuses to supply narrative linearity and coherence. Cha stresses the constructionist aspect of history writing; her presentation is never seamless, or seemingly natural. Positivist historiography is under assault. By re-telling her male ancestors' stories, stretching back three generations in the US and Hawaii, Kingston simultaneously displays the absence of her ancestors in American historical records and replays their historical presence in her family history. In contrast to Cha, she does supply a narrative line; yet she often leaves her reader with multiple versions of the past.

For Cha and Kingston, dwelling in the past involve dwelling in the stories of others. They show how collective erasure from historical records frequently entails painful personal erasure. This is a form of autobiographical writing that incessantly points to the self's situatedness in histories, among multiple discourses, in bodies, and always among others. Poetics and politics lead a cheek-by-jowl existence, as the Kingston and Cha example indicates. As pertains to form, I have also argued that the vignette-like structures in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Suleri's *Meatless Days* allow for the display of a highly relational self, where the stories and memories of others are crucial in the formation/narration of the autobiographical self, and where the stories and memories of others frequently locate the autobiographical subject off the center stage.

I have considered the keen attention given to the body in all these texts as part of their effort to trouble national schemes. The abstract grand narrative of *American Bildung* is disturbed by the multi-layered historically and socially shaped story the body tells. The body has offered these (im)migrant subjects a lens through which to examine their multiple locations and displacements. The figure of the body prompts us to reconsider the self's relation to the world by destabilizing binaries such as body/mind, personal/political, private/public, individual/collectivity, which is part of the political project in each text. The "bodily turn" of these texts can also be linked to the postmodern emphasis on "the local, the fragmentary, and the particular." As Eva Hoffman writes, "I cannot always be out on the heath, we exist in actual homes, in communities, in clothes" (L 139-140). She thereby contests notions of the universal, transcendent self.

As much as this study has identified a mode of (im)migrant autobiographical writing of and towards subjectivities in the making, on the move, constantly assessing their shifting, multiple, and sometimes contradictory affiliations, it has proposed a new way of

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5 Hollinger 64.
reading immigrant autobiographies. Keen attention to the multiplicities of place and the workings of memory disturbs common conceptualizations of both autobiography in general and immigrant autobiography in particular. When we resist the expectation of certain linear trajectories of innocence and maturity, or departure and arrival, we can explore the complex ways in which autobiographical subjects are “multiply placed and [...] multiply linked.” Beyond this study, I propose re-readings of “traditional” immigrant autobiographies through the lenses of diaspora discourse, locational feminism, and postmodern understandings of the subject. These tools offer avenues to recognize and problematize the shifting and often ambivalent affiliations in texts such as Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*, where the affiliation with America is most often read as repudiating all other affiliations. Not only do we need new modes of writing that complicate the passport categories, we need readers able to look for gaps and inconsistencies in what at first glance appears as narrow autobiographical accounts of individualism supporting nationalism.

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Multiple Affiliations explores the autobiographical negotiations of memory and multilocality articulated by five (im)migrant women writing from, and being read (primarily) within, the US. Texts as diverse as Korean-American Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictée (1982), Polish (Jewish)-American Eva Hoffman’s Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language (1989), Chinese-American Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts (1976) and China Men (1980), Caribbean/African-American Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), and Pakistani-American Sara Suleri’s Meatless Days (1989) highlight how various (cross-race and transnational) experiences of location, dislocation, and relocation resonate with each other and “immigrant America.”

These texts widen and displace the generic boundaries of autobiography. Multiple Affiliations investigates the ways in which these autobiographies gesture beyond the individual self to the networks of relation that constitute that self. It elucidates the ways in which these (im)migrant texts gesture beyond the US as setting and context for belonging, communion, and self-formation.