Bad Style: Feminism and the Ethics of Reading in 20th and 21st century Global Anglophone Literature

by

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Jerrine Tan received her Bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley in 2011, where she graduated with a double degree in English and Economics. She received her Masters degree in English from Brown University in 2014. Her first published article, "The International Settlement: The Fantasy of International Writing in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans,*" appeared in *American, British, and Canadian Studies Journal* in December 2018. She has also worked as a translator on an advanced Chinese textbook, *China in Depth,* published by the Peking University Press in 2015. She has also presented widely at several conferences, including the Modern Language Association, English Language and Literature Association of Korea (ELLAK), and Summer School for Sexualities, Cultures, and Politics (SSSCP). Her international approach to research has been supported by various fellowships. She spent the summer of 2014 and 2015 in Germany on fellowships by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Joukowsky Institute at Brown. Her research in Tokyo, Japan at the University of Tokyo was supported by the Brown University Graduate School in 2015 and the Japan Foundation in 2017. Her research on Kazuo Ishiguro in Shanghai at Fudan University was enabled by the Fudan University Graduate Research Fellowship. Her participation by the Harvard University Institute for World Literature (IWL) was also partially funded by the IWL. An interdisciplinary fellowship from the Brown Graduate School gave Jerrine the opportunity to gain professional experience as an Assistant Editor at *differences*: *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies.* She also worked as an editorial assistant for *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction.* Jerrine was a graduate representative in her department for six years and served on the Graduate Student Council as International Graduate Student Advocate in 2014.

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> Women with expensive and artsy tastes *can*, of course, be idealized, but probably only if they project an image of graceful muteness. One has only to think of the outpouring of feeling around the death of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to realize the genius of her adoption of the role of silent image from the moment of the assassination onward. Prior to that time, the woman with a taste for French cooking, redecoration, and Oscar Wilde was a far less idealized figure in the American press. And the contrast between Jackie O's muteness and Hillary Clinton's outspokenness only served to give cultural reinforcement to the notion that grace, dignity, and class could only be embodied by a woman who remained silent.
> *The Feminist Difference*, Barbara Johnson

Introduction

In January 2018, Judge Rosemary Aquilina granted over a hundred of Larry Nassar's sexual assault victims the chance (if they should wish) to read their testimonies against their abuser in court. On 24 January 2018, Larry Nassar was sentenced to 40-175 years in prison. The trial was applauded for the ways in which Judge Aquilina chose to empower survivors and their narratives, giving them the space and time (as long as they needed) to speak. Later that year, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford stepped forward on 27 September to give her testimony detailing how Brett Kavanaugh, then U.S. Circuit Judge, had sexually assaulted her when they were teenagers. On 6 October 2018, Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court was confirmed. The difference in these two outcomes encourages us to think about women's speech and the way it is received: is it enough just to be able to speak? And is all speech the same?

From Daphne's transformation into a silent laurel tree, Io's helplessness as an unspeaking heifer, to Keats's still unravished bride of quietness, the figure of the mute woman has captured the creative imagination for centuries. Susan Garber offers a consistent physiological metaphor behind descriptions of poetic creation:

> This model of the pen-penis writing on the virgin page participates in a long tradition identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation—a secondary object lacking autonomy, endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality. Clearly this tradition excludes woman from the creation of culture, even as it reifies her as an artifact within culture. (Gubar 114)

Aptly, the feminist reaction and the feminist rallying cry is to demand to be "given voice," suggesting that women have been silenced, that they have been spoken over or spoken *for*. But it also suggests that power is only enabled or conferred by speech. These calls to "give voice" or to "break the silence" and to "make visible" "presuppose some absence, repression, or marginalization as the ontological rationale and political motivation for articulations of self and community" (Kang 20). It is imperative to remember that such "subject" or "object" making is not necessarily liberatory, often involving intractable forces—political and otherwise.

Furthermore, speech alone is not necessarily powerful for it is possible for people not to mean what they say or even to speak against their own self-interest. Philosopher Kate Manne refers to this in her book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny:* "Part of male dominance… seems to be seizing control of the narrative…enforcing her concurrence. It is not exactly deference: rather, it closely resembles the moral aim of gaslighting, according to Kate Abramson's illuminating account of it. The capacity for the victim's independent perspective has been destroyed, at least when it comes to certain subjects. She is bound to agree with him; she may not only believe, but take up and tell, his story" (11).

My project is therefore interested in training oneself to see what is often already at the surface but nonetheless gets occluded, looked past, or seen through. Each novel centers on the suffering of a female character which somehow gets glossed over. What does it mean when we refuse to look at violence or are unable to name it? When the character of David Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old professor, describes the sexual intercourse he has with his student Melanie, in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, we are told that the woman goes limp, "As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck" (23). What does it mean when readers are unable to recognize this rape? And if not rape, then what? Similarly, what is at stake when we think of Nabokov's *Lolita* as a love story or Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* as a novel demonstrating Japanese aesthetics?

I take Kandice Chuh and Laura Kang, both Asian American feminist scholars, as my main interlocutors, and further, identify them as being part of a feminist genealogy, their work growing out of and in conversation with feminist and postcolonial deconstructionist theorists such as Barbara Johnson and Gayatri Spivak. Chuh's project in *Imagine Otherwise,* aims to "inscribe Asian American literatures as epistemological projects engaged in a politics of knowledge" (x). Asian American Studies for her as a theoretical discipline, then, is one that builds a mode of analysis, thinking, and interpretation, that transcends embodied experience. She "advances a critical approach to the study of Asian American Literature that conceives of that work as theoretical devices that help us apprehend and unravel the narrative dimensions of naturalized racial, sexual, gender, and national identities" (x).

My project is interested in multiplicity and ambivalence, but by that I do not mean multiculturalism as the term and concept so often "occludes and effaces the historicity of racism and the deep-rootedness of racialization as a technology through which the United States […] has perpetuated a self-stylization as the achievement of the universalist Englightenment values of equality and liberty" (Chuh 6). Recognizing that within a certain frame, minoritized literatures tend to be coded as "(multi)cultural" whereas the "literary" is often reserved for canonical writers and texts, my dissertation is instead interested in the multinational or the international. Ishiguro has broken the earlier described mold, but the work for which he is best known and most loved are nonetheless his "aesthetic and ethical" texts—what I call in Chapter 2 his "post-Japan novels." It is important to note that when he first made his mark as an emerging international writer, critics almost always remarked on the beauty or "authenticity" of his "Japanese style." As Chuh explains, often the way the term "multiculturalism" is popularly used "manages at once to sediment Asian Americanness in a narrative of otherness that achieves cohesiveness through an emphasis on (previous) exclusion and powerlessness, and to erase the continuities of the materialities underwriting such positions by insisting on the irrelevance of the past" (6). I argue that the work of considering plurality and community must insist on responsible historicization and lies neither in the telos of resolving differences or promoting assimilation, nor in disciplining knowledge into discrete readings, but rather in staying with uneasy irreducibility in order to unpack the ethical as dynamic relation.

The World Literature novels I have chosen structurally and thematically demonstrate the immense critical potential available in refusing a territorial-based imagination. Considering them together allows us to dislocate the spatial logic that often

holds together the boundaries of the field. Considering these novels as World Literature texts also allows us to "see how the practice of holding "Asia" at a cognitive distance sustains a certain kind of imperialist epistemology responsible for conceiving Asian-raced peoples, among others, as Others" (Chuh 88). But since I am expressly employing Kandice Chuh's conceptualization of Asian American Studies *as theory,* then in those terms, this project becomes an Asian Americanist one as well. I am interested not only in the multinational nature of these authors, their multinational personal histories, and the multinational settings of their novels, but also their dislocations and translocations. The project is therefore inspired by Asian American theorists because I am specifically interested in these writers not simply because of the global circulation of their Anglophone novels, but because they are Anglophone novels written by persons of Asian descent. Nabokov stands out in my selection of immigrant World Literature authors because he is white and serves as an important lynchpin in my dissertation as a counterpoint against which differently racially marked immigrant bodies are read culturally and critically.

Kandice Chuh and Laura Kang's discussion of Asian American women and the "comfort woman" issue in particular are part of a feminist genealogy beginning with Barbara Johnson and Gayatri Spivak. Laura Kang's project in exposing how "The sometimes facile but more often fraught attempts to account for Asian/American women could underscore how different disciplines privilege particular modes of subjection" focuses on "foregrounding of the particular historical circumstances, ideological suppositions, and methodological tactics that enable and constrain that compositional instance" finds a precedent in Spivak's postcolonial work (3). In Kang's formulation of what she calls the "compositional subject" that is the Asian American woman, she invokes

Foucault's formulation of the role of the "Examination" in the "intertwined making of the human as both a productive body and an intelligible body" and how it sounds "useful warnings to the recent effusion of compositional efforts about Asian/American women" (17). This formulation is in some ways analogous and therefore useful to my interest here in female speech. Just as power is enforced in Kang's project through imposing what Foucault calls "a principle of compulsory visibility" which "maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (187) because constant and compulsory surveillance transcribes visible bodies into a "field of documentation" and "a network of writing," so legitimacy and power is enforced through an insistence on women's speech.

This is not always desirable as women are encouraged to "speak out" only to have that speech disciplined, disavowed, or censored—simultaneously negating the speech act itself and serving as a disciplinary measure to caution against further speech. Women such as Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and Anita Hill and Emily Doe who have been vocal about their experience of sexual assault painfully lay out a history of women's speech subject to examination, surveillance, documentation, and subsequently, delegitimization. The implicit teleology of silence-to-speech, unheard-to-loud-and-proud protester affirmatively structures a certain form of speech as the primary and essential goal, the promise of which will finally imbue the subaltern/the nymphet/the "comfort woman" with legitimacy and coherence that was, by definition, not there before. This means that the composition of the subaltern subject is reliant on her emergence into speech recognized as speech by the dominant culture. If we know that the "minority voice" is often used for purposes of Othering by making difference mainstream through such tags as "multiculturalism," is such speech necessarily desirable and good, and for whom? Indeed "the textual production of

"Asian American women" as a distinct object of knowledge" emerged through sometimes random and partial intersections of activism, university ethnic-studies departments, state-sponsored knowledge production on girls and women "in response to feminist efforts, and a commercial publisher's interest in a timely, profitable "topic of interest"" (Kang 13). This way of making of "subjects" is not necessarily liberating. The figures of suffering women that I focus on in my dissertation, then, expose readings of minorities or persons outside of normative identitarian categories as subalterns who are entirely reliant on external representations and readings of themselves.

Against readings of certain immigrant World Literature writers like Kazuo Ishiguro and Vladimir Nabokov that too quickly aestheticize them in order to privilege a universality of style, my dissertation argues that their works should be seen as articulating a feminist cosmopolitanism that politicizes identity. In examining Nabokov's *Lolita* and Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*, as well as Chang Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, and Ruth Ozeki's *The Tale for the Time Being*, I draw attention to the figures of female suffering that lie at their center. These novels are powerful for their ability to make this pain into an allegory for other forms of historical violence while maintaining a feminist focus on the issue of misogyny. In so doing, these works leverage feminist critique in order to tackle such issues as xenophobia, war, slavery, and ecological collapse. In order to understand the complex ethical engagements of these works, it is necessary not only to recognize how they politicize the identities of suffering female characters but also to take seriously how the personal histories of writers also connects them to the violent histories and geographies in which their novels are set—to unpack how their politics draw in complex ways from their identities. In so doing, I push against conventional approaches to how certain immigrant World Literature

writers tend to be read that prize an aesthetic cosmopolitanism through an attention to style and have tended to bracket such overtly political concerns and have either treated the identities of authors in reductive ways or ignored them altogether.

My first chapter, ""If one were quite sincere with oneself": The Immanent Politics at the Surface of *Lolita,*" argues that the bulk of liberal criticism on *Lolita*, often abstracts away from the specific and particular crimes at the core of the novel—the abuse and silencing of Dolores Haze. *Lolita* has been variously read as a Program Era novel, a road trip novel, or, by liberal critics such as Lionel Trilling and Richard Rorty, an aesthetic novel and even an ethical one, yet such analyses privilege the narrative voice of the pedophile while Dolores Haze's voice remains absent. Against readings that privilege Humbert/Nabokov's impressive style, I situate the moral stakes of the novel in Dolores Haze's absent voice and work to excavate it by looking to Nabokov's politics (embedded, though disclaimed) and personal history. I historicize *Lolita* by reading it alongside *Pnin*, which was written concurrently, and more directly reflects Nabokov's personal history of immigration and his relationship with Russian liberalism. Examining the stakes of both novels this way brings us to contend with the violent forces that shaped Nabokov's life—his exiled and martyred father who fought sexual criminals, the fascism in Europe that threatened his beloved wife, Vera, and killed his homosexual brother, Sergey. Nabokov's totalizing style distracts the reader from the sexual violence at the heart of the novel—a crime that we learn to be more adept at recognizing when we read it alongside *Pnin,* a novel that lays out for us Nabokov's deep personally and historically contingent liberal ethos and strong ethical stance against cruelty while encouraging empathy.

My second chapter, "Screening Japan: Ishiguro's Early Japan Novels and the Way We Read World Literature" looks at two of Ishiguro's least popular novels—*A Pale View of Hills,* his first novel set in postwar Nagasaki, and *When We Were Orphans*, which stands out as an anomaly among what I am calling his post-Japan novels. Criticism in the field of World Literature has mostly focused on the cosmopolitanism of Ishiguro's post-Japan novels while scholarship on his Japan novels consists mostly of bathic praise for a putative "authentic Japaneseness." While complex ethical quandaries are foregrounded in the critical engagement with his post-Japan novels, writings on his Japan novels remain overlaid with superficial orientalist readings that obfuscate, even adamantly ignore, the novels' expansive and intensive engagement with the political and ethical conditions faced by the Japanese in the postwar period. In *A Pale View of Hills,* Keiko's suicide is the catalyst for the narrative, yet Keiko is only ever offered as an absent center. Empathy and sympathy for Keiko seem impossible because her being "pure Japanese" marks her as foreign and as having a "tendency toward suicide." The view taken towards the singular incident of Keiko's death is produced out of a generalized assumption about an entire race and emblematizes the inhumanity of being oblivious to the suffering of even one person. I demonstrate how attention to Keiko's suffering can bring us to engage with overlooked historical motifs in the novel such as the busy Nagasaki harbor and festering wastegrounds, which force a confrontation with many of postwar Japan's most dangerous crises—for example, the aftermath of the atomic bomb and Minamata disease in the Kyushu region—and highlights the chronic inability to read both Japan and Japanese bodies in aesthetic cosmopolitan readings of the novel. I turn next to *When We Were Orphans,* Ishiguro's only

novel not set in either Japan or Europe and which follows a white protagonist. Critics' inability to read Japan reveals itself as also an inability to read greater East Asia.

My third chapter "Speaking Otherwise: Reading Voicelessness and Considering Silence in Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*" reads Lee's novel which broaches the controversial "comfort women issue." *A Gesture Life* enshrouds the abuse of a Korean military "comfort woman," K, by Japanese soldiers in Asia in a palimpsestic narrative of nostalgic flashbacks. Korean-American Lee seems to be spoken over by critics, who constantly read him as a pastiche of other writers, displacing attention from the political issue of sexual slavery onto the plurality or universality of his voice. I read this ventriloquizing of Lee as mapping onto the gendered subject matter of Lee's novel itself. After all, after interviewing dozens of women in order to tell the story from the point of view of a "comfort woman," Lee chooses an immigrant Japanese man, Doc Hata, for his narrator. I argue that the novel in fact uses this narrative conceit to make a case for the resistance and resilience available under oppression. Instead of reading K as merely the victim—as an allegory for Japan's war crimes in Asia—I examine how K repeatedly chooses silence, creates an alliance with Hata through a shared language, recounts stories, and refuses reproductive futurism. I contend that the novel thus subverts victimhood not by conferring K with the authority of the narrative voice, but by demonstrating how she leverages the various forms of resistance available to a victim with no power. Splitting itself by straddling two time lines, with one foot in the fantasy of Cheever's suburban America, written almost in the mode of wish-fulfilment, and the other foot firmly in the trenches of the Pacific Theater of World War 2, *A Gesture Life* makes it difficult to make allowances for becoming distracted by fantasy or aesthetics. By examining the motif of the

suffering female as mute and reified art objects (sculpture, painting) in the novel through the work of feminist theorists such as Barbara Johnson, I argue for ways in which K is not merely an allegory for history, but a figure advocating a distinct form of resistance.

My final chapter, "An Act of Faith: Feminism as Writing, Communitarianism, and Mutual Constitution in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*," reads Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being,* which tells the story of the earnest sixteen year-old Nao Yasutani from California who moves to Tokyo. Relentlessly tortured by bullies in school, and grappling with her father's multiple suicide attempts, the beleaguered teenager contemplates suicide herself. We learn of Nao's tribulations analeptically through our narrator who picks up Nao's diary in Canada where it has passed through the Great Pacific Trash Vortex and washed ashore after the 2011 tsunami in Japan. The novel is ambitious to say the least, reaching across time, space, and more—from the Second World War to Zen Buddhism to love hotels; from Tokyo to California to British Columbia—and critics remark on this as a formidable attempt to connect disparate threads on a global and international scale. Setting aside readings that focus on globalization, I argue that the most expansive, imaginative, and ultimately, redemptive connections the novel makes articulate a profoundly feminist and communitarian politics. Through Nao's earnest lens, trite stereotypes of Japan such as suicidal salarymen and kamikaze pilots are made sympathetic. Against the men in her life who seem to have a drive for death, Nao, through her kinship with her feminist-anarchist grandmother, ultimately finds the strength not to die, but to live. The novel is deeply interested in the relationship between reading and writing, the reader and the writer, and Ozeki throws the bond between reader and writer into dynamic relation with one another and shows the complex ways that both are mutually constituting. Within

this structure of good faith, "speaking for" or "giving voice" can become a generous posture of sincerity rather than an act of violence. These "acts of faith" are more capacious and rely on the diversity and plurality of the bonds of kinship and community. I show how the imaginative power of the novel lies not in its ability to connect across space, but in the redemptive and generative potential of female bonds and the bonds of community.

Barbara Johnson argues that "Rhetoric is the domain of male self-difference reframed as universality. If masculinity establishes, explores, and interests itself as that which is constantly differing from itself, it arises out of the replacement of sexual difference by self-difference. But this does not mean that the replacement can simply be reversed: masculine privilege is enforced precisely by male femininity" (Johnson 127). In fact, "not only are women writers "monstrous" for transgressing onto male territory; transgression itself—impiety, indecency, political and theoretical assertiveness—is here designated the exclusive property of the male spirit. And the male spirit is owed the respect due a god" (103). This is why and how narrators such as Humbert Humbert and Doc Hata are able to pass as victims by using a simpering, self-abasing tone that nonetheless—or because of it—is able to parade itself as Truth. Indeed it is "in this male two-step—the axe wielder plus the manipulative sufferer, *both* of whom see themselves as powerless—that patriarchal power lies" (Johnson 153).

Barbara Johnson puts forth that literature is ultimately important for feminism because "literature can best be understood as the place where impasses can be kept and opened for examination, where questions can be guarded and not forced into a premature validation of the available paradigms" (13). In other words, literature "is not to be understood as a predetermined set of works but as a mode of cultural work, the work of

giving-to-read those impossible contradictions that *cannot yet be spoken*" (my emphasis, Johnson 13). There may be power in speech, but we must not do those who cannot yet speak a disservice by consigning them to *powerlessness* because of their *speechlessness*. The power of literature lies in fact in this potentiality—of making available to read something that is not said or has not yet been spoken— and it is the aim of this project to mine it.

Literature, then, is conceived as active work—not merely as an oeuvre but as a mode; not as a canon but a process; not a body of work but a *working through*. I am interested in the texts I have selected for the "sense of life their forms themselves embody—the shape of the text as it addresses its imagined reader, what sort of readerly activity is built into the form" (Nussbaum 4). But the texts I am looking at theorize a method of ethical reading that also goes beyond those proposed by ethical thinkers such as Rorty or Nussbaum, who argue that literature should be championed for granting the "ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself or one of one's loved ones" (5). It is difficult to hope today that public reasoning can be modelled as novel-reading; it is not good enough just to read. Ultimately, a text like Ozeki's *A Tale for A Time Being* structures a way of not just reading and writing in the world, but of *acting* in the world. Culture and literature cannot be produced nor *felt* outside of embodied experiences and is therefore always already political. It is therefore important in my dissertation for the final turn of the screw to also be a to turn to a female writer whose novel is one that repeatedly attempts to approximate a responsible way of "giving voice," the multiplicity of attempts itself revealing the impossibility of the project and therefore also the importance of the continued endeavor.

It can be good to speak; it can be bad to speak: what, then, do feminists want? The answer is far from clear, but at least it might be possible to conclude that to be differently empowered does not have to mean: to be empowered *as* different. The feminists deconstructionists such as Johnson and Spivak are helpful in illuminating this. If silence is often (accurately) cast as having a lack of agency, it nonetheless does not necessarily follow that speech is the requisite of agency. After all, to use Spivak's words, "one cannot put together a "voice"" (93). It may be true: the subaltern cannot speak; "The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (104). Within speech and beyond speech, it might yet be possible to imagine what it might mean to be empowered differently and otherwise.

"it's strange…but some critics seem to treat the text the same way Humbert treats Lolita: they only see themselves and what they want to see"…I mean, the censors, or some of our politicized critics, don't they do the same thing, cutting up books and re-creating them in their own image?
Reading Lolita in Tehran, Azar Nafisi

And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, "Poor little girl," or, "Poor baby," but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils.
The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison

"If one were quite sincere with oneself": The Immanent Politics at the Surface of *Lolita*

The difficulty Nabokov faced in getting *Lolita* published is perhaps the clearest testament to the scandal at the heart of one of the 20th century's most famous novels. It was finally published in Paris in 1955 by Olympia Press, a publishing house that had a reputation for its pornographic content. *Lolita* was largely dismissed as a piece of smut, until Graham Greene rescued the novel from obscurity and disrepute when he proclaimed it one of the best books of the year, inciting a harsh response from John Gordon, editor of the London *Sunday Express,* who called it "the filthiest book he had ever read," and "sheer unrestrained pornography" (Boyd, *American* 295). But in the years since, liberal critics in the academy have worked hard to redeem *Lolita,* as if embarrassed for having been too quick to dismiss the novel as filthy, and for having been out-smarted, in a sense, by a showy Russian émigré. Chastised by Graham Greene's comment for their myopia and quick judgment, early criticism on the novel was diligent in remarking on its aesthetics, referencing Nabokov's stylistic virtuosity and masterful wielding of the English language.

I argue in this chapter that the bulk of liberal criticism on *Lolita*, while certainly important and compelling, often abstracts away from the specific and particular crimes at

the core of the novel—the abuse and silencing of Dolores Haze. *Lolita* has been variously read as a Cold War novel, a Program Era novel, a road trip novel, an aesthetic novel and even an ethical one, but such analyses continue to dwell on the ever-present narrative voice of the pedophile, instead of excavating the voice of Dolores Haze.

I borrow from Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's discussion of surface reading and symptomatic reading as a means to frame how literary critics have often read *Lolita*. In the abstract of the special issue of *Representations*, Best and Marcus contrast surface reading with symptomatic reading, which is given as a specific type of interpretation that "took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter" (1). Their definition of surface reading "broadens the scope of critique to include the kinds of interpretive activity that seek to understand the complexity of literary surfaces—surfaces that have been rendered invisible by symptomatic reading" (1). It is this action of "render[ing] invisible" that I hone in on, or rather the structural relationship between surface and symptomatic reading in which the dominance of the latter practice tends to occlude what might seriously be offered in the practice of the former. In this chapter I will demonstrate how the privileging of largely symptomatic readings by liberal critics have eclipsed certain "surface meanings" in *Lolita* that are equally important.

My aim is not to advocate for or privilege either surface or symptomatic reading—I do not think they are mutually exclusive, and can even be mutually engendering— but rather to highlight how the two are in tension with one another in treatments of *Lolita* and

to meditate on what the nature of this tension might reveal about our reading practices.[1] What I refer to as symptomatic readings in this chapter are readings of *Lolita* that produce allegorical interpretations, and also readings that analyze syntactical details of the novel in order to produce an interpretation that aligns with a certain type of liberal ideology. To that end, Nabokov's prose is undeniably ripe and juicy for symptomatic reading: the countless

[1] To be clear, while this chapter borrows the terms from the polemical Best and Marcus essay, I am not using the terms "surface reading" and "symptomatic reading" strictly in the terms Best and Marcus have laid out. To begin with, I believe Best and Marcus mean to challenge the notion of "surface" and "symptomatic reading" as a binary, and the rest of the essays in the issue take up this call. Marcus's own example of surface reading (surface reading as literal meaning) as one that treats female friendships as *just that* is heavily reliant on a historicization of social relations and is a reading that takes a strongly historicist approach, which is, in Best and Marcus's outline, an iteration of symptomatic reading. This slippage can be seen in other articles raised as examples of surface or symptomatic reading as well. Jane Gallop's "Close Encounters: The Ethics of Close Reading," for example, does not adhere only to the notion of surface reading as described in the abstract. Her call for attention to details in the text, to stylistic difference, to assonance and consonance, etc., are by no means a call to ignore plot, history, or context. In these ways, surface and symptomatic reading can often be confused with each other, can slip from one into the other, and one often produces the other. It is for this reason that I make clear that my own usage of these terms acknowledges and takes as a given this uneasy irreducibility.

clues and allusions proliferate and spiral out into an infinite number of rabbit holes one could disappear down, and the diligent critic will find that the material can be milked for endless delectable interpretations. Such interpretive delights are, of course, the fuel for the literary critic's engine and the reason, we argue, that literature is important. After all, the critical thinking required to do such interpretative work is the lifeblood of the humanities. Such close reading skills teach us to cultivate a keen sense of our surroundings, a curiosity about others, and the power of empathy. When I refer to surface reading here, I mean a reading that takes into seriously into account what is happening at the level of plot—the sexual abuse which is the central crime in the novel. While by no means advocating for a biographical approach, by surface reading, I also mean a reading that looks seriously at the author's socio-political past and personal history, acknowledging and addressing their race, nationality, immigrant experience, and historical circumstance in order to reveal another dimension to the novel's politics that may be hidden in plain sight. Ultimately I aim to expose how a novel like *Lolita* seems to actively encourage symptomatic reading, which can impede a surface reading that may appear at times too obvious or too painful. This dominance of symptomatic reading over surface reading appears to be a prevailing aspect in novels that can be categorized as World Literature by certain immigrant writers. The desire for a transcendent symptomatic reading (often manifested as ethical, affective, or cosmopolitan readings) in World Literature texts often either abstract away from a writer's race or nationality, or reduce their writers to it. I then turn to *Pnin,* written and published while Nabokov was trying to find a publisher for *Lolita*. Pnin, as the Russian émigré figure, has more obvious similarities with Nabokov than Humbert Humbert does—the novel displays its politics more plainly and lends itself more easily to a biographical comparison

with its author. Research into Nabokov's personal history, his exile, his father's work as a criminal lawyer, among other things, corroborates this similarity between Nabokov and Pnin and the ways in which the politics discussed in *Pnin* echoes Nabokov's own. Paying attention to *Pnin* this way shrinks the God-like author of *Lolita* down to size and in so doing, reveals what gets lost in symptomatic readings that aim to transcend the author and that tend to take either a formalist approach, or perform overly reductive "surface readings" of the authors themselves. This will be more explicitly observed in my following chapters on British Japanese author Kazuo Ishiguro, Korean American author Chang Rae Lee, and American Canadian author Ruth Ozeki.

Blinded by Style: The Distracting Pleasure of Reading Nabokov's Aesthetics

Nabokov's unmistakable and heavily laden style has caused some critics to believe that he is *all style* and no content—or rather, no politics. Nabokov's prose baits literary critics; it is the raw material of our livelihood, and the edge against which we cut our analytical teeth. In other words, it invites symptomatic reading—an irresistible invitation since it yields as much as it suggests for those willing to plumb its depths. Most liberal critics' readings of *Lolita* begin with his style as their point of departure, and others have gone a step further by advancing that Nabokov's content *lies in his style*, that the prose embeds within it an ethical lesson for the "good reader" (to use Nabokov's own words) to uncover. But it is finally his style that drowns out Dolores Haze's voice, killing her a second time. After all, Humbert ominously forewarns, "you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (9).

But if close reading is meant to be good for us—on good faith, making us good

readers—by bringing us thus *closer* to people we should sympathize with,[2] I argue that in *Lolita*, the seduction of close reading can bring us *too close* such that we no longer have the critical distance with which to see. Pulled beneath the surface of the text, into its depths, as it were, one can lack orientation, needing to break the surface again in order to regain perspective. In the case of *Lolita,* close reading in fact often aligns us more and more with Humbert, Nabokov's cruel narrator. The argument liberal critics make in relation to this is that the ethical upshot of what might seem an *unethical* position is we belatedly learn the error of our ways so that we are schooled by the force of remorse which is felt twofold. True enough, we hardly register the incidents of rape—or if we do, not quite *how many*—on the first reading. But what can it mean when in the process of equipping ourselves with the skills and ethical sensibilities to pay attention to girls such as Dolores Haze, we realize that we have forsaken Dolores Haze herself?

Where attention to what I'm calling the literal or surface reading of the novel (the abuse of an adolescent girl) is given, it is superficial, and being in fact *in*attentive, misreads what it sees. I contrast this against a surface reading in which a "surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through" (Best and Marcus 9). What we take away from the figure of the abused girl is only the scandal and salaciousness of the subject matter, and not the tragedy. This can be observed in how the figure of "Lolita" or "a Lolita" (typified into a noun) now largely lives in our collective consciousness, circulated in popular culture as a hypersexualized child-seductress, and has very little resemblance—if any at all—to Dolly Haze. It is the enticing draw of the symptomatic reading that trips up literary critics. The novel, overladen with style, seems

[2] See Gallop

to disproportionately beg a symptomatic reading—or perhaps it is more accurate to say that *critics* are disproportionately drawn to performing the symptomatic reading because it is one that feels most rewarding to the aesthetically minded intellectual. Symptomatic readings of this novel, which are usually allegorical, allows us to partake in the pleasures of style while seeing *through* what is being described, inviting us not to cast a light upon a surface reading so obvious that it hurts the eye to see. Like Claudia and Frieda in *The Bluest Eye,* I search for critics whose close readings may reveal "eyes creased with concern," instead of merely being "disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited" (190).

Scholars such as Pfifer, Trilling, Rorty, de la Durayante, and Amis championed the novel for its use of the aesthetic to produce an ethical experience. Critics have examined Nabokov's style and its two-step operation: it detracts from the horrors performed in the novel, and the process of discovering one has been carelessly blind to suffering embeds an indictment that shocks us into becoming more aware of suffering.[3] Nabokov's aesthetic language alternatingly draws you into its allure and lulls you into a stupor. The novel uses a veiled, aesthetic language to gloss over the perverse events and only alludes to the lewd acts Humbert performs. The aesthete, in the guise of John Ray Jr. in the false foreword, after all, cunningly and proudly claims that, "not a single obscene term is to be found in the whole work" (4). Dragunoiu astutely points out that "Nabokov's greatest act of courage lies in Lolita's unsentimental engagement with the promises and limitations of liberalism" (140). Richard Rorty has posited that Nabokov endows his most hated characters with his best gifts in order to first seduce us with aesthetics, and later berate us for our folly. As yet another aesthete Oscar Wilde tells us, "The books that the world calls immoral are the

[3] See Serpell, Rorty, and Trilling

books that show the world its own shame."[4] These books enact an ethical lesson by forcing us to "[reflect] on the possibility that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets—masters of imagery who are content to turn the lives of other human beings into images on a screen, while simply not noticing that these other people are suffering" (Rorty 157). His language softens you with its confessions and also bullies you with its false knowledge and language.

The liberal critics put forth that we are engaged in Nabokov's ethics by being made complicit in Humbert's crime through the act of reading. We are responsible for bringing Humbert into being as he implies in his cry: "Imagine me, dear reader, I shall not exist if you do not imagine me" (129). And indeed Nabokov is capable of creating complicity in the most intimate of ways, right from the outset: C. Namwali Serpell opens her book, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty,* with a fascinating reading of the first lines of *Lolita*. She suggests that these first lines introduce the reader to Humbert in a way that forces a visceral complicity with the narrator. His heavily alliterated description of the speech organs moving to wrap around the name induces in the reader a physical urge to test his hypothesis—"Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta." We, too, want to see where the tongue taps.[5] Right

[4] See Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

[5] Describing how even the very grammar or syntax of sentences can be suffused with their own brand of affect that can "convey a disquiet which runs under what is being said," Denise Riley posits in *Words of Selves* that this affect "might pursue, whisperingly, a perverse or an arteriosclerotic course" (4).

from the beginning, in speaking her name—the name Humbert gave her—we almost speak *as* Humbert.[6] Indeed, only Humbert Humbert calls Dolores Haze "Lolita" in the novel.[7]

"I don't know if you're a detective or a pervert," Sandy says to Jeffrey in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. Reading Nabokov's *Lolita* forces readers to ask themselves the same question. Nabokov's prose notoriously holds countless clues and secrets waiting for the attentive and close reader—detective or pervert—to uncover. Critics have written on the dangers of reading *Lolita* blindly for its aesthetics; Nabokov himself has suggested this in his afterword to the novel, through allusions to certain carefully crafted scenes: if we do not read closely enough, we are just as guilty for being blind to Dolores Haze's suffering and abuse. But reading thus closely—like a good detective—makes perverts of us all. Leland de la Durantaye posits that we, as readers, are complicit in Humbert's terrible acts. Lionel Trilling, one of the earliest supporters of the novel says, we are "seduced" by the eloquence of the narration into a kind of stupor, not registering the awful acts we are witnessing even as we witness them because the prose is so aesthetically beautiful. Humbert "passionately dedicated his remarkable rhetorical resources towards seducing or subduing the reader into an acceptance of, or complicity with, his dark fantasies and darker acts" (Durantaye 95). Therein lies the ethical lesson of the novel: We must see that "What

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[6] In an interview, Nabokov reveals just how deliberate his choice of name was: "For my nymphet I needed a diminutive with a lyrical lilt to it. One of the most limpid and luminous letters is "L". The suffix "-ita" hs a lot of Latin tenderness, and this I required too. Hence: Lolita. However, it should not be pronounced as you and most Americans pronounce it: Low-lee-ta, with a heavy, clammy "L" and a long "o". No, the first syllable should be as in "lollipop", and the "L" liquid and delicate, the "lee" not too sharp. Spaniards and Italians pronounce it, of course, with exactly the necessary note of archness and caress. Another consideration was the welcome murmur of its source name, the fountain name: those roses and tears in "Dolores." My little girl's heartrending fate had to be taken into account together with the cuteness and limpidity. Dolores also provided her with another, plainer, more familiar and infantile diminutive: Dolly, which went nicely with the surname "Haze," where Irish mists blend with a German bunny—I mean, a small German hare" (*Strong Opinions* 25).

[7] The novel also makes us complicit with the narrator by immersing us in his longing for this nymphet. The first and last words of the novel are "Lolita" but those of the movie are "Quilty."

[has been] done is monstrous, let no amount of eloquence ever convince you that such acts are anything but: look at them for what they are, look at them for the pain they cause" (96).

The horror we experience in *reading Lolita* comes from realizing that we have begun to condone the monstrous acts Humbert performs due to the fallacious authority he asserts through his aesthetic *written language*. Nabokov's execution of his virtuoso style is paralyzingly beautiful, or intimidating, almost bullying; we believe we can never attain the same level of linguistic flourish and thus accept his authority. In the novel, Humbert refers to his desire to have sex with Lolita outdoors as his "yearning for rural amours"—a heavily romanticized term for the actual humiliating event (169). That he forces her to perform oral sex on him is only suggested, yet the images that are called to mind are horrifying and appalling—"[her face] so bright with tears, when I used to roll, in play, her tousled head on my knee" (204). It is precisely because he only alludes to these acts and describes them in a deceptively beautiful way that when the cogs of comprehension click into place to form the image he describes in our minds, our horror is directed at ourselves for having believed in the reliability of such a person. We feel more guilt at conjuring up the image than horror at him for implying it. Humbert whines that he "often felt [they] lived in a lighted house of glass […] that the most jaded voyeur would have paid a small fortune to watch" (180). But of course, *we* the readers, are that voyeur—with our noses pressed up to the book.

Rorty explains that "the worst thing [a liberal subject] can do is to be cruel," and that one avoids being cruel by "the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers" (Rorty 136). Rorty believes that certain books "help us become less cruel" by making us aware of how "our private obsessions with the achievement of a certain sort of

perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing" (141). Our gaze, bewitched by the aesthetic language before us, becomes blind to the injustice that is taking place. Here, beauty, by "preoccupying our attention…makes us inattentive and therefore eventually indifferent, to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just" (Scarry 58). Nabokov's prose in *Lolita* is undeniably first-rate and beautiful, his content, chillingly devastating. Rorty suggests that Nabokov imbues his characters—cruel people that he hates[8]—with his own gifts and qualities through the invisible hand of an all-powerful and benevolent creator. Our admiration for Nabokov's skill displayed through Humbert's narration is necessarily altered upon our horror at what Humbert is narrating—conceived, after all, by the self-same creator.

The first line of the foreword is "Lolita, or the confession of a white widowed male." Humbert's manipulation of our judgment on his morality is heavily reliant on the rhetoric of confession—within an imagined court of law—that is premised on an interaction with the reader that only a novel can achieve. As Michel Foucault tells us in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, "the intensity of the confession [renews] the questioner's curiosity; the pleasure discovered [feeds] back to the power that encircled it" (44). We are accountable in Lolita's tragedy because we indulgently read Humbert's confession and perform it in our imaginations (44). His confession is a supplicating act that elevates the reader such that we permit him to continue with his story. In his most elucidating of confessions, Humbert pleads with us, *while flattering us*, saying he "[hopes] [he is] addressing [himself] to unbiased readers" (285). We, of course, permit him to continue and read on—we *believe*

[8] These books enact an ethical lesson by forcing us to "[reflect] on the possibility that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets—masters of imagery who are content to turn the lives of other human beings into images on a screen, while simply not noticing that these other people are suffering" (Rorty 157).

ourselves unbiased readers. Humbert's confession requires the "presence of a partner (his reader) who is…the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile" (Foucault 61). The confession of his sin "exonerates, …and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation" (Foucault 61).

At Hourglass Lake, Humbert delves into detailed description of how he would orchestrate Charlotte Haze's death, but finally sighs that he was unable to bring down the axe. He "[confesses] an inability to perform an action which we condemn and thus [wins] our reluctant admiration both for [his] murderous imagination and his tame morality" through a trick of reverse psychology (Schuman 197). He begs clemency for an act he did not, after all, commit, resulting in an immense bathos associated with his self-professed good-heartedness that is reduced to a mere timid virtue. He declares one day that "[he] perceived all at once with a sickening qualm how much [Lolita] had changed since I first met her two years ago… The fog of all lust had been swept away leaving nothing but this dreadful lucidity. Oh, she had changed!" (204). By bemoaning a withdrawal of beauty that he was never justified in accessing, he victimizes himself and tries to gain some sort of reluctant or misguided sympathy from his readers.

Learning to unmask style for the ugliness it conceals is important, as is learning to be suspicious of cruel individuals despite their penchant for aestheticism. Indeed it is why *Lolita* is ultimately a *good* book rather than a filthy one. Nabokov himself gives us reason to believe that he subscribed to high-standing moral values which he inherited from his father and wanted to imbue his fiction with them. But foregrounding the ethical lesson derived from the aesthetic experience of the novel allows critics to nonetheless indulge in

the style Nabokov offers in dazzling abundance even as they make the case for it as a moral pedagogical device, while they continue to glance away from the central crime.

The Crazy Quilt of Forty-Eight States: Abstraction of Americana as Distraction

That *Lolita* has been so readily taken up in the canon, typically as a novel of 20th century American Literature, reflects the fixing and normalization of the novel and its central subject matter of sexual abuse through symptomatic readings. The novel is more likely to be found on syllabi for survey courses on 20th century American Literature than say, a Women's Studies class, Gender and Sexuality Studies class, or even a Queer Theory class. In fact, it is less likely, too, to show up on a syllabus for a class on immigrant writers even though its author's personal history of migration is more colorful than most.

This is particularly interesting as Nabokov's Russian origins are constantly referenced in any mention of him. Yet Nabokov was genuinely fond of his adopted country and it is likely he wanted his first American novel to reflect this affection. He said that in America he was "happier than in any other country. It is in America that I found my best readers, minds that are closest to mine. I feel intellectually at home in America. It is a second home in the true sense of the word" and was even willing to put his money where his mouth is: "I am an American, I feel American, and I like that feeling. …I pay a US federal income tax on every cent I earn at home or abroad" awkwardly reckoning his feelings of patriotism (*Strong Opinions* 10, 124). In fact, the criticism of *Lolita* that Nabokov found most affronting was that it is "anti-American"("On A Book Entitled Lolita" 315). Nabokov's prose is often exalted for being *more* sophisticated than that of a *native speaker.* In fact, it is always highlighted—both in disbelief and in praise—that Nabokov

wrote *Lolita* not in his native Russian, but in English, his *third* language, as if so flourishing a mastery over a foreign language makes a writer not more credible, but more suspicious. While not quite false, this was in fact a sensational claim: in his memoir *Speak, Memory,* published in the 1950s in several editions, Nabokov made clear that he grew up speaking Russian and English equally fluently.

Lolita is set against the backdrop of the American landscape and in important ways, this Americana allowed critics several angles from which to broach the novel, where before it was dismissed as smut. The good critic, answering Jameson's call to "always historicize!" could produce historical allegorical readings revolving around the postwar relationship between America and the Soviet Union or the violent colonial relationship between the Old World and the New World. Nabokov's harshest denunciation of his hateful character in an attempt to distance him from himself is one that is charged with patriotism and a suspiciously strange political accusation: "my creature Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him" ("On a Book entitled Lolita" 296). This loaded claim has led *Lolita* to be read as a Cold War novel as it was written and published against the backdrop of McCarthyism. Martin Amis reads *Lolita* as an allegory of the totalitarianism that tore apart Nabokov's native Russia, as a story of tyranny told by a tyrant. Indeed, Humbert uses barely veiled attempts to rewrite American laws and statutes in *Lolita* on the false authority of his educated European, old-world persona to absolve himself of culpability. Humbert constantly derides both Charlotte and Dolores Haze's American-ness and pines for his lost European past, highlighting a form of nationalistic nostalgia that can drive the perverse. Even though Nabokov has famously bemoaned his loss of Russian, his native tongue—

"My private tragedy, …is that I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English"—he is notoriously reluctant to participate in political advocacy and debate, and his writing exhibits all the flourish of *style* (*Strong Opinions* 14).

As Nabokov's first English novel set in America, *Lolita* has also commonly been read as a roadtrip novel, the quintessential American fiction genre. Between 1949 and 1959, Nabokov's wife Vera drove the two of them 150, 000 miles across America. In mirroring the trip Humbert Humbert was to take with Dolores Haze, Nabokov offers a portrait of America. The genre of the American roadtrip novel often calls to mind Kerouac's *On the Road,* yet Nabokov has seen more of America than Kerouac, Fitzgerald, and Steinbeck. *Lolita* takes us from noisy Bourbon Street in New Orleans to the quaint Little Iceberg Lake in Colorado, to Thayer Street in Providence. They make their way across the "crazy quilt" of forty-eight states. Nabokov/Humbert Humbert writes not only with the pseudo-authority of an "Old World" European, but also with that of one who has seen the details of America missed by Americans.

Lolita is deliberately punctuated with landmarks and place names—from notable national parks, to obscure motels, traversing both America's physical expanse, and the gulf of its disparate classes. Humbert mobilizes the landscape of America as the backdrop against which he sets his story: "By putting the geography of the United States into motion," he writes, "I did my best for hours on end to give her the impression of 'going places,' of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight. I have never seen such smooth amiable roads as those that now radiated before us, across the crazy quilt of forty-eight states" (152). This invocation of a pastiche of America, woven together "quilt-like,"

has the same dizzying effect on the reader. The reader or critic too has been given the impression of "going places." Finally, despite his drive to keep up the pretense, Humbert admits that their entire journey accrues nothing but junk and suffering. The cruelty that we have been witness to the entire time is likewise unmasked at the end, finally carelessly thrown in with the meaningless travel paraphernalia: "We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. [Our journey] in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night-every night, every night-the moment I feigned sleep" (186). The reader, too, is doubly chastised in realizing that if one had only looked past the dog-eared maps, and tour books, and old tires, one would not only be able to see that Dolores Haze suffered every day she was with Humbert, but that one should have been conscious of it before this point. By following Humbert's impressive, meandering sprawl of the United States, we fail to see the suffering child before our eyes.

America itself becomes a foil to the girl-child who is supposed to be its symbol. Nabokov has protested that he "did not know any American 12-year-old girls, and I did not know America; I had to invent America and Lolita," suggesting that if he invented them simultaneously, each should be symbolic of the other (*Strong Opinions* 26). However, reading symptomatically here, for the America we think Dolores Haze must represent, seems to prevent us from seeing what, or who, is at the surface—Dolores herself.[9]

The Director's Cut: Nabokov's Lolita; Kubrick's Lolita

[9] The attention to the landscape of America is arguably a treatment of the "surface" of the text, but insofar as it is usually then mobilized for an allegorical reading on nationhood, national cultures, or national security, it is still one that ultimately turns to a symptomatic reading. My aim here is not to establish an argument for or against surface or symptomatic reading but rather to point out what is interesting in the tension between the two, and how they compete for the attention of critics.

Yet another aspect of the text that invites a symptomatic reading is the use of allusions to film. Part of the flourish of Nabokov's writing lies in its almost cinematic quality, but what is more obviously at the surface is the text's express wish for sublimation into film. Alfred Appel's *Nabokov's Dark Cinema,* lovingly inventories the many allusions to film in *Lolita*. Numerous to the point of obviousness, and hence obvious that they are more numerous than can be counted, such planted allusions in texts can incite a kind of mania. In alluding to a medium that invokes the logic of "what you see is what you get," it ironically produces the lingering sense that there is always more than meets the eye—in other words, a distrust for what is at the surface.

And such distrust is not unwarranted. Not for nothing does Nabokov use the cinematic and invoke the visual. Through Humbert's begrudging his novelistic mode of constructing a scene for his readers, lamenting the ineffectiveness of the narrative's necessarily linear progression of words to convey the instantaneity of a visual image, and seeking recourse to film, Nabokov highlights to us the different ways in which participating in the act of reading (as opposed to viewing an image) can have private ethical implications. In Charlotte's car accident sequence, Humbert regrets that "[he has] to put the impact of an instantaneous vision into a sequence of words; [because] their physical accumulation in the page impairs the actual flash, the sharp unity of impression" (97). He goes on to describe the many disparate objects and details in that visual frame—"Rug-heap, car, old man-doll, Miss O's nurse…a half-empty tumbler in her hand…two policemen and a sturdy man with tortoise shell glasses"—himself unable to take in all the details at once (97). Humbert struggles with the narrative mode's failure to present the immediate shock of such an image of chaos to his readers. In laying this out, Nabokov shows us that it is precisely

the textual mode, which allows a different kind of visual clarity for readers that implicates them more intimately. The long list of details Humbert puts on the page in front of readers allows them to digest the information and reconstruct the scene for themselves in their mind's eye. Just as a viewer (Humbert) could not absorb every detail in a flash of an image, and whose eyes must travel across the frame in order to collect details, our eyes as readers, too, travel across the page, picking up pieces of information in order to recreate a holistic picture. The novel insists on the reader's active participation in bringing the events in the novel to life. This epistemology is opposed to that of film in that the film viewer is a passive receptacle of an endless barrage of images and information. If a scene is not shown, it is easy to forget what was alluded to due to the onslaught of images; if an offensive scene is shown, it can easily be disavowed as the product of someone *else's* (the producers' or directors') perverse imagination. As such, the moral and ethical implication of conjuring private and exclusive images in our imaginations is far greater than simply being relentlessly fed horrible images because we are forced to take ownership of the images we conjure up in our own minds—the guilt is our own.

Humbert professes an aspiration to film at the same time that he recognizes his reliance on the ways in which the textual form lends itself to manipulation. Humbert's first-person narration is handicapping and enables the narrative to achieve an instantaneity that is not necessarily attainable in other media. At the Enchanted Hunters hotel, we are brought through his mental deliberations with him, step by step—"I again chose the stairs. 342 was near the fire escape. One could still—but the key was already in the lock, and then I was in the room" (127). The short, succinct, matter-of-fact sentences pull us along beside him. We are subsumed into his solipsistic existence so we do not realize (just as he claims not

to realize) that "the key was already in the lock" and when he finds himself in the room, we are right there with him. Later, he ironically references the instantaneity conveyed through visual cinematic representation even as he mimics it through his handicapping narration—"I seemed to have shed my clothes…with the kind of fantastic instantaneousness which is implied when in a cinematographic scene the process of changing is cut; and I had already placed my knee on the edge of the bed…" (218). The semicolon acts as the mimetic textual manifestation of the cinematic "cut" to the moment where Humbert's knee is already on the edge of the bed. The implication of these two scenes is that we think we learn of things at exactly the same time that Humbert does, when he, in fact, completely manipulates our knowledge of what is happening. Since his perspective is the only one we can anchor ourselves to, we must comply to a certain degree with this system of incomplete knowledge even as we come to realize his efforts to manipulate our understanding of events.

The allusions Humbert makes to movies and his futile desire for his narration to be sublimated into film serve to distract from his intractable manipulation of rhetoric and imagery in the text. He heavily regrets and berates himself for not having filmed Lolita—"Idiot, triple idiot! I could have filmed her!...That I could have had all [of] her … immortalized in segments of celluloid, makes me moan to-day with frustration" (231). However, this is simply his way of qualifying his actions and presenting a fallaciously innocent image of himself. He earlier acquits himself of his guilt by concluding that his act of masturbating with her on his lap "affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen…" (62). Reducing Lolita to an abstract two-dimensional image allows Humbert to proceed inculpably with his increasingly horrendous acts of

indecency. At times he even imagines himself to be the towering romantic hero of movie shows: imagining that he is "a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood" (39). He glamorizes his intentions by aligning them with how they might be portrayed in movies—"I ought to have hit her across the cheekbone according to the rules of the movies"—as if such actions would be less criminal in the dramatic, sensational realm of cinema (29-30). He deludes himself—or us—when he assumes Lolita must be enjoying herself, thinking that she "even close[s] her eyes as Hollywood teaches" to *perform* her pleasure for him (48). The filmic mode seems to be an endless resource of rhetorical justification for Humbert to continue to perform acts so perverse that they are ironically *unshowable*. Despite Kubrick's proclamations, the film does seem to intentionally showcase certain sexual behaviors deemed "sex perversions" by the Hollywood Production Code, which serve to dilute the scandal of the central Lolita-Humbert relationship. The tagline "How Did They Ever Make A Film Of Lolita?" references the producers' awareness of the novel's notorious and scandalous subject matter; the untellable story is implied in the comment's expression of alarm at an attempt to portray it. The audience enters the theater already expecting scandal and the film in turn manipulates this heightened watchfulness in its audience. These inclusions of different "sexual perversions" detract from the Lolita-Humbert central tension of the story, making it more tolerable or less aberrant—it is after all cloaked in the guise of the familiar familial father-daughter relation.

Humbert, as the narrator-director, requires a distorting lens to tell his story—"It is a question of focal adjustment, of a certain distance that the inner eye thrills to surmount, and a certain contrast that the mind perceives with a gasp of perverse delight" (17). But that distorting lens, that focal adjustment, is aesthetic and tied to its remarkably beautiful

textual execution; it is Humbert's textually constructed character, *through* whom readers become acquainted with the story of Lolita. We might hear Barthes say here: "Unless for some perverts, the sentence is a *body?*" (Barthes 51). One of the most lucid, glistening moments of clarity in the novel, in which Humbert acknowledges simply, with no excuses, that he understood the cruelty of his actions, requires a narrative flashback that recasts earlier moments of "bliss" as moments of horror and is profoundly textual. Near the end of the novel he seems finally able to see clearly and distills the simple fact that "With the utmost simplicity and clarity I now saw myself and my love. Previous attempts seemed out of focus in comparison" (282). He now realizes flatly that "a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac" (283). It is only at this point when he finally "sees" her clearly, that he returns her name to her.

Lolita's Voice

The abiding attention to Nabokov's style and distinctive narrative voice in order to produce what may be called symptomatic readings, often means that not only do critics look through or past the surface, they barely register the surface at all. Such carelessness manifests itself on two counts: an obliviousness to what is at the surface, and an incuriosity about what is not—equally poignant and meaningful gaps, elisions, and omissions, the most obvious of which is Dolores Haze's own voice.

Lolita's most distinctive feature is the impassioned voice of its first-person narrator, Humbert Humbert. But this element also occasions and sustains the novel's central tragedy: the absence of Dolores Haze's voice from a story about her. Even though the plot of the novel is driven by Humbert's passion for Dolores Haze, and indeed, even though the novel

is titled "Lolita," we only ever hear her voice through a trick of prosopopoeia. The lilting cadence of Nabokov's meticulously chosen hypocorism, "Lolita," notwithstanding, naming the novel "Dolores" would have given the game away: In Spanish, "Dolores" means "pain."

In recent years, Azar Nefisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has brought the novel into the spotlight once again and provided the occasion for a feminist lens to be applied—albeit secondarily—to the text. In Nefisi's novel, she gives the message of *Lolita* simply: "The desperate truth of *Lolita*'s story is *not* the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but *the confiscation of one individual's life by another*" (33). Indeed, it is during one of the most heart-wrenching moments in the novel that we become privy (through Humbert's eavesdropping) to Dolores Haze's most intimate fears: death and loneliness. "You know, what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own" (284). It is only then that we realize that Humbert's solipsistic narration had deprived the expression of the child's subjectivity: "and it struck me…that I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile cliches, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions…" (284). Nabokov's own biggest regret was the loss of the use of his native tongue; in *Lolita,* he robs Dolores Haze of her voice. At the end of the novel, in one of the novel's most limpid moments, when Humbert is listening to the sound of children laughing in a playground, he states his heartbreaking realization simply: "I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from

that concord" (308). Dolores Haze's voice is similarly absent from the novel—what we hold in our hands is "the confessions of a white widowed male."

Her name invokes immediately images of pigeon-toed feet, frilly-socked and wrapped in Mary-Janes, legs alternatingly knock-kneed or butterflied open—all of which have been used on the cover of *Lolita*. Yet, the name of Nabokov's most famous character is not Lolita at all. It is Dolores Haze, ironically though tragically masked by the *haze* of pop culture, advertising, scandal, perversion, and palimpsestically, by the haze of layers and layers of the novel's many paratexts—its fake foreword by John Ray Jr., the afterword, and even its cover. Nabokov initially did not want any part of his nymphet to be portrayed on the cover of the novel—he had wanted "a sunset above a receding road" and "no little girls"[10] (*Selected Letters* 250). Instead, she circulates culturally, and in our minds, in the images of heart-shaped glasses and lollipop-stained lips instead of Nabokov's initial imagined image—one known to few, and nowhere represented. Like Nabokov's lost image, *Lolita,* devastatingly, begins with its end in sight. Of course, only Nabokov could render so beautifully the tragedy of *Lolita*. That a little girl, Dolores Haze is brought on a roadtrip, where she grows up, in more ways than one, on the road—belies the sad fact that this is no vacation, and the road leads nowhere redemptive: they hurtle only towards the distant setting sun.

Barbara Johnson argues in "Muteness Envy" that women are silent about two things: their pleasure and their violation. She suggests that "the work performed by the

[10] "I want pure colors, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain. And no girls." He also said, "Who would be capable of creating a romantic, delicately drawn, non-Freudian and non-juvenile, picture for LOLITA (a dissolving remoteness, a soft American landscape, a nostalgic highway—that sort of thing)? There is one subject which I am emphatically opposed to: any kind of representation of a little girl." (Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940-1977* 250)

idealization of this silence is that *it helps culture not to be able to tell the difference between the two*" (137).[11] True enough, in a story about pedophilia and abuse, which Vanity Fair unabashedly touts "the most convincing love story of our century"—a quotation which Random House merrily slaps on the novel's 50th anniversary cover right next to a pair of sealed and silent lips—we never once get to hear Dolores Haze's voice. Paul de Man defines prosopopoeia as "the fiction of an apostrophe to a…voiceless entity… Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope's name, *prosopon poien,* to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*)" (Paul de Man). And it is in this way that Humbert Humbert constructs a voice and a subject for Dolores Haze—one that serves only to highlight her silence.

Surface reading as literal meaning: *The Enchanter* and Sally Horner

Nabokov offers two instances to consider in which we could "see" what it might mean to look at the surface of *Lolita* and take it literally: the first iteration of *Lolita* in the form of the recovered, and posthumously translated manuscript, *The Enchanter,* and an embedded reference to the real-life story of Sally Horner.

The "first little throb" of Lolita manifested itself as the short story *The Enchanter,* translated by Nabokov's son Dimitri, about a middle-aged man who marries a dying woman in order to get closer to her young daughter. Conceived in Hitler's Berlin in the 1930s and produced in Paris, Nabokov did not publish the story and thought it had been destroyed. The idea returned to him in the 1940s, with the notion of turning the story from third person to first. Where *The Enchanter* has a zany tenor to its prose and ends on a

[11] In *The Enchanter,* the narrator decides self-congratulatorily that he "would make no attempt on her virginity in the tightest and pinkest sense of the term," he muses that he "would hold back until that morning when, still laughing, she would hearken to her own responsiveness and, *growing mute*, demand that the search for the hidden musical string be made jointly" (*The Enchanter* 56).

dizzying frenzied haste, the protagonist literally tripping over himself before being torn asunder, *Lolita* starts by starting over, tapping out lightly, this time in the first person, a syncopated rhythm we will learn to keep pace with. *The Enchanter* is an almost identical story—indeed like Annabel Leigh to Dolores Haze, it was *Lolita*'s precedent. Yet crucially, the protagonist of *The Enchanter* does not incite sympathy or identification in the same way that Humbert does. The protagonist is *too* crude, too *obvious*—too deliberate and conniving; identification and forgiveness become impossible.

In *Lolita,* Humbert wonders offhandedly: "Had I done to Dolly, perhaps, what Frank La Salle, a fifty-year-old mechanic, had done to eleven-year-old Sally Horner in 1948?" The Sally Horner story on which *Lolita* is loosely based renders the moral quandary we face in the novel moot: in 1948, Sally Horner stole a 5-cent notebook from a bookstore, and, anxious with guilt, readily succumbs to the threats of the wily and opportunistic Frank La Salle, and is abducted, abused, and raped on the road for 21 months. If a reader had been curious enough about the Sally Horner case, they would invariably have been yanked out of their stupor and shocked at recognizing the abuse they had been witness to in reading *Lolita*; if they had not, they would belatedly be charged for their careless and cruel incuriosity and similarly shocked at their inability to recognize evil. We understand instantly that to say Sally Horner's "punishment" was wildly incommensurate to her "crime" is an understatement. Consequently, we cannot despise Frank La Salle enough. Yet how is it that Humbert, who references Horner when he questions if he has been no different from that monster (he has not), is able to seduce us so fully—if briefly—even right from his opening words? Before we begin to read those enticing, famous "first" lines of the novel, we presumably already know that we are reading the words of a killer and a rapist (as John

Ray Jr.'s foreword precedes this first page), and further, that to read the book knowing the conditions of its publication, is to know that Dolores Haze has died. Nabokov thus illuminates and casts a shadow on how liberal literary critics choose to approach texts. Knowing that we are about to apprehend the words of a monster, do we nonetheless willingly take the tumble, trip down his aural steps, give ourselves over to the beauty of his prose?

It is ultimately the seduction of style that causes certain symptomatic reading practices finally to reveal their fatal flaw. One of the novel's earliest supporters, Lionel Trilling, confusingly calls it a great love story. I turn to a small moment of incongruence in an interview. During a "live" taped interview for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation with Lionel Trilling,[12] Nabokov reads his responses from his index cards, as he is wont to do, stuttering awkwardly, while Trilling, cigarette in hand, coolly smokes. In some ways, Trilling was Nabokov's ideal critic, as he was himself a writer—the "artist-reader" in Nabokov's words—and Nabokov respected and welcomed Trilling's thoughts. At one point in the interview, Trilling interjects to say, "You can't trust a creative writer to say what he has done; he can say what he meant to do. And even then, we don't have to believe him." Nabokov chortles good-naturedly, but concedes the point. Then, Trilling, who had written on the shocking lesson of *Lolita* as one that shows us our capacities for misrecognition and the harsh moral imperative not to condone "revolting" acts, inexplicably insists that *Lolita* is a love story. This suggestion seems starkly incongruous with previous statements. His defense of his statement is weak and insincere: all love stories worth their salt have to be "scandalous" and about the forbidden.

[12] See Sarah Fay, *The Paris Review*; See also "Vladimir Nabokov discusses "Lolita" part 1 of 2," *Youtube,* uploaded by JiffySpook 13 March 2008. https://youtu.be/Ldpj_5JNFoA.

Trilling previously identified the moral dilemma of reading Lolita as such: "we find ourselves the more shocked when we realize that, in the course of reading the novel, we have come virtually to condone the violation it presents [...] we have been seduced into conniving in the violation, because we have permitted our fantasies to accept what we know to be revolting" ("The Last Lover" 18). Trilling's statement seems straightforward enough and as a liberal reading, finds much in common with Rorty's reading: we realize we have been careless and complicit, and feel chastised upon realizing that we have partaken in the awfulness that is Dolores Haze's fate. It is worthwhile to try to unpack Trilling's statement a little further. He suggests, "we have been seduced into conniving in the violation." But *what* have we been seduced by? Presumably Nabokov's style, if "what we know to be revolting" is the "violation it presents," in other words, the sexual abuse. And if we have connived in the violation because we have "*permitted* our fantasies" to accept the thing we know to be revolting, then what exactly *is* the stuff of our fantasies? If our fantasies needed to be permitted to accept the revolting fact of abuse, could Trilling be suggesting that we have in fact been seduced not by style, but *by the story of an abused girl*? The answer, I would venture, is yes and no. Mining the style of the text is seductive, and allows a reader to proceed without culpability. The story of a European professor and his obsession with a precocious girl-child is *also* seductive, but to recognize it plainly as pedophilia, deprives one of the pleasures that the style on display proffers, for one could not admit the seduction of sexual abuse and go on. If both the symptomatic reading and surface reading are seductive, it is the accurate recognition of the surface reading that serves up a moral injunction to pleasure. An ethical quandary is set up, then, in the tension between the two forms of reading available because privileging one, knowing the other, *permits* (to borrow

Trilling's term) us to engage in pleasurable reading practices while consciously ignoring the types of readings that make ugliness and evil immediately apparent. Perhaps *this* is also "what we know to be revolting"—the biases in our reading practices and why we permit them. The seduction of symptomatic readings then colludes with the critic's desire to indulge in the seduction of style to produce an irresponsible "surface reading": that *Lolita* is *simply* a love story. Nabokov's hall of mirrors allows critics to absolve themselves of a particular responsibility—that of paying attention to a particular crime as they lose themselves unraveling what is at heart an intellectual game of cat and mouse. It is not merely a question, then, of reading well (symptomatically or at the surface), but also of the different readings available to us—the readings we choose to follow and those we do not. It is a question of how we process and proceed with what is at the surface of the text—both the style and the apparent subject matter.

To call *Lolita* a love story is to misread the novel and Dolores Haze in problematic ways. Humbert, our unreliable narrator, plants excuses for himself such that the reader, too, can excuse him or herself from viewing the novel as, first and foremost, about sexual abuse. Lee Edelman says, of the queer child, that "the cult of the Child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness, for contemporary culture… is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end" (Edelman 19). While Dolores Haze is not necessarily "queer," she appears *queer* for what is made to seem like her abnormal precociousness. Humbert tells us he is not her first lover and we learn that she "played games" with boys at camp which marks the point from which we cease to view Dolores

Haze as a child. Nabokov deeply despised Humbert Humbert and thought him undeniably hateful and felt strongly about making this explicit.[13]

At Trilling's gaffe, the awkward, stuttering Nabokov gets worked up into spontaneity, discards his index cards, and sitting up on the edge of his seat, counters that not all love stories have to be terrible, or forbidden, or perverse, but that quiet romances and unassuming happiness are equally the stuff of love stories: "There have always existed, in novels, as in life, relationships between people which have ordinary lives in Europe or America who have passionate love… which may be termed passionate love, glamorous love, within the terms of normal marriage." In this way Nabokov distinguishes himself from Humbert: he calls the bluff on the sublime in art and love—that they need be dramatic to be worthy of attention—and exposes the dangerous ways beauty and scandal can conceal very terrible things. He insists instead on dwelling on the ordinary and the everyday.

This view is echoed by Vera, Nabokov's beloved wife, to whom the novel is dedicated and who was the first to read every word he wrote. Vera Nabokov may well be the Vivian Darkbloom (an anagram of "Vladmir Nabokov," of course) to Nabokov's Clare Quilty: a seemingly silent, but intimate coconspirator. She drove him thousands of miles across the United States and read and typed up every word he wrote and even famously saved *Lolita* from destruction when Nabokov tossed the manuscript into the trash. She was the guardian of Nabokov's archives after his passing and granted access to few—Brian Boyd who wrote the biography of Nabokov was one such person. If we were to imagine a

[13] To Herbert Gold, who suggested that what went on between Humbert and Lolita wasn't much different from, say, the relationships between middle-aged movie moguls and young starlets, Nabokov responded sharply, wanting to make clear Humbert's evil and perversion: "Humbert was fond of 'little girls'–not simply 'young girls.' Nymphets are girl-children, not starlets and 'sex kittens.'" See *Paris Review* Summer-Fall 1967, Interview with Herbert Gold "Vladimir Nabokov: The Art of Fiction No. 40"

female voice guiding the pen of Nabokov, it would be to Vera Nabokov's.[14] In fact she was his wife, muse, and ideal reader; his secretary, typist, editor, proofreader, translator, and bibliographer; his agent, business manager, legal counsel, and chauffeur; his research assistant, teaching assistant, and professorial understudy (Boyd, *Russian* 215). She chides "critics [who] prefer to look for moral symbols, justification, condemnation, or explanation of HH's predicament…" and instead expresses a wish for greater *attention* to the less salacious aspects of the novel:

> I wish, though, somebody would notice the tender description of the child's helplessness, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH, and her heartrending courage all along culminating in that squalid but essentially pure and healthy marriage, and her letter, and her dog. And that terrible expression on her face when she had been cheated by HH out of some little pleasure that had been promised. They all miss the fact that the 'horrid little brat' Lolita is essentially very good indeed—or she would not have straightened out after being crushed so terribly, and found a decent life with poor Dick more to her liking than the other kind. (qtd. in Nafisi 40)[15]

Such moments that Vera points to are right there on the page for the reader to see, stripped even of Nabokov's signature euphemism and style, and yet tend to be missed—or

[14] Within the first couple of months of their courtship, Nabokov writes to Vera telling her that "[he] cannot write a word without hearing how you will pronounce it." See *Letters to Vera*

[15] The "squalid but essentially pure and healthy marriage" may be, for Vera, reminiscent of her own 52-year long marriage to Nabokov. Despite Nabokov's "sky-filling adoration and a helpless dependency" on Vera, for 30 years, money did not come easy and they lived on tight purse strings. Early in their marriage Vera left for seven weeks to a sanitarium due to depression and anxiety and Nabokov wrote to her every day, determined to love her back to health. See Martin Amis; See *Letters to Vera*

ignored— by readers with even the keenest eyes. Moments like the one described earlier, of Humbert listening to "her sobs in the night-every night, every night-the moment I feigned sleep" (186). Or when he took advantage of her again, monstrously, after telling her that her mother had died, concluding part one of the novel—"in the middle of the night she came sobbing into [my room], and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (142). Such painfully stark moments are not in fact concealed, and require no interpretive work to excavate, and when acknowledged, make it difficult for an allegorical reading of the novel to be privileged.

Further, *Lolita*'s theme and conception resonate very much with precisely the work Nabokov's father did that led to their exile. V.D. Nabokov trained as a criminal lawyer and specialized in sexual crime. He controversially campaigned for the rights of homosexuals and the protection of children. He was an outspoken advocate of liberal reform, publishing regularly in the radical press both inside and outside Russia.[16] He taught at the School of Jurisprudence and his legal writings, in which he tried to humanize the struggle with crime, established him as one of the leading Russian criminologists of his time. V.D. Nabokov defended "[h]omosexuals, ex-convicts, vagrants, Jews, the politically suspect" against the oppression of the law (Boyd, *Russian* 28). His study of sexual crime was the best thing on the subject in Russian: the father of the man who conceived *Lolita* and Kinbote of *Pale Fire* strongly supported increased protection for the underage and criticized continued punishment for homosexual acts between consenting adults. Nabokov revered his father throughout his life and derived his moral standards from him (61). He has said that "My father was an old-fashioned liberal, and I do not mind being labeled an old-fashioned liberal

[16] See Barbara Wylie, *Vladimir Nabokov*

too" (*Strong Opinions* 96). Nabokov deeply respected and loved his father, whom he saw as the man who taught him the moral "principles passed down from father to son, from generation to generation" (Boyd, *Russian* 12).

Pnin

Despite his claims of apoliticism, Nabokov in fact stayed up to date with Russian politics and kept company with many other Russian emigres during his years of exile. While working on *Lolita,* Nabokov started writing *Pnin,* the novel which most closely reflects Nabokov's own experience as a Russian émigré professor in America and which most pointedly addresses the political history in Russia and Europe. Reading *Pnin* alongside *Lolita* offers a way of getting out of Nabokov's aesthetic bubble. Like Nabokov, both Pnin and Humbert Humbert are Russian intellectual émigrés to America. But this is where their similarities end. Pnin seems a Jekyll to Humbert Humbert's Hyde; the angel to his devil. Where Humbert Humbert is sneaky, manipulative, and self-centered, Pnin is righteous, forthright, and honorable. In contrast to *Lolita, Pnin* lends itself more easily to a historical or biographical reading.

Pnin's personal history very closely parallels Nabokov's own. Nabokov was close to finishing the manuscript of *Lolita* when he began work on *Pnin,* following the comic-tragedy about the life of an émigré Russian professor as a series of unfortunate events. In the summer of 1953, Nabokov wrote to Katherine White, the editor of *The New Yorker* about publishing a serialized short story. In this way, *Pnin* assured a constant source of income for Nabokov as he continued the difficult task of finding a publisher for *Lolita*. *Pnin* was well received but certainly did not in any way generate the same scale of

excitement that *Lolita* would. Nabokov created *Pnin* partly as a relief from the dark world of Humbert Humbert—in his own words (in a letter to a friend) as a 'brief sunny escape from [*Lolita*'s] intolerable spell,' describing Pnin as "not a very nice person but he is fun" (qtd. in Lodge x). Nonetheless, by the time *Lolita's* fame—or infamy—brought worldwide acclaim (and outrage) to Nabokov, it was *Pnin*'s glowing reviews that helped establish Nabokov as a writer of rare ability, instead of being written off as a pervert. The entire novel was published in March 1957 to rave reviews and quickly went into a second printing. For his work on *Pnin,* Nabokov was hailed as "one of the subtlest, funniest, and most moving writers in the United States today" (Boyd, *American* 10).

Pnin begins comically *in media res* and we are introduced to the "ideally bald, sun-tanned, and clean shaven" professor whose surface can evidently be read—like a novel, and like the novel whose title bears his name—from beginning to end: "he began rather impressively with that great brown dome of his, tortoise-shell glasses (masking an infantile absence of eyebrows), apish upper lip, thick neck, and strong-man torso in a tightish tweed coat, but ended, somewhat disappointingly, in a pair of spindly legs (now flannelled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine feet" (3). And after all, he *is* a novel. Pnin is *Pnin*; he himself, anatomically emblematizes the anti-climatic bathos that pervades the novel. If *Pnin* begins by exemplifying how Pnin can be read on the surface, so too much *Pnin* be read on the surface. The name Pnin is injected with life in its playful usage, becoming the condition of life itself. We learn that Pnin is in a "Pninian quandary" early in the novel, and that he "Pninizes" his office. The tautology creates an insistence on the literal and therefore on a surface reading. In fact, it is almost as if when Pnin (and *Pnin*) is stripped of modifiers and adjectives, we are forced to more honestly confront the deep

tragedy and virtue in his life. In his introduction to the novel, David Lodge quotes Nabokov, who has said that "'Pnin' is the only genuine name in the Russian language consisting of just one syllable" and this serves to "[emphasize] the character's rich individuality rather than his typicality" (ix). This is in obvious contrast to Humbert Humbert's "double rumble" that echoes his duplicity and is a "hateful name for a hateful person" (*Strong Opinions* 64). In his letter to Cass Canfield, the president of Harper and Brothers, Nabokov writes:

> In Pnin I have created an entirely new character, the like of which has never appeared in any other book. A man of great moral courage, a pure man, a scholar and a staunch friend, serenely wise, faithful to a single love, he never descends from a high plane of life characterized by authenticity and integrity. But handicapped and hemmed in by his incapability to learn a language, he seems a figure of fun to many an average intellectual… (*Selected Letters* 182)

What links Nabokov to Pnin most strongly is that they are both not merely immigrants, but exiles with painfully nostalgic memories of pre-revolutionary Russia and contempt for the communist regime that forced their departure (Lodge xii). Like Nabokov, Pnin left France for America in 1940. And even his progress in the English language, which for him was a "special danger area" is tracked according to the US politico-historical landscape: He had to sit down "to the task of learning the language of Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Poe, Edison, and thirty-one Presidents" and "by the time Truman entered his second term, Pnin could handle practically any topic" (8). But despite this, the arc of his language learning remained solipsistic; his progress merely allows him to refine or interrupt his own narration and is hence embedded in metafiction, forcing us to acknowledge his literariness:

"he was able to interrupt his narration with the phrase, "to make a long story short"—thereby making *his* long story short.

As mentioned before, Nabokov's strongest condemnation of Humbert Humbert, and his most awkwardly and self-consciously valiant attempt to distinguish Humbert Humbert from himself, brings Nabokov to call Humbert Humbert "a foreigner and an anarchist," as if he could purge the public's awareness of his own Russian immigrant status through the force of his insistence and the energy with which he points his finger at Humbert Humbert—the schoolyard joke, of course, is that his three other fingers curl back to point at himself. When Nabokov accused Humbert Humbert of being "a foreigner and an anarchist" he sets up the false equation of the immigrant as perverse—here, one of the most perverse characters in literary history. Yet in Pnin, Nabokov provides a portrait of a Russian émigré professor we find easy to sympathize with. This is classic Nabokovian pedagogy against cruelty: we must be curious, we must not typecast, and we must reconsider each person and paradigm anew.

Pnin is Nabokov's most explicit fictional tribute to Russia's liberal tradition—a tradition in which his father had been a leading figure. He spoke often of the Russian immigrants he met in the nineteen twenties and thirties and had virtually no contact with American novelists (*Strong Opinions* 139). During his years of exile, Nabokov befriended some of the prominent Socialist Revolutionary leaders (Vladimir Zenzinov, Ilya Fondaminsky, Vadim Rudnev) who published his fiction, and would listen with great enjoyment to their tales of the conspiratorial past (Boyd, *Russian* 63). Like Pnin, Nabokov did not have much interest in American politics. The Russian gathering Pnin attends would have been conceivably similar to Nabokov's regular social situation. The picnic scene with

fellow Russian intellectuals offers us a peek through the curtain where we see Pnin in his element, not as a fish out of water. Finally restored to his natural habitus, Pnin encounters perfect sympathy and understanding, and is endowed with a charm and grace that his Waindell colleagues are not privy to (Lodge xi). There, the Russians banter about politics and a fellow Russian, Oleg Komarov, "for whom an ideal Russia consisted of the Red Army, an anointed monarch, collective farms, anthroposophy, the Russian Church and the Hydro-Electric Dam"—contemptuously dismisses Pnin for his "*antikvarnïy liberalism* [antiquarian liberalism]" (96). This episode is eminently personal and harks back to Nabokov's statement on how his father was "an old-fashioned liberal" and that he did not mind being called one either.

In his book *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction,* Michael Wood argues that the ethical is the realm of the unspeakable for Nabokov. Wood's first chapter, "Deaths of the Author,"—a clear allusion to Barthes's famous essay—explores a way of reading Nabokov as a phantom in his own work, both there and not there. And indeed, his style is ever tangible, the text always marked with Nabokov's recognizable fingerprint. Nabokov even jokes about his own use of wordplay and writing tricks as God-like: "I loved doing simple tricks—turning water into wine, that kind of thing…" (qtd. in Wood 11). But unlike, say Austen, yet another master of style, who, as D.A. Miller says, "writes with the detachment of a God," Nabokov invests heavily of himself through his craft—imbuing his characters with his gifts, embellishing the plot with a childhood

memory, resurrecting old friends from his past, granting them eternal life in the pages of his book.[17]

But the desire to wield absolute control in fact echoes with a kind of political language. Nabokov says of his novels: "I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth" (*Strong Opinions* 69). And yet the politics this language echoes with is not necessarily one that Nabokov endorses. His choice of words is ultimately ironic given his open hate for dictatorship. Even as he denies any investment or inclination towards politics, he launches into vicious denouncement for dictatorships and censorship: "I have never belonged to any political party but have always loathed and despised dictatorships and police states, as well as any sort of oppression. This goes for regimentation of thought, governmental censorship, racial or religious persecution, and all the rest of it" (*Strong Opinions* 47). More importantly, this makes obvious the link between his *totalizing style* that claims to operate divorced from politics, and his private politics which stands firmly against totalitarianism and dictatorship. Often, his paraleptic claims seem obviously ironic. In the 1963 reissue of *Bend Sinister,* he says in the preface, "I am neither a didacticist nor an allegorizer. Politics and economics, atomic bombs, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of 'thaw' in Soviet Russia, the Future of Mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent." That he puts together a string of such specific and pointed political issues of that moment clearly suggests otherwise. Nabokov has publicly insisted that he favors aesthetics first and foremost and that he does not care a jot about politics. "I pride myself on being a person with no public

[17] "I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it" (*Speak Memory* 95).

appeal…Nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent" (*Strong Opinions* 3). And yet his response to the follow-up question asking what he likes and dislikes is this: "My loathings are simple: stupidity, oppression, crime, cruelty, soft music. My pleasures are the most intense known to man: writing and butterfly hunting" (3). But even this response centered on "pure aesthetics" belies a politicism that Nabokov takes care to conceal, a commitment to the political that is still *immanent,* right under the surface. Even at the level of the autobiographical, Nabokov's seemingly most apolitical aesthetic pleasures have been mired in some sort of political tangle. He recalls in Speak Memory "On a path above the Black Sea,… among shrubs in waxy bloom, in March 1918, a blow-legged Bolshevik sentry attempted to arrest me for signaling (with my [butterfly] net, he said) to a British warship" (225).

Despite the black comedy in *Pnin*, the ache of loss throbs not far below the comic surface of the novel and occasionally grips Pnin with the intensity of a heart attack or a tragically whimsical hallucination. The use of comedy to paper over tragedy serves only to highlight its cruel truth: Pnin is Nabokov as he might have been in America as an exile if he had not possessed a mastery of the English language, a supportive and cherished wife, and the resource of literary creativity: a quaint, eccentric, rather sad figure, doomed never to fully understand the society in which he found himself (Lodge xiii). In one such inconvenient and comic hallucination, we learn that Pnin hallucinates that the audience he is speaking to is in fact interspersed with people from his Russian past, among them an aunt, a former schoolmate whose father had been shot for being a Liberal (as Nabokov's was), and a childhood sweetheart. The pathos of this hits us only later when we learn that she had died years ago. At a gathering, an old acquaintance asks him if he has heard of

Mira Belochkin's "terrible end" to which he quietly nods: he has. As readers, we anticipate an analeptic story to come. But the story that we get is made all the worse for being an absent-story.

> In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself…never to remember Mira Belochkin—[…]because, if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. One had to forget—because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, […] had been brought in a cattle car and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart…And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one's mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood. (99-100)

It is true that *Pnin* is "the only full-length work of fiction by Nabokov which does not describe a violent death" (Lodge xv). But this is a facetious point. The death of Pnin's childhood sweetheart, Mira, which is only alluded to obliquely seems all the more harrowing for the mystery that shrouds it. We learn that Mira had died in one of the concentration camps, although we do not know exactly how. This vagueness cruelly invites Pnin—and us—to imagine the countless ways Mira could have been murdered, killing her himself over and over again in the painful privacy of his own mind. We are second-handedly tortured by this gap in knowledge, that, bottomless, can never be filled with enough terrible images. Nabokov *does*, in fact, give us *numerous* possible violent deaths,

none of which can be written off, and hence all of which are equally horrendous and equally true. The use of paralipsis to describe her betrays the devastating fact that far from having forgotten Mira, her memory shimmers intact only just beneath the surface of his consciousness. He moans in disbelief that the Buchenwald camp was only five miles from "the cultural heart of Germany—'that nation of universities,' … an hour's stroll from Weimar, where walked Goethe, Herder, Schiller, Wieland, the inimitable Kotzebue and others" (100). Invoking the forefathers of aesthetic education, Nabokov painfully highlights the fact that "poetry does nothing," and that an attunement to beauty will be for naught if we are not able to register and react to the suffering around us.

This passage offers us a rare glimpse into how Nabokov felt about the conditions that expedited his departure from Europe. The Holocaust and its horrors clearly weighed heavily on his mind. In a letter to his sister, he writes: "much as one might want to hide in one's little ivory tower, there are things that torment me too deeply, e.g., the German vileness, the burning of children in ovens—children as funny and as strongly loved as our children" (qtd in Toker 178). And of course, if Pnin is as Nabokov would have been as an exile without his beloved Vera, it is because Vera—only a syllable away from *being* Mira—could have easily shared Mira's fate. One of Nabokov's reason for finally moving his family to America was because he became increasingly fearful for Vera, who was Jewish, and their half-Jewish son Dimitri in Nazi Europe. Nabokov's own brother, Sergey, a homosexual, died in a Nazi concentration camp in Europe.

This is where *Pnin* most forcefully, through reference to an unspeakable historical event, demonstrates the lessons that are only immanent in *Lolita*. Bruce Stone snaps his fingers at us most aggressively to point out the stakes of the "awful existential truth" of

Lolita in the lived world. Pushing beyond the abstract ideological liberalism that warns against only an unspecified and amorphous cruelty that Trilling, Rorty, and the others refer to, he turns our eye to war:

> It is a monument to an awful existential truth: simply to be alive, in the face of the whole history of human suffering, requires a kind of insane fortitude. *Lolita* reminds us that while soldiers were dying in European trenches, Monet was painting lilies in his garden; that horror and beauty are cosynchronous; that for every fine sentiment, every sweet emotion, someone else pays in blood, and eventually we all get presented with the check. (Stone)

As Barbara Johnson notes, "while you are parsing a sentence, analyzing a metaphor, or smiling over a meaning entirely produced by the magic of rhyme, you are not paying attention to what is going on in the world" (*Mother Tongues* 3). Mira's unjust and untimely death in *Pnin* is not unlike Dolores Haze's suffering in *Lolita*: both unmentionable acts of cruelty to innocent beings. These moments, undeniable in their horror, and placed on the surface in plain sight, have the same effect as the moments in *Lolita* that Vera calls our attention to. In *Lolita,* too, "one had to forget," for otherwise "one could not live." Put in other words, "if one were quite sincere with oneself," as Pnin is, one could not go on; a reader had to ignore, for otherwise a reader could not read; a critic could not critique.

Screening Japan: Ishiguro's Early Japan Novels and the Way We Read World Literature

As a widely published and translated writer of Anglo-Japanese background, Kazuo Ishiguro has made his life—and a living—out of crossing borders of nation, language, and even genre. Ishiguro has emerged as one of the most prominent international writers of our time, focusing often on various postwar or interwar periods. Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki on the 8th of November, 1954 and left Japan for the UK at the age of five, in 1959. As a Japanese immigrant to the UK, and naturalized British citizen, writing in English across various geographies, cultures, and even personal and national histories, Ishiguro embodies the kinds of crossings and mixings world literature must take seriously. Ishiguro suggests works of art should be valued for the social life they help establish and indeed, as widely translated and translatable texts, Ishiguro's works themselves thematize the tension between their own singularity and multiplicity, as well as the cultural, national, and political boundaries they simultaneously enact *and* cross.

The critical acclaim Ishiguro's work has garnered and the interest in Ishiguro as a World Literature writer center on what I call his post-Japan novels, beginning with *The Remains of the Day* which won him the Man Booker Prize, and ignore the crucial pivot at which Ishiguro became critically exciting—notably excluding his earlier geographically and culturally specific Japan novels. I identify two general approaches to the reception of Ishiguro's novels. World Literature critics writing on cosmopolitanism tend to exalt Ishiguro for his crafting and treatment of complex, universal ethical dilemmas that transcend their historical moment and location, seemingly untethered to setting, nation, or race. Critics have generally overlooked Ishiguro's Japan novels and most criticism on these earlier novels performs problematically exoticizing and Orientalist readings. When critics

are not straining to unravel Ishiguro's ethical puzzles, they are cooing at the "Japanese texture" of his style; they either wrestle with his ethics, or sigh at his aesthetics. Where universalism does not work as a reading in his work, he is reified and racially typecast, the one-dimensionality of universalism transferring easily to the apoliticism of aesthetics. In other words, Ishiguro's body of work can be seen as cleaved into two sections: his Japan novels (featuring Asian protagonists), and his post-Japan novels (all featuring white protagonists). The critical approach taken to his work, is similarly bifurcated.

Ishiguro has emerged as the quintessential non-white writer in a very dominant conception of World Literature, seeming, as he does, to have transcended borders of nation and language through his easily and widely translated "translationese"—English stripped of its particularizing and language-specific markers such as puns or idioms that lends itself to translation. Claimed, in his fame, by both the country he was born in and the one he has adopted, the trajectory of Ishiguro's claim to fame echoes this duplicity: it began with his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills,* set in Japan, and was solidified by his Man Booker Prize win with *The Remains of the Day,* set in England. The unique lens of a writer who does and does not belong to Japan offers the critical distance required both to read Japan and *to read how the Japanese are read by the West*. Ishiguro's works are repeatedly read as quintessentially Japanese *or* British *or* cosmopolitan (as if failing to be recognized nationalistically, the national cathexis, ever present, must then be dispersed *everywhere*).

Critics have been alternatingly confused or impressed by Ishiguro's movement through and across genres. Yet Ishiguro does not so much write in different genres, or even "mixes" genres seemingly unimpeded by a commitment to any particular one, as he does simply write in the genre of Ishiguro. The author after all has said tongue-in-cheek that he

writes the same novel over and over. The Ishiguro novel can always be identified by its investment in ethics and morality, the author's keen attunement to the "unimaginably large" implications of actions of the finest degree, and especially by its display of a certain authorial style. As readers, then, with each new novel, we approach an old paradigm anew. In other words, we learn to read Ishiguro *by reading Ishiguro*. But while complex ethical quandaries are foregrounded in the critical engagement of his post-Japan novels, writings on his Japan novels remain overlaid with superficial orientalist readings that obfuscate, even adamantly ignore, the novels' expansive and intensive engagement with the political and ethical conditions faced by the Japanese in the postwar period as they negotiate their relationship to the shift in empire.

In this chapter, I look at Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills,* set in postwar Nagasaki. By investigating the historical moment in which the novel is set, I expose how Ishiguro's earlier non-cosmopolitan, Japan novel demonstrates an even more complex engagement with the ethical paradigms it stages, pulling together threads of race, empire, and nation. It refuses and refutes the claim that Ishiguro's novels should be cherished for promoting a replicable brand of cosmopolitanism and instead highlights and insists on politically and historically engaged approaches to reading. Ishiguro's Japan novels bring us to encounter histories that link West and East instead of focusing solipsistically on the West. They expose the epistemological failings of claims to universalism or cosmopolitanism that focus mainly on white suffering and have historically ignored non-white suffering at the same time that they invite historically grounded political readings and in fact pressure a confrontation with East Asian postcolonialism that has been not been sufficiently addressed. Ishiguro's present status and position as a World Literature writer

supplies the theoretical frameworks which serve to critique the systems, practices, and networks of world literature when imposed on his earlier, localized Japanese novels. The general criticism enamored with Ishiguro's work for what they read as exhibiting an exemplary cosmopolitanism unmarked by nationality, race, or ethnicity is exposed for their shallow reading practices when the frame is shifted and they are forced to contend with his Japanese novels which deal with a real, historical Japan marked by war, its Eastern imperialism, and postwar American imperialism.

This chapter examines Ishiguro's novel by taking seriously Gayatri Spivak's prescription at the start of her essay, "Three Women's Texts and the Critique of Imperialism," where she insists that "to reopen the epistemic fracture of imperialism without succumbing to a nostalgia for lost origins, the critic must turn to the archives of imperialist governance" (253). I borrow from this idea to turn backwards, to reopen an investigation into the perceived Japaneseness in Ishiguro's writing, but precisely to avoid a mere nostalgia for lost origins. Japanese-born British Ishiguro serves as an interesting figure for Spivak's imperative: which archive, and which imperialist governance? The instruction to investigate "the archives" of imperialism is more complicated to perform in the case of Japan, whose complex recent history inscribes it as both an imperial power, and a fallen one. Modern Japan is as much fraught by its own imperial history as it is with its much more recent experience with American imperialism. I argue that moments in Ishiguro's Japan novels that have largely been read merely aesthetically can bring us to engage with the neglected archives of Japan's history with imperialism.

As recently as 1995, in his essay, "The Empire Strikes Back," Pico Iyer groups Ishiguro with Booker-prize winners of colonial backgrounds. Iyer makes a glaring, though

common mistake, in his conjecture about how some of Britain's strongest writing in recent years is actually emerging from some of its former colonies: he erroneously lumps Ishiguro together with Rushdie and Timothy Mo. Japan, unlike India and Hong Kong, however, was never a colony, but in fact an imperial power that colonized large swaths of Asia during and before the Second World War. Such an error highlights how the West sees the East as painted with a single brush: oriental, exotic, subaltern, and postcolonial. More importantly, this is one of many instances I will look at to display the ways in which Japan remains problematically and chronically unreadable to Western critics and the Western reading public.

The critical writings on World Literature as a discipline, coming out of the Western academy, continue to misread and misunderstand Japan's past and present position within global political networks of transmission and power. Reading Ishiguro's works as proponents of a "new World Literature," Rebecca Walkowitz points out that "because a text's network will continue to grow and multiply, as that text is circulated and read in numerous regions and languages, its geography and culture will be dynamic and unpredictable. It is no longer simply a matter of determining…the literary culture to which a work belongs" (217). Certainly literature today is subject to market-driven forces, and the global production and circulation of texts give the illusion of a radically global literature. But it is precisely because the West has historically dominated these market forces that it is imperative for scholars of World Literature to pay particular attention to non-Western geographies, histories, and culture.

Ishiguro's writing *is* and *is not* Japanese. This is not merely a deliberately obtuse paradoxical statement because it has become characteristically difficult to identify modern

Japanese writing.[18] Japan in the postwar both *was* and *was not* itself. The country found itself grappling with a confused and faltering national identity at the end of the war in 1945, not least because it was fatigued by fifteen years of war by that point. Readers in the West are unable, or otherwise resistant to reading a Japan that is not the exoticized version born of the Western imagination. Many scholars of modern Japanese literature lament the difficulties of teaching Japanese literature to a Western audience because it does not easily capitulate to reified perceptions of an exotic Japan.[19] Recognizing instead a more multi-valenced Japan, Eastern in its geography and culture, yet sharing in the Western history of imperialism, humbled in defeat, powerful in its recovery, allows a more intimate and helpful way of thinking about violence and conflict in the world. Such particularizing, which pays attention to culture, history, and even environment is necessary if we are to be mindful about de-universalizing and particularizing the hegemonic Western norm in our reading and methodological approaches in the field of World Literature.

I return to read Japan in *A Pale View of Hills* in order to show how specific cultures remain unreadable in our globalized climate of World Literatures. I begin by exposing and excavating the ethical and moral stakes in aestheticist approaches to his Japan novels, which treat the cultural and socio-historical textures of his work as both literally and figuratively skin-deep. Reading beyond Ishiguro's entrancingly—and notoriously—affectless style brings us to crucial moments and events in Japanese history which similarly

[18] See foreword by Edwin McClellan to Shuichi Kato's *A History of Japanese Literature* for more on how modern Japanese literature is taught in universities.

[19] In his foreword to the English translation of Shuichi Kato's *A History of Japanese Literature,* Sanderson describes the story of modern Japanese literature as "to a large extent one of Western influence and its absorption into traditional culture." Despite some awareness of the delicacies and failures of translation, "nevertheless an uneasiness remains, an awareness that modern Japanese culture can all too easily be seen as Western culture viewed in a distorting mirror" (Sanderson xvi). For more details on Western influence in Japanese culture following the Meiji Restoration, see Kato 279.

showcase a lack of empathy and humane identification with the Japanese people by the West, driving home the point that ignoring, or misreading the death of even one young Japanese woman imbricates us in the ethical conundrums of modern history. Contemporary iterations of this quandary manifest themselves in the literary appropriation and commodification of immigrant narratives, which the novel seems to stage as well. I then turn to *When We Were Orphans,* Ishiguro's only post-Japan novel to be set in Asia, to show how critics' inability to read Japan, is also an inability to read greater East Asia. The lack of critical attention to *When We Were Orphans* among Ishiguro's post-Japan, "cosmopolitan novels" becomes striking in this light, and unmasks the deliberate selection bias in Western critics' cosmopolitan readings of Ishiguro's work. It is, in fact, the novel that most concretely represents a historically and geographically grounded model of cosmopolitanism,[20] set in Shanghai's International Settlement, which originated following China's defeat by Britain in the First Opium War.

Screening Japan

By using the word "screening" here I hope to invoke the double entendre of its paradoxical actions: both obfuscating and projecting; to conceal and to make visible. In addition, its noun form, "the screen" also alludes to *Ukiyo-e* 浮世絵, Japanese woodblock prints which typically depicted *Ukiyo* 浮世, Japanese "pictures of the floating world," referring to the pleasure-seeking aspects of Edo-period Japan (1600–1867), often on ornamental room screens. These screens literally shield things from view by featuring

[20] In contrast, many of his other novels such as *Never Let Me Go, The Unconsoled,* and *The Buried Giant* are set in unnamed, imagined locations in the European continent.

visually stunning ornamental images of Japanese tropes on their surface. *Ukiyo-e* were central to forming the West's perception of Japanese art and strongly influenced artists such as Monet, Manet, and van Gogh. Ultimately, I argue for the importance of a third definition of "screening," which is to examine, or to filter—to pay careful attention in sieving through what is being screened (what are only distracting ornamental stock images) to get to what is being *screened* (what is concealed from view at first glance).

A Pale View of Hills, Ishiguro's first novel, begins with Etsuko, a Japanese woman who has married an Englishman named Sheringham and moved to England, ruminating on her daughter, Keiko's suicide. We learn that Keiko is her "pure Japanese" daughter from an earlier marriage in Japan to a Japanese man named Jiro. Her half-English daughter, Niki, is visiting for the weekend. Etsuko recalls her past in Japan and an acquaintance, Sachiko, and her little daughter, Mariko, whose story suspiciously parallels Etsuko's. Keiko's suicide is the catalyst for the narrative, yet Keiko is only ever offered as an absent center and only occupies a liminal space: as a fetus before birth and as a ghostly presence after death. Her voice is entirely absent from the novel and if Sachiko's daughter, Mariko, serves as a kind of substitute for Keiko, her voice too is at best given in the form of prosopopoeia. The narrative shimmers with meaningless flat details or thrillingly macabre images that do not contribute any narrative propulsion and appear purely aesthetic, imbuing the tale with a spectral quality, resulting in what critics erroneously take to be its "Japanese quality."[21] Ishiguro has bemoaned his lack of experience and narrative skill in his first novel, lamenting that it resulted in messy, shoddy plot and narrative organization.[22] I suspect that

[21] In the preface to his interview with Ishiguro, Gregory Mason describes "an uncannily Japanese quality emanating from his perfectly pitched English prose."

[22] "I'm very fond of it, but I do think it's too baffling. The ending is almost like a puzzle. I see nothing artistically to be gained by puzzling people to that extent. That was just inexperience—misjudging what is

this "messiness" is more intentional than it may initially seem and argue that these seemingly meaningless details in fact bring into focus a more complex interaction between issues of aesthetics, empathy, cultures of reading, and how cultures are read.

Cultural specificity does not feature much in contemporary Ishiguro "World Literature" criticism. Despite insistent references to "[his] Japanese face and [his] Japanese eyes," and the fact that he was born in Nagasaki, Japan, early critics who remarked on *Japaneseness* in Ishiguro's work seldom actually delved into the Japan-specific cultural elements of Ishiguro's novels. The trends in Ishiguro criticism, began with an interest in *Japaneseness*, before shifting to ethics and morality,[23] to psychoanalysis and narrative,[24] and finally to world literatures and cosmopolitanism,[25] as if to save him from himself—an apotheosis of his *Japaneseness* in his earlier books to abstraction that circulates above cultural specificity. Early critics have commonly read Ishiguro's novels as a literary reflection on Japanese philosophical notions. Barry Lewis provides a short overview of this approach in his book *Kazuo Ishiguro:*

> Anthony Thwaite believes that *A Pale View of Hills* "functions brilliantly as a kind of Japanese novel"; whilst Geoff Dyer calls the prose in *An Artist of the Floating World* "clean, unharried and airy; full of inflections and innuendo" like a Japanese watercolour. Gabriele Annan states that the "elegant bareness [of the first two novels] reminds one of Japanese painting" and it was a frequent strategy among reviewers to compare Ishiguro's style with Japanese art. Terms such as *yugen* ("a

too obvious and what is subtle. Even at the time the ending felt unsatisfactory." Taken from the *Paris Review*

[23] See Bain, Robbins

[24] See Wall, Reitano

[25] See Bain, Walkowitz

suggestive indefiniteness full of mystery and depth") or *mono no aware* ("the sadness of things") were dragooned into action. (20)

In an interview with Ishiguro, Mason says that it is "remarkable, for someone writing in English" to achieve the kind of "Japanese texture" Ishiguro's text does and asks him how he "set about the problem of projecting differentiated Japanese voices through the medium of the English language" (345). Glaringly, the "Japanese quality" noted by these critics from the West is at best, never defined, and at worst, its unsubstantiated definition bespeaks a certain Orientalist homogenization of Japan. The earlier criticism on Ishiguro's work, merely iterated a superficial view of Japan through stock references to Madame Butterfly, watercolour paintings, and politically incorrect philosophical incantations.[26] The notion of "Japaneseness" employed in Western scholarship to denote Ishiguro's novels has been mostly produced and inflected by the West, and draws from the superficial Japan that exists as an oriental agglutination of signs à la Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs.* Even the excerpt from *The New York Times Book Review* of *The Empire of Signs* on the cover of the book says, "If Japan did not exist, Barthes would have had to invent it…In this fictive Japan, there is no terrible *innerness* as in the West, no soul, no God, no fate, no ego, no grandeur, no metaphysics, no "promotional fever" and finally no meaning…" White writes as if Japan were Barthes's to invent and his review speaks to the continued inability of Western critics to *read* Japan, as if its beauty were a screen that after all served only to

[26] Some liberal Japanese are sensitive to the use of the term "*mono no aware*" as it is linked to right-wing conservatives' aestheticization and disavowal of Japan's history of wartime aggression. I thank Professor Yoshiki Tajiri at the University of Tokyo for explaining the history and nuanced reception of such philosophical notions in present-day Japan to me. See also Ria Taketomi's "*Mono no aware"* which exposes and argues against Western critics' exoticized misuse of the term.

conceal itself. Finally, being immersed in Japan can still only produce a "fictive Japan"—one with no "innerness as in the West, no soul, no God, no fate, no ego…no meaning." It is easy to be indignant here but ironically, this phrase has been used by Ishiguro to describe his treatment of Japan as well. Of his first two novels, he has said, "I just invent a Japan which serves my needs" (qtd. in Mason 341). But Ishiguro's first two novels of an equally hazy, spectral, and imagined Japan, offered through his own "Westernized" eyes, [27] quickly reveal Japan to be more than merely an empire of signs, and instead force us to confront the histories of the land, thereby allowing us to critique the dangers of viewing Japan—and its people—as purely semiotic.

There is in fact little autobiographical reason for critics to pursue an aesthetic reading of "Japaneseness" in Ishiguro's writing. Ishiguro only returned to Japan after the publication of his first novel, on a trip sponsored by the Japan Foundation. Even though Ishiguro does not identify with Japan, there has been much temptation among his Western critics to read the specifically "Japanese character" in his work. Lewis writes, "It was as if the Japaneseness of his name and his appearance acted as a *screen* to hide the possibility that behind it there was a complex person" (my emphasis, Lewis 21). Indeed, Ishiguro is often too deliberate in disavowing his Japanese heritage in interviews, insisting he "speaks Japanese like a 5-year-old," and that his favorite authors are Chekov, Dostoyevsky, and Brönte (in other words, as canonical as you can get). Yet my aim is not to disavow Ishiguro's Japan altogether but to propose a return to it, with a greater attention to the attendant specific histories. An international conference on Ishiguro's work organized by Professor Yoshiki Tajiri at the University of Tokyo in November 2014 is testament to the

[27] See Barthes *The Empire of Signs*

very current (renewed or continuing) interest of Japanese scholars in Ishiguro.[28] Perhaps not surprisingly, most of the scholars from Western universities presented on Ishiguro's post-Japan novels, and most of the Japanese scholars were concerned with Ishiguro's Japan novels.

After the success of his first two novels, Ishiguro wrapped up his "Japanese phase" with the republication of his early short stories in a volume titled *Early Japanese Stories,* deliberately moving away from Japan. In an interview with Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger, Ishiguro acknowledges that the international recognition of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 helped usher in a whole line of ethnic writers, and that the trend of multiculturalism in Britain then facilitated his own embarkation on a writing career in the early 1980s. While attributing the instant success of *A Pale View of Hills* to "this Japanese face and this Japanese name," Ishiguro is also keenly aware that the label of ethnic Japanese has since become a straitjacket, restraining him from growing as "an artist and a serious writer" (Sim 11). Indeed, critics have noted the ubiquity of Ishiguro's face, referencing his picture, often placed prominently on his covers (Sim 20). As if to buoy this critical turn, Ishiguro has said in interviews that he decides the setting of each novel he writes last, as he wants his stories to embody a kind of transferability that survives transposition.

It is the general consensus that Ishiguro's work is aesthetically first-rate, if affectless. In his editor's note to the issue of *Novel* dedicated to Ishiguro's writing, Timothy

[28] "International Conference Kazuo Ishiguro: New Perspectives" organized by Professor Yoshiki Tajiri was held in the University of Tokyo on November 15, 2014. The first panel consisted of all Japanese scholars presenting on Ishiguro's Japan novels (Ria Taketomi, 'Kazuo Ishiguro and Yasujiro Ozu'; Ayaka Nakajima, 'Translating Japan: Kazuo Ishiguro's A Pale View of Hills'; Nob Hiyoshi, 'A Pastiche of Mishima?: 'Getting Poisoned', A Pale View of Hills, and The Sailor Who Fell from the Grace with the Sea'). International scholars Christopher Holmes, Ivan Stacy, and Liani Lochner all presented papers dealing with the ethical in *Never Let Me Go.*

Bewes highlights that "what is fascinating about this body of work is that Ishiguro offers no clues about how to read him" (205). Bewes described Ishiguro's style as "an attempt to deflate all forms of sentiment" (205). Louis Menand has likened the lack of individuality in Ishiguro characters' to "paper-mâché animations." Sheng-Mei Ma points out this sense of hollowness or lack of interiority in Ishiguro's characters. In his essay "Ishiguro's Persistent Dream for Postethnicity: Performance in Whiteface," he even describes Ishiguro's later prose as programmatic. New York Times book reviewer Michiko Kakutani has said of *When We Were Orphans* that "Mr. Ishiguro simply ran the notion of a detective story through the word processing program of his earlier novels, then patched together the output into the ragged, if occasionally brilliant, story we hold in our hands." This comparison to a word processing brings to mind Franco Moretti's "distant reading" methods, calling to attention how Ishiguro is seen to operate within new technologies and systems of World Literature, as well as the failures and limitations of such practices.

This same complaint is withheld for Ishiguro's Japan novels because critics are often quick to read a hollow awkwardness as precisely a characterization of what makes it *feel* authentically Japanese. In fact, Ishiguro insistently does not use idioms, which cannot be translated. But how does something that is *not* there come to *feel* a certain way? Japaneseness is hence construed as an emptiness, or a lack. And yet this nothingness nonetheless signifies *something.* Emptiness is *presumed* to be Japanese. For poor Keiko, "Japaneseness" (and Japanese death) is precisely what made "further explanation[s] unnecessary" (*Pale View* 3). Sianne Ngai's exploration of tone characterizes precisely this hollowness in *A Pale View of Hills* that cannot but be felt. She describes how the very absence of care can itself become disturbing, positing that "[a text] [can] conscript its own

affective ambiguity to ensure that we cannot *not* care about it without feeling, well, bad" (84).

Even Japanese death does not warrant explanation or prompt curiosity and sympathy. Etsuko explains that Keiko's death was revealed in a trenchant newspaper report:

> The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was all they reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room. (3)

We are to understand, of course, that no further explanations were necessary because *that was the explanation.* The implication of the attitude taken towards Keiko and Keiko's death and the view that her unhappiness and death were innate manifestations of "traits" of her race realized in their predictable, tragic telos is greatly disturbing as it might be seen as a microcosm of broader attitudes towards Japanese culture and society. Empathy and sympathy for Keiko seem impossible because her being "pure Japanese" marks her as foreign. The view taken towards the singular incident of Keiko's death, produced out of a generalized assumption about an entire race is too easily turned inside out and expanded back upon that entire race and country. *A Pale View of Hills* is precisely the kind of "fiction which [exhibits] the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person" and in doing so, shows the reader how he or she may have been similarly blind (Rorty 141). After all, as Richard Rorty says in *Irony, Contingency, and Solidarity,* the ability to avoid being cruel is "achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers" (Rorty xvi). Following the logic of "unimaginable largeness," the term Rebecca Walkowitz borrows from *The Remains of the*

Day to describe the idea that impossibly small actions can have incredibly large resonances, Keiko emblematizes the inhumanity of being oblivious to the suffering of even one person.

A Pale View of Hills in fact resists being read as Japanese even though it is "sprinkled with apparently authentic historical snapshots," which when examined further, undermine critics' praise for authenticity (Lewis 22). Barry Lewis argues that the novel obstructs realist readings by persistently echoing Giacomo Puccini's *Madam Butterfly,* also set in Nagasaki which only "satisfied a Western demand for stock images of an alien and aestheticized Far East" (23). During their visit to Inasayama, Etsuko and Sachiko meet Suzie-san, an American woman, who overzealously gushes over Mariko's whimsical drawing of a butterfly. She repeatedly and erroneously praises Mariko's drawing with the Japanese word for "delicious," when she must mean "beautiful" (114). Mariko's butterfly is an allusion to Puccini's *Madame Butterfly,* famously set in Nagasaki—an Orientalizing opera depicting an overdetermined Japan. Coupled with Suzie-san's embarrassing confusion of senses, the reader is invited to consider that Ishiguro is satirizing the West's appetite for stock images of an exoticized Japan.

As critics such as Barbara Johnson and Elaine Scarry warn, aestheticism often promotes a retrograde apoliticalism as a result of the tendency to be content with such superficial attention to other cultures (Scarry 2).[29] Similarly, reading a *mere* lack of consequence to Ishiguro's "details" due to an extrapolated perceived "Japaneseness" in his writing is to run the risk of reading aesthetics *badly*. Ishiguro has admitted that "[he always felt] that Japaneseness was a superficial part of [his] writing" (23). Chalking Ishiguro's pathos filled "details" up to *mono no aware* because he is Japanese parallels the politics of

[29] See Barbara Johnson 3

reading Keiko's death as needing "no further explanation" than the fact that she was Japanese.

The superficial attitude taken to the event of Keiko's suicide, which is in fact the central catalyst to the narrative, leads us to erroneously take the same approach to other minor moments in the novel. By paying close attention to seemingly inconsequential moments, we are made to confront how we repeatedly misread or overlook suffering. For example, children are constantly getting hurt in the novel—often more frequently, or more seriously, than we notice on the first reading: Etsuko thinks she sees a cut on the child's cheek which later turns out to be a smudge of dirt; the two women later find her unconscious by the river with "a wound on the inside of her thigh," "lying in a puddle and one side of her short dress was soaked in dark water… the blood on Sachiko's sleeve… was coming from Mariko" (41). That the water had turned dark from blood and that Sachiko's sleeve was stained with blood suggests that Mariko was more badly hurt than Etsuko is telling us, but the novel never addresses this, nor invites us to recognize it. The many wounds that Mariko sustains throughout the novel suggest a literalizing of the adoptee's "primal wound" as Mariko-Keiko is later separated from her Mother*land.*[30] The repeated imagery of the "rope that had caught around [Etsuko's] ankle" which Mariko registers with fear as Etsuko approaches her, also takes on a chilling new significance, as it anticipates Keiko's suicide later on and is echoed in the repeated references to the girl who was found hanging in the village playground. Etsuko cryptically articulates her folly about her dream—"the little girl isn't on a swing at all" (96). Ostensibly, she had not dreamed of the girl she saw at the playground with Niki, but of the girl who had been

[30] See Nancy Newton Verrier. I borrow from her writings on the mother-child relationship in the context of adoption to read the nation-child relationship here in the context of immigration.

hanged in the playground in Japan. These images of hanging children or allusions to hanging permeate the entire narrative with a certain spectral quality. The odd, throwaway detail of Jiro's missing tie—an insignificant article of clothing that goes like a noose around one's neck in an unremarkable scene with no narrative significance, but which seems all the more suspect for that reason—which Etsuko "[seemed] to *have done something with*" begins to seem more disquieting when dwelled upon (my emphasis, 132). While Etsuko presumably never hurts Mariko with the rope, the scene works as a foreshadowing of the eventual harm Etsuko will indirectly cause Keiko.

Yet simply because we sympathize with Mariko and Keiko, does not mean that we cannot recognize the difficulty Sachiko and Etsuko faced as well. The recurring image of the woman in Tokyo who Mariko saw drowning her own baby is ominously and chillingly twinned in Sachiko's drowning of the kittens later in the novel. Sachiko was unyielding despite Mariko's many pleas and appears unnecessarily cruel. As Sachiko holds the kittens underwater, only "the corners of each sleeve touched the water" (167). Yet, "somehow, Sachiko's hair had also become wet; one drop, then another fell from a thin strand which hung down one side of her face" (167). Sachiko's face is obscured so the odd and oddly placed adverb "somehow" begs probing. Its odd-occurrence, which *seems* insignificant is precisely what makes it significant; it acts to clue the reader in to the fact that she, too, is meant to *somehow* realize that Sachiko was in fact *crying*.

Critics often take a strong stance in reading Sachiko psychoanalytically as *either* Etsuko's retrospective projection of herself, *or* a real person who serves as a narrative tool for complicating Etsuko's own story. Interestingly, the *kanji* for Etsuko (悦子) and Sachiko (幸子) have the same meaning, translating to child of joy, and child of happiness

respectively. Chillingly, and in contrast, Mariko (真子) translates to the *real* or the genuine child, and Keiko

(恵子), the lucky child. The twinning of Etsuko and Sachiko is particularly important given the racially charged literary historical use of the trope of the doppelganger.[31] That Sachiko as Etsuko's double is ontologically unstable inscribes the very untenable epistemology of the raced subject herself. Integration and assimilation are the key worries the doubled mothers have—less about their own adjustments than for that of their (twinned) children. When pressed to consider Mariko's well-being if Sachiko were to move to the United States with Frank, Sachiko finally says: "Do you think I imagine for one moment that I'm a good mother to her?" (171). Sachiko says this with "one side of her face in shadow," the chiasruscuro of the scene highlighting the cruel contradictions inherent in such fraught decisions (171). Later, Etsuko makes a similar confession to Niki, telling her that "[she] knew all along [Keiko] wouldn't be happy over here. But [she] decided to bring her just the same" (176). Being attentive to these "meaningless" details bring to light the ethical conundrums embedded in the text, highlighting the fact that these are complex characters, not merely "paper-mâché animations," who can warrant sympathy even if they are guilty, who made hard choices in situations they did not choose.

These careless oversights give the lie to the view that culturally aestheticizing reading practices are harmless. Often in an attempt to show "the ways things really are" in the non-West, our discourses "produce a non-West that is deprived of fantasy, desires, and contradictory emotions" and in this way, reify an exoticized perception of the non-West

[31] See Cynthia Sau-ling Wong

(Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity* xiii).[32] Chow asserts that as "history shows, idealism is always anchored in violence" and warns that "the potentially democratic idea that everyone possesses a "culture," could lead to the conservative culturist view that every culture must be understood strictly and only in its own 'specificity'" (34). But of course, the "specificity" we've discussed thus far is merely a false specificity, a simulacrum of the Western imagination. More dangerous is when specificity is not adequately investigated such that the cultural specificity we purport to understand is only a false one. Ishiguro was acutely aware of such stereotypes surrounding Japanese people and has even admitted to wielding this knowledge to his commercial advantage. In his first novel, it provides the foil to the more complex engagement he is crafting between culture and violence.[33]

Reducing Keiko's death to the "suicidal inclinations of The Japanese," makes it easy to imagine that the great loss of Japanese civilian lives in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was merely a product of their own inclinations, their own *nature* to court death—as if the destruction of the atomic bombs *dropped on their cities*, was an internally produced invitation to death, and not a brutal, externally imposed attack. After all, it was this belief about suicidal extremist Japanese nationalists that was one argument for dropping the bomb—after witnessing soldiers who committed suicide to avoid capture and Japanese kamikaze pilots, Americans perpetuated the belief that there was no other way to defeat this enemy (Igarashi 42). Through the figure of Keiko, the "pure Japanese" daughter, Ishiguro forces us to confront the ethical and political failings in being incurious about different peoples, in unthinkingly chalking aestheticization in the novel up to

[32] Rey Chow quotes Masao Miyoshi in *Woman and Chinese Modernity.* See Chow 6.

[33] Ishiguro has elsewhere toyed with the theme of suicide as an aspect of Japanese culture that many Western cultures are quick to fixate on. This can be seen in one of his earliest works, a short story titled, *A Family Supper.* See *Early Japanese Stories*

"Japaneseness," and hence rendering the Japanese person unreadable, determining their narratives to be undeserving of circulation. A lack of understanding of cultural specificity may cause us to think we see beauty, when we should be paying attention to suffering.

Emily Apter recommends that we should have "serious reservations about tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded "differences" that have been niche-marketed as commercialized "identities"" (346). Walkowitz argues that "[*The Remains of the Day*] takes seriously the idea that international, collective events can be transformed by local, individual actions" (218). So far, I have tried to invoke the use of unimaginable largeness in a slightly different way, calling for the careful treatment of details in *A Pale View of Hills* that may otherwise be brushed off as "aesthetic details" with a Japanese texture.

Coming to the ethical in *A Pale View of Hills* by probing at the aesthetic surface causes more shadows and outlines to emerge from the novel by the light of this illumination. While not a realist novel, certain historically realistic details invite readers to visit the socio-historical context of the novel. The simplistic attitude towards Japan and its people is also manifested visually and aurally in the bomb itself. Rey Chow asks in *The Age of the World Target*, "what politics of vision—of viewing the world—accompanied the strategic decision to drop the bombs?" (Chow, *Age* 12). This focus on the visual and visibility drives the crux of Chow's argument, in which she asserts the bombs were dropped as a precautionary spectacle of the kind of warfare the human race could not survive. Describing the (self)-destructiveness of self-referentiality in the wake of the atomic bombs, she posits, "the world has come to be grasped and conceived as a target—to be destroyed

as soon as it can be made visible" (Chow, *Age* 12). It is the visual product of the bomb—the image of the mushroom cloud—that Chow meditates on. What of the visual effect of the bomb itself? The bomb that obliterated most of Nagasaki was named "Fat Man," the signifier calling to mind Japan's ubiquitous symbol of their virile and dangerous, large sumo wrestlers. Even the shape of the bomb, round and tubby, unlike its leaner more streamlined little brother, "Little Boy," dropped on Hiroshima three days earlier recalls the image. Not to mention the painted yellow surface of the bomb with a black band painted across, which mirrors the large exposed surfaces of Asian yellow skin on Sumo wrestlers, concealed only by their sumo belt.

Fig. 1[34]

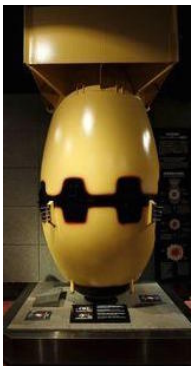


Fig 2[35]

[34] Image taken from Igarashi's *Bodies of Memory.* Art by Robert Grossman, *The Atlantic*, May 1989, 46-47

[35] Picture of Fat Man bomb in Nagasaki Peace Museum. Image taken from https://cdns.klimg.com/merdeka.com/i/w/photonews/2015/08/08/578344/640x320/20150808195802-wujud-bom-nuklir-fat-man-yang-hancurkan-nagasaki-70-tahun-silam-001-nfi.jpg. Web. Accessed 18 April 2019.

Through the work of Frantz Fanon, we understand race as an "epidermal schema," inextricable from the condition of the visible. Mary Ann Doane has described racial difference's "constant visibility" as "inescapable" and as "a disabling overvisibility," and Homi Bhabha calls the indisputable nature of this epidermal scheme colonialism's "open secret," reminding us that "skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes" (Bhabha 112). Anne Cheng claims that "not only do new visual technologies affect how we see racial difference but…racial difference itself influences how these technologies are conceived, practiced, and perceived" (Cheng, *Second Skin* 6). Indeed in the case of the Fat Man hydrogen bomb, the physical manifestation of the technology seems tied to the enemy for which it was conceived.

The Historical Novel That Was Not One: Narrative Appropriation and the Inability to Read Japan

"The interest in world literature," says During, "obviously follows the recent rapid extension of cross-border flows of tourists and cultural goods around the world, including literary fiction" (57). The commercial literary industry remains dominated by the West, and its demands for exotic narratives continues to pose a challenge to a truly revolutionary and de-colonized World Literature. *A Pale View of Hills* can be read as an immigrant narrative on two counts: it is narrated by the immigrant Etsuko; it is also written by the immigrant Ishiguro. But perhaps the most glaring gap in the novel may be that for what can be read as an immigrant narrative, we never get the actual story of *how and why* Etsuko comes to England. Ostensibly, we understand that the story will be revealed beyond the

diegesis of the novel, *after* the end of the book: Niki's poet friend "has decided she'd write a poem" about Etsuko's life.

The novel embeds a criticism of how immigrant narratives are often appropriated and commercialized by white writers—a salient point, and one that Ishiguro is able to forcefully make from the position of a non-white writer. Ishiguro seems cognizant of the potential of such a critique and embeds his own by hinting at such a version of the novel that may have existed instead: the one written by Niki's poet friend (presumably a fellow cosmopolitan Londoner). This would have been a work which would have been preoccupied with, and hence distracted by, a pale view of hills (the image Etsuko gives to Niki to pass on to her friend), and never privy to the troubling historically resonant, if elusive, images of wastegrounds, drowned kittens, and hanging children that Ishiguro, in fact, offers, and whose author would *still* be lauded as a "brilliant poet."

Niki declares to Etsuko over breakfast that "A friend of [hers] is writing a poem about [Etsuko]," and Etsuko reacts with thinly-veiled hostility, asking "Why on earth is she doing that?... A poem about me? How absurd. What is there to write about? She doesn't even know me" (173). And of course, she doesn't. We are shown a ridiculous instance of commodification and orientalism. Unlike Ishiguro's subsequent characters, whose flimsiness of their internal lives cause them to seem disconnected from themselves, Etsuko's interiority is fiercely guarded. She rarely betrays any feeling, but her emotions bubble palpably beneath the surface. Even her attempts to mask the degree to which she is affected by Keiko's suicide belie her emotions. Her expression of her desire not to "dwell on Keiko as it brings her little comfort" paraliptically performs precisely what it proclaims to avoid, claiming to reject memory even as she memorializes (9). Etsuko initially refuses

the appropriation of her narrative and its sublimation and aestheticization into poetry. Niki continues, "I was telling her about you and she *decided* she'd write a poem," as if the story and the decision to tell it were hers (my emphasis, 89). The justification for this is that "She's a brilliant poet" (89). Finally, Etsuko gives Niki a calendar with just one photograph to pass to her poet friend. The picture shows a pale view of hills over Nagasaki, a vista dear to Etsuko because she remembers sharing the view with Keiko on one of the few days she was happy. Presumably her poet friend will produce an ekphrastic rendering of the picture coupled with Niki's stories. What is portrayed here is an attempt at aestheticizing a traumatic event, made romantic because of its exotic quality: Etsuko is a nuclear bomb survivor living in England.

Before Niki leaves at the end of the novel, Etsuko tells Niki that the picture of a pale view of hills from the calendar is "a view of the harbor in Nagasaki" and that "Those hills over the harbor are very beautiful" (182). In fact, the novel's title makes its first appearance in the text at the beginning of Part Two, *right after* Etsuko's description of the wasteground, remembering that gazing emptily onto the "pale outline of hills" served as a welcome distraction and provided "a rare sense of relief" to their real, immediate problems—the hazy beauty of the image lending to its role in subterfuge (99).

Furthermore, it seems that Niki did not learn of Etsuko's experiences in Japan from Etsuko, but from her English father Sheringham:

> Besides, she has little idea of what actually occurred during those last days in Nagasaki. One supposes she has built up some sort of picture from what her father has told her. Such a picture, inevitably, would have its inaccuracies. For, in truth,

> despite all the impressive articles he wrote about Japan, my husband never understood the ways of our culture… (90)

The motif of the newspaper and Sheringham's occupation as a journalist recalls Benedict Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities,* which describes the ways in which print-capitalism was one of the major institutional forms that helped create communities, and by extension, feelings of nationalism. Ishiguro here seems to echo Chatterjee's critique of the myopia and exclusions of *Imagined Communities* in his essay "Whose Imagined Community?" Indeed, *A Pale View of Hills* reveals the imagined community only delineated by the English newspaper reading public, their secretly held stereotypes, and their imagined Other. Etsuko's English husband Sheringham, a journalist who wrote on Japan, whom Etsuko reveals "never understood the ways of [her] culture" despite "all the impressive articles he wrote about Japan" is of course part of this community (90). He also held clear prejudices against the Japanese race for "although he never claimed it outright, he would imply that Keiko had inherited her personality from her father" (94). As a metonymic representation for the newspaper, the narratives it produces, and the networks within which it is produced and circulated, Sheringham is in part responsible for Keiko's death— a fact which Niki later tentatively admits in the novel—"I suppose Dad should have looked after her a bit more, shouldn't he? He ignored her most of the time. It wasn't fair really" (175). The newspaper as the dominant mode of media for information dissemination in *A Pale View of Hills* exemplifies the ways in which newspapers not only compound, enforce, and circulate racist stereotypes held by the hegemonic demographic, they create them.

That Etsuko's narrative will have been transformed, translated, and circulated by different forms and media speak to the complexity and palimpsestic nature of the immigrant narrative. The various media—oral accounts, newspapers, photographs, poems—demonstrate the processes of transformation, circulation, production and reception of narratives today, but also expose the impossibility of conveying the immigrant narrative. Japan in *A Pale View of Hills* can be read *with* the grain of globalized networks of contemporary publishing culture—as a text on migration, memory, and translation, the novel demonstrates both the immense networks that can be dragooned for World Literature texts, and their limitations. Projecting proleptically, we are made to confront the ways in which the eventual published product of Etsuko's story will have been altered. The various moments of translations and transmutations of the narrative bookmark so many corrigendum in what will inevitably be the fragmented finished product of Etsuko's immigrant narrative. Ishiguro demonstrates in *A Pale View of Hills* how a refusal to acknowledge aestheticist reading practices can blind us to the various networks laid bare that we circulate within, and which circulate within us.

Western critics seem to lap up such ideas about Japan as pure surface, or the Japanese having no interiority or capacity for self-reflection. The novel may have been inspired by Ishiguro's childhood in Nagasaki and although what his general readership admired about his work was some putative authenticity of its Japanese "feel," the Japanese translation of the novel was not well-received in Japan. Japanese readers of Ishiguro note the non-native feel of the writing from Ishiguro's invocation of gestures—the characters bow at awkward moments, betraying Ishiguro's unfamiliarity with Japanese customs.[36]

[36] See Ria Taketomi's writings on the awkwardness of Ishiguro's Japan and Japanese characters to the Japanese reader.

One Japanese writer, Aono Sou, even complained that Ishiguro should not be allowed to write about Japan at all,[37] criticizing Ishiguro's Japan as a mere ekphrastic depiction of Ozu's films—famous, after all, for their empty spaces, and aesthetic blocking. The Japan perceived in *A Pale View of Hills* might seem an overdetermined Japan, merely a false representation, and the characters are unreliable and less like Japanese people than *Bunraku,* Japanese puppets.

If Ishiguro's later creations appear like "paper mâché animations,"—among them, an emotionally stunted butler, zany musicians, and soulless clones—his first novel is full of life. But tellingly, beginning after all with a suicide, life in his first novel is found beyond its human characters. The novel is full of ghostliness—the infanticidal woman from Tokyo whose apparition Mariko claims to see, Keiko's ghostly presence in the English house, even Etsuko's unreliable narration hints at skeletons in her closet and ghosts of her own. The characters of the novel are ghostly or hollow, half-alive, or unreliable. Instead, it is the physical land of Japan that seems to throb, vibrate, even fester with life. Life in the novel resides in both the damage and recovery of Japan itself. In this section I look at two recurring images of the Nagasaki landscape: the thriving Nagasaki harbor, the vital lifeblood of Nagasaki, and the expanse of wasteground in front of Etsuko's apartment block. The two images—one depicting robust postwar industrial growth, the other throwing light on the negligence of governments and corporations—illustrate two sides of the same coin that was postwar Nagasaki. Scrutinizing these images reveals networks of capital flows and consumption, biological pathways, and ecological movements. Japan features as an active *character* hidden in plain sight. But this nation-character in the process of recovery

[37] I thank Mr. Nobutaka Hiyoshi, PhD candidate at the University of Tokyo for pointing out and translating this comment by Aono Sou in a Japanese magazine.

and repair—growing and rotting; both after all, signs of life—is obfuscated by reified ideas of an exotic and oriental japan, trite symbols from orientalist opera, and the inability to read Japan and Japanese bodies.

The operation of reading Japaneseness in Ishiguro's writing stems from a parochial (mis)recognition of Nagasaki as a synecdoche for Japan. If representations of Nagasaki invoke a sense of nostalgia for an undifferentiated "past Japan," it is in no small part *simply* because Nagasaki is part of Japan (that common, undifferentiated signifier for the East)—and a place with heavy resonance for the modern Western consciousness. Such a reading of Nagasaki would be patently wrong, because Nagasaki has historically been one of Japan's most cosmopolitan, vibrant, and international cities, with networks extending into China, Singapore, the Netherlands, and beyond. For over 200 years of Japan's isolation policy, *Sakoku* 鎖国, until the 1800s, Nagasaki was Japan's only official international trading port, and therefore, Japan's only—or, at any rate, main— point of contact with the rest of the world.

Etsuko describes her day out with Sachiko and Mariko, when they crossed the water by ferry on their way to Mt Inasa:

> Noises from the harbor followed us across the water—the clang of hammers, the whine of machinery, the occasional deep sound from a ship's horn—but in those days, in Nagasaki, such sounds were not unpleasing; they were the sounds of recovery and they were still capable then of bringing a certain uplifting feeling to one's spirits. (76)

The vibrant harbor of Nagasaki beats as the vital heart of the city. Nagasaki has historically been an international port, immensely important to Japan's modern history. The diction of this passage describing the machinery imbues the inanimate machinery of industry and by extension, the nation, with life— from the onomatopoeia of the "clang" to the anthropomorphication of the "whine," the noises that "followed" them across the water, were signs of a country throbbing with life that was, like an injured body, in "recovery." The personifying "whine" of the machinery recalls the lamentations of a fledgling child—not unlike a nation newly recovering from devastation—bemoaning uncomfortable if necessary growing pains.

But such rapid growth always cuts both ways. Great economic growth is often accompanied by a malady elsewhere. The wasteground in front of Etsuko's block is described early in the novel and becomes a recurring, ominous image. We are introduced to Sachiko when Etsuko catches up to her at "the edge of the wasteground," and she describes the "expanse of wasteground" later (12, 15). Sachiko lives in the "wooden cottage [which]…[stood] alone at the end of that expanse of wasteground, practically on the edge of the river" (12). In Etsuko's first flashback, one of the first images she recalls in constructing the mise en scène of her life in Nagasaki is that of the ubiquitous wasteground:

> …between us and the river lay an expanse of wasteground, several acres of dried mud and ditches. Many complained it was a *health hazard*, and indeed the drainage was appalling. All year round there were craters filled with stagnant water…From time to time officials were to be seen pacing out measurements or scribbling down notes, but the months went by and nothing was done. (my emphasis, 11)

Part Two of the novel opens with another lengthy description of the wasteground:

> As the summer grew hotter, the stretch of wasteground outside our apartment block became increasingly unpleasant. Much of the earth lay dried and cracked, while water, which had accumulated during the rainy season remained in the deeper ditches and craters. The ground bred all manner of insects, and the mosquitoes in particular seemed everywhere. In the apartments there was the usual complaining, but over the years the anger over the wasteground had become resigned and cynical. (99)

Stagnant water is often a warning sign of imminent disease—from breeding mosquitoes to ground leeching. The passage reflects the dark side of economic and industrial growth. The "resigned and cynical" emotions of the people ultimately become aligned with and reflected by the physical pollution—stagnant and festering.

There may be more intertextuality between Ishiguro's earlier Japan novels and his later works than is immediately apparent: rapidly industrializing 1950s Japan of *A Pale View of Hills* may well have inspired the dystopia that is *Never Let Me Go*'s 1990s England, plagued with disease and desperate for cure. Critics have noted that *A Pale View of Hills* features certain anachronistic events—the opening of the Nagasaki Peace Park, the American occupation, etc.—that add to the formal effect of Etsuko's disjointed memory and narrative. As such, it is possible to assume that Ishiguro meant for the novel to deal with the variously fraught period of 1950s Japan, where he spent the first five years of his life. The descriptions of such scenes referencing the ecology and physical landscape of the setting together with economic recovery thus take on a darker tenor. Industrial robustness was a double-edged sword in 1950s Japan and sounded the alarm for some of Japan's biggest tragedies during its postwar industrialization years. The combination of "clang of the hammers" and "whine of machinery" signifying industrial growth with the

"wasteground" with "drainage [that] was appalling," which posed a "health hazard" which inefficient "government officials" were slow to address in 1950s Japan, inevitably bring to mind one of Japan's biggest environmental and biological catastrophes: Minamata disease, the first recorded case of organic mercury poisoning due to bad industrial practices. The four big pollution diseases of Japan (四大公害病 *yondai kōgai-byō*) were a group of man-made diseases all caused by environmental pollution due to improper handling of industrial wastes by Japanese corporations. Even though the first case was recorded in 1912, most of them occurred during Japan's period of rapid industrialization in the 1950s and 60s. Both Nagasaki and Minamata are neighboring coastal cities in Kyushu in Southwest Japan.

Toxicity in 1950s Japan was beginning to become a nation-wide problem. National growth translated into environmental hazards that encroached on civilian zones, making visible the pathways of capital flows that go beyond the economy into the biological and the ecological. In *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect*, Mel Y. Chen examines the lead toys panic in the US in 2007 and argues that "animacy becomes a property of lead… a… substance that feeds anxieties about transgressors of permeable borders, whether of skin or country" (15). I am less interested in the movement of toxic products themselves—even though that reading is certainly available here: mercury as a marker of Western capital flows that permeates national borders, is processed, then expelled into the country as toxic waste—than in the *effects* toxic substances have on human bodies and how those effects have historically been rendered readable or *unreadable* (for diagnosis) in the case of raced bodies. The effects go beyond "late-transnational capitalism doing violence to national integrities," but also expose the

difference in reading practices taken upon Asian bodies—the Japanese body in particular, in this case (Chen 272).

Minamata disease, the most well-known of the four big pollution diseases, was the first recorded case of organic mercury poisoning, caused by waste products being discharged into the groundwater by the Chisso Corporation. Mercury from the unfiltered wastewater entered the ecosystem through the bodies of fish and shellfish, which were then consumed by the local residents, resulting in congenital neurological disorders and loss of psychomotor skills. The disease was initially not recognized, as it had no precedent. It was first recognized in cats, when the cats in Minamata began to twitch awkwardly, or fall over—hence the term "dancing cat fever." This paved the way for investigation of human symptoms (Harada). Problematically, the unhealthy Japanese body could not be *read* as such and required an animal precedent. Even this aestheticization of the sick cats is disturbing as, like the "little girl [who] isn't on a swing at all," we learn that the cats were not dancing at all but afflicted with a serious neurological disorder as a result of organic mercury poisoning. The novel gestures to this link through its repeated use of kitten motifs. Sachiko says sternly to Mariko as she snatches the kitten away: "It's not your little baby" (165). In some ways, the suffering kittens stand in for the children in the text—like the various children in the novel, they are abused, abandoned, drowned. The last kitten is finally drowned in the river right by the wasteground and Sachiko repeatedly remarks on the filthiness of the water—"Look at this water, Etsuko. It's so dirty"; "This water's so dirty… The insects here are becoming intolerable" (167-8). That the dirty water of the river by the wasteground that was "becoming a health hazard" is ultimately the gravesite of the kitten makes for a substantial link to the health and environmental crises Japan faced at

that historical moment, as regards the "dancing cat fever" and eventually, Minamata disease. The only known case of mercury poisoning prior to Minamata was the Hunter-Russell syndrome, a type of mercury poisoning based on an industrial incident in the UK in 1940 (Tokuomi 518, Harada 156-7). Minimata victims only qualified for compensation under the 1959 agreement, if they displayed all the symptoms of the Hunter-Russell syndrome. Japanese illness, the loss of Japanese lives—and by extension, Japanese humanity—could not be recognized except when it could be recognized in relation to a *prior* Western form. Unlike Chen's racialized lead, mercury animated the Japanese body *differently,* working to dehumanize them by rendering their ill bodies *unreadable*—legible only in terms of a documented Western precedent.

Japanese bodies were incredibly fraught sites of social memory and national integrity in postwar Japan. The moment of the atomic explosion radically changed Japanese bodies and how they could be read. The immense heat given off by the explosion had incredible, unprecedented effects on the bodies that were exposed to it: Bodies became part of things. The Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum and Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum house artifacts and pictures that demonstrate this: bodies and objects were burnt, dehydrated, or otherwise melted and melded together—organic and inorganic matter fused together; previously animate and inanimate things became indecipherable from each other.[38]

[38] Figure 1 shows a helmet retrieved from the site of the bomb blast with the remains of skull fused into it. Figure 2 shows a lump of melted glass melded around the dehydrated bones of a hand. Figure 3 shows the burn marks of a woman in the pattern of her kimono print, where the dark areas of the pattern of her kimono have been seared into her skin.

Fig. 3[39]

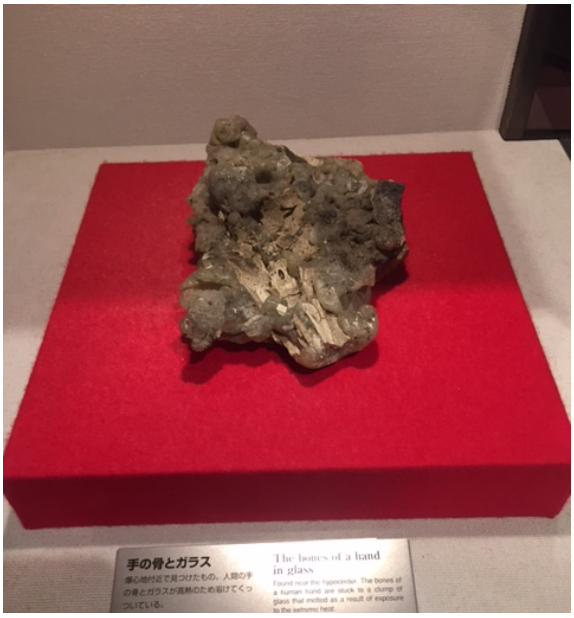


Fig. 4[40]

[39] Tan, Jerrine. "Helmet Skull." 2015. JPEG. Photograph taken with permission at the "Permanent Exhibition" of the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, Nagasaki, Japan

[40] Tan, Jerrine. "Glass Hand." 2015. JPEG. Photograph taken with permission at the "Permanent Exhibition" of the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum, Nagasaki, Japan

Fig. 5[41]

Etsuko's reaction to the awkward and grotesque memorial statue in the Nagasaki Peace Park highlights this dissonance in recognition. Etsuko describes the statue as "a large *white* statue," or "a massive *white* statue in memory of those killed by the atomic bomb—*presiding over its domain*" (my italics 13). This emphasis— in fact a mis-remembering— on the status's *whiteness* speaks clearly to the fact that it does not lend to cultural and ethnic recognition. The Peace Park statue is made of brass and appears to be an obviously stark light blue-green.[42] Rather, this white status, like a "muscular Greek god," which was "presiding over its domain" seems like a symbol for the aggressive white man directing Japan's future during the time of the American occupation in the wake of World War II. After all, the bomb marked Japan's surrender, which saw the beginning of the diminution of Emperor Hirohito, Japan's ruler, in relation to General Douglas MacArthur who

[41] Tan, Jerrine. "Kimono Woman." 2015. JPEG. Photograph taken with permission at the "Permanent Exhibition" of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Hiroshima, Japan.

[42] See Appendix for images and text from the Peace Park site.

accepted Japan's surrender, stripped Hirohito of his military authority, and oversaw the American Occupation in Japan for the seven years immediately after. "It was always my feeling," she says, "that the statue had a rather cumbersome appearance, and I was never able to associate it with what had occurred that day the bomb had fallen, and those terrible days that followed…the figure looked almost comical, resembling a policeman conducting traffic. It remained for me nothing more than a statue, and…I suspect the general feeling was much like mine" (138). The statue and its conception seem so utterly quartered, fragmented, and bizarre as to be impossible in lending empathy and self-recognition (137). This passage echoes the cognitive dissonance the people of Nagasaki felt even with the memorials erected in their name because depictions of "humanity" and "humaneness" did not resemble themselves at all.[43]

Even his most English novels have a way of being seen as "Japanese." Mark Romanek, who directed the Hollywood adaptation of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go,* set in England, has again invoked the terms "*wabi sabi,*" "*yugen*," and "*mono no aware*" in interviews. In an interview titled, "Mark Romanek Talks About Adapting Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* for the Big Screen," with *Vanity Fair,* both interviewer and Romanek read the final scene with the "plastic fluttering on the barbed wire fence" as touchingly and poignantly like "Japanese poetry." The interviewer, John Lopez, remarks that the "final shot with the plastic fluttering on the barbed wire fence did feel very Japanese." Romanek picks up the point and muses accordingly that "it's somehow Japanese, its hard to pinpoint what it is about it, but it has a kind of quality about a visual haiku. It's just little hints of what felt to me like Japanese poetry, and imagery." That some piece of trash stuck on a

[43] Interestingly, many of the other smaller monuments not mentioned in the novel, are of a mother and child, and most of these were donated by then-communist countries.

fence which senselessly separates one empty field from another should be seen to possess some essence of "Japaneseness" is a potent reminder of the problems of our culturally shallow practices of reading and adaptation.

The International Settlement: The Fantasy of International Writing

This inability or refusal to critically consider the non-West appears to be chronic, but not only limited to the Japanese context. The final thrust of my argument lies with another neglected Ishiguro novel, *When We Were Orphans,* which demonstrates again how Western critics have not attempted to seriously confront the non-West except through negligence and silence. As a novel that posits the dream of an ideal cosmopolitanism through the model of an "International Settlement" but in the East Asian capital of Shanghai, the book bridges the two distinct segments of Ishiguro's oeuvre. The locus of the novel, the International Settlement nestled within Shanghai, which itself was semi-colonized, and semi-occupied at the time, is more telling than it may initially appear. For one, it marks Ishiguro's first and only return to Asia after what I am calling his "Japan novels," but with a white protagonist. The idealized space of the International Settlement represents the fantasy of cosmopolitanism that critics seek to read in Ishiguro's body of work. The fraught space of Shanghai and the International Settlement within the city in which *When We Were Orphans* is set exists as a palimpsest of various cultures, classes, and even languages, and thus demonstrates and exposes the fantasy of universalism in the form of a "global village" and its ultimate failings. It is the subsequent crumbling of the idyllic International Settlement in the novel, buoyed after all by Shanghai's grey economy,

dirty money, and set amidst growing international strife that indicts precisely the naïve reader or critic who would propose to read Ishiguro ahistorically, or sweepingly as a cosmopolitan writer, without an informed consideration of his Japan novels. Even as his general oeuvre post-*The Remains of the Day* has been roundly lauded, *When We Were Orphans* is the one novel that fades into the background as critics sidestep it uncertainly: they remark on its brilliance of style while awkwardly ceding that it does not do its genre very well. Set in an "international" bubble in another East Asian city, *not* Nagasaki, but one more well known for being international, the novel resists the orientalizing and aestheticizing screen through which Ishiguro's Japan novels have been conveniently read, revealing precisely such problematic reading practices inherent in the field of World Literature today.

Widely read as a detective novel about a British detective, Christopher Banks, returning to his childhood "home village" in Shanghai, determined to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearance, *When We Were Orphans* is Ishiguro's least popular novel and, in many ways, the most underwhelming. But its lackluster reception may be explained by simply acknowledging from the start that *When We Were Orphans* is just not a very good *detective* novel at all. In the same way that *A Pale View of Hills* is an immigrant narrative with no immigrant story, *When We Were Orphans* is a detective story with none of the delicious spadework of the genre. Most critics implicitly recognize this, yet skirt around the issue, refusing to commit explicitly to such a criticism—Michiko Kakutani comes closest to making such a critique.[44] The refusal or discomfort around doing so, I will argue, is because it provides (like *Japaneseness* does for the Japan novels) precisely the

[44] See earlier Michiko Kakatani comment. See also Philip Henscher's review in *The Guardian.*

convenient veil for why the novel does not work, or is not well liked. Which is to say, it provides probably the only way for the cosmopolitan-Ishiguro fan to dislike the novel without having to acknowledge that *When We Were Orphans* forces an exposure of their double-standard and aestheticizing reading practices.

Ishiguro finds himself in an awkward position when it comes to issues of race. Despite their interest, Japanese readers criticize him for what they see as his capitulation to literary consumerism, feeding the West with an exoticized Japan while growing fat on book sales himself. On the other hand, Asian American critics such as Sheng-Mei Ma have criticized Ishiguro for rejecting his "Asian heritage" and writing in "white face" (81). Ma observes snarkily that none of Ishiguro's protagonists, save his first, Etsuko, share his Anglo-Japanese status. But Ishiguro, in fact, inscribes himself into the novel rather quietly—as Mrs. Fujiwara's eldest and only surviving son, also named Kazuo, a fact little remarked on by critics. After all, he may even be better aligned with Keiko, his alliterated absent creation—Ishiguro has revealed that "[his] mother was in Nagasaki when the atomic bomb was dropped" (Hunnewell). She was in her late teens and, like Etsuko, survived the bombs. In fact Ishiguro's personal history creeps into *When We Were Orphans* as well, allowing him to visit his complex relationship with not only Asia and Japan, but with internationalism as a World Literature writer, suggesting that the transnational writer may be likened to an orphan. If his Japan novels, set in Nagasaki where his mother was from, bring him to his Motherland, *When We Were Orphans,* set in Shanghai, where his father grew up, with the "sensibility of a Chinese man," brings him to his Fatherland.[45] Furthermore, if he feels that his Japanese name and face act as a straitjacket, as if he were

[45] "My father wasn't typically Japanese at all because he grew up in Shanghai" Ishiguro in *The Paris Review Interview*

only yellow on the outside, and British on the inside, he may rather seem more like a mix of Christopher Banks, who is white, but feels that Shanghai is home, and Akira, his childhood friend, an immigrant Japanese boy in Shanghai who does not want to return to Japan.

Indeed this idea of mixing is offered by Uncle Philip, who posits the dream of a fantasy, liberal universe using the International Settlement as a model, set in the future in which peace is achieved not by particularization and segregation, nor by a uniform and monolithic homogeneity, but rather a universal *mixing*:

> …it's true, out here, you're growing up with a lot of different sorts around you. Chinese, French, Germans, Americans, what have you. It'd be no wonder if you grew up a bit of a mongrel. … You know what I think, Puffin? I think it would be no bad thing if boys like you *all* grew up with a bit of everything. We might all treat each other a good deal better then. Be less of these wars for one thing. Oh yes. Perhaps one day, all these conflicts will end, and it won't be because of great statesmen or churches or organisations like this one. It'll be because people have changed. They'll be like you, Puffin. More a mixture. So why not become a mongrel? It's healthy. (79)

Uncle Philips here questions the effectiveness of governments and organizations in bringing about peace, imagining instead a Habermasian ideal of a mixed universal community. He subverts the use of the word "mongrel," typically used pejoratively to describe mixed-breed animals and as a slur for children born from miscegenation, reclaiming it positively as the hope for the future. The irony of course is that Christopher is white, so if he is a mongrel, he is only so on the *inside,* in ways that remain invisible.

Further, the illusion and facetiousness of Christopher's being a "healthy" mongrel is exposed by his contrasting pet name "Puffin"—one of few monogamous animal species. In other words, for all his exposure to diversity, Christopher is still, by blood, a pedigree. The "home village" that the International Settlement in Shanghai is, then, acts as a microcosm for the fantasy of a global village, representing a seed of ideal civilization that could unfold outward as a model for the rest of the world. And indeed the space of the International Settlement even gives expression to such immanent universalism—for it was a space where two little boys from different cultural backgrounds played with a shared understanding. Reminiscing on their childhood, Banks muses, "I had a feeling we acted out scenes from *Ivanhoe,* which I was reading at that time-–or perhaps it was one of Akira's Japanese samurai adventures" (113). This highlights the fungibility of these stories across cultures, suggesting idealistically that cultural specificity is not necessary for cultivating a common understanding, or even that perfect translation need be achieved.

But this idyllic time of ideal harmony only occurs during their childhood in the safe space of each others' houses. Elaine Scarry argues in her foundational study *The Body in Pain* that apartment blocks and houses symbolize homes and social safe spaces meant to comfort and protect, and that "in Western culture, whole rooms within a house attend to single facts about the body, the kitchen and eating, … the bedroom and sleeping…" (39). If architectural space can be read, as Scarry proposes, as coterminous with the body and its functions (39)—and by extension, identity, and even culture—the architecture of Akira's house serves as an interesting monument to the character's dual identity. Christopher informs us that both his and Akira's houses had been built by the same British firm, but Akira's parents had created a pair of "replica" Japanese rooms at the top of the house.

Christopher recalls that "once inside…one could not tell one was not in an authentic Japanese house made of wood and paper" and that "the doors to these rooms [were] especially curious; on the outer, 'Western' side, they were oak-panelled with shining brass knobs; on the inner, 'Japanese' side, delicate paper with lacquer inlays" (75). Akira's house, doubly surfaced—both on the outside and on the inside—troubles the notion of authenticity, and what is within and without. The doors to the room simultaneously seal *in* and seal *out both* "Englishness" and "Japaneseness"; they are simultaneously the sites of concealment and revelation, where "Japaneseness" is *enclosed* and *disclosed*. Positioned at a liminal space, the doors enact the tension that prevents worlds from colliding, the space at which borders are shared—the invisible point at which differences meld into each other, without erasing the other, and yet provide literal doorways to separate worlds.

In fact Akira's house might almost be an inverse monument to Ishiguro's own double consciousness: (he is, or wants us to believe he is) Japanese only on the outside, but English on the inside, and the metaphorical structure itself seems to draw from Ishiguro's own past. The house in Nagasaki that Ishiguro lived in till he was five displays a similar structure. Ishiguro has reminisced about the house, saying, "[t]here was a room on the top floor with Portuguese furniture" (Yamakawa 18, trans. and qtd. in Taketomi, "Kazuo Ishiguro and Japanese Films" xvi). Contrary to Sheng-Mei Ma's claims that save for Etsuko, Ishiguro's novels never betray any autobiographical detail, *When We Were Orphans* appears to be Ishiguro's extended meditation on national identity, immigration, ethnicity, and belonging, especially of his own. Like Christopher, Ishiguro's identity seems to display a dichotomous outside-inside. Ishiguro, who is both English and Japanese, is embodied by Christopher and Akira—inspired by both *Ivanhoe* and Samurai stories. Yet he shares Akira's and

Christopher's worry of not being respectively "Japanese" or "English" enough. The young Akira believed that communication breaks down when children are not deemed to be English or Japanese *enough.* So, not to conform or capitulate sufficiently to the national norm (whatever it may be) is to result in the cessation of communication and the breakdown of the parental unit—which then catalyzes the crumbling of the world. It was by practicing "Japaneseness" or "Englishness" that Akira believed they did their part to keep the world in harmony: "we children…were like the twine that kept the slats held together…We often failed to realize it, but it was we children who bound not only a family, but the whole world together. If we did not do our part, the slats would fall and scatter over the floor" (73).

This scene in *When We Were Orphans* in fact echoes directly with statements Ishiguro has made about himself and his sense of identity in an early 1989 conversation with Nobel Prize winner Kenzaburo Oe. Describing himself as "a kind of homeless writer," echoing the language of melancholic displacement,[46] he has said that he "wasn't a very English English" nor "a very Japanese Japanese" (Ishiguro and Oe 115). Because he "had no clear role, no society or country to speak for or write about," and "nobody's history seemed to be [his] history," (Ishiguro and Oe 115) he has often expressed a profound desire to be an "international writer": "If the novel survives as an important form into the next century, it will be because writers have succeeded in creating a body of literature that is convincingly international. It is my ambition to contribute to it" (qtd. in Sim 20). To get outside of this dichotomy, Ishiguro produces a fantasy of an international future for literature and has declared it his "ambition to contribute to it" (qtd. in Sim 20). Since Ishiguro feels himself a homeless writer, doomed as Heidegger says of Novalis's homesick

[46] See Anne Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race*

philosopher, to be nowhere at home, he imagines home to be situated in a third locale, outside the dichotomy of Japan-England: the international. The fantasy peaceful international future for which the International Settlement stands as a model overlaps with Ishiguro's successfully surviving literary world. But this third "international" locale is both precious and precarious in its "international-ness"— it is not, after all, unhinged from the flawed world it finds itself in, whose ontology is still rooted in the nation-state. It is ultimately "fragile" as Akira will later assert, at risk of dissipating into the air with the wave of a hand.

This dreamland is rudely unmasked as mere dream once Christopher begins to look beyond the settlement, realizing that the settlement does not--nor can it--exist as an independent bubble. The precarious nature of the International Settlement as a safe space is alluded to in the scene where Christopher first sees the Japanese launch shells into the Chinese area, thinking at first that he may be watching a firework show of some kind. He is told that "it's the Jap warship in the harbor. The shells actually arc over [them] and land over there across the creek. After dark, it's quite a sight. Rather like watching shooting stars" (170). A scene of warfare is defamiliarized and aestheticized—even naturalized—as the whimsical and wishful sight of shooting stars. This moment literalizes the dangers of defamiliarization that Viktor Shklovsky warns against—that it eats away at "work, clothes,…*our fear of war*" (my emphasis, 75). That the shells arc over them also calls into question the Allied nations' literal and figurative privileged place in this strife—as in between, ineffectual mediator, paralyzed, if not petrified and hence, as good as outside of it.

Fig 6[47]

Finally, Banks is forced to confront the "real world" when he accidentally leaves the International Settlement and enters the warzone of Chapei where he chances upon his childhood friend Akira, whom he has not seen for twenty-two years. This sets up a devastating and sobering dichotomy: if we are not in the fantasy world of a global home village, we are in war. Christopher imagines that the two of them will pick up where they left off, as if continuing their childhood adventures, and in a sense they do—but the grim backdrop of violence and strife unmasks the fantasy of their childhood games; the reader knows this adventure will lead nowhere redemptive. If earlier we imagined the space of home symbolized by Akira's and Christopher's houses to be comforting and safe, here the notion is literally blown apart. The violence performed on the physical architectural landscape of Chapei echoes the violence on bodies. In *Regarding the Pain of Others,* Susan Sontag reflects, that "a cityspace is not made of flesh. Still, sheared off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies in the street" (8). Elaine Scarry concurs with this alignment of the body and the house in *The Body in Pain*, observing that the rooms of a house, after all, often echo this parallel in the ways that they attend to singular functions of the body—

[47] *The Young Companion*. No. 132. December 1937. The Liang You Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd. Shanghai, China. Archives, Shanghai National Library, Shanghai, China.

eating, defecation, rest, etc. (39). As Christopher and Akira move through the devastated slum area, his "impression" was that "we were moving through not a slum district, but some vast, ruined mansion with endless rooms" (258). This literal sense of the *unheimlich,* at the moment in which an unfamiliar and ruined neighborhood feels all the more strange for its also feeling like a *house,* is compounded by Akira's and Christopher's reminiscing about home in a space of destruction:

> "I fight here, many weeks. Here, I know just like"—[Akira] suddenly grinned—"like my home village." […] "Yes," I said. "I suppose it's my home village too."[…] "I'll tell you an odd thing, Akira. I can say this to you. All these years I've lived in England, I've never really felt at home there. The International Settlement. That will always be my home." "But International Settlement…" Akira shook his head. "Very fragile. Tomorrow, next day…" He waved a hand in the air. (275)

While it is tempting to hold onto the International Settlement as home, and hence retain the false chiasmic fantasy of Home as an international space, it ultimately does not hold, and in fact collapses under the pressures of international strife. That Christopher earlier did not even realize they had left the settlement until he found himself in the warzone of Chapei highlights the illusory nature of borders and their permeability. Christopher's need to clarify that by "home village" Akira meant the International Settlement and *not* Japan calls attention to his own persistent sense of displacement. Home for them was neither England nor Japan-–not tied to nationality—but Shanghai's International Settlement. The claim that their "home village" is really the "International Settlement" aligns itself with the contemporary dream of a global village. The word village insinuates

a certain intimacy, smallness, or provincial quality—innocently connected by dialect, and free of the complications of modern financial systems—exposing the naiveté of such a wish. Akira's ironic description of his familiarity with war-torn Chapei as "like [his] home village" causes the space of the home and the place of strife to briefly overlap, forcing us to confront how home and the place of danger can be ineluctably entwined, not merely touching at the place of an invisible border, but not having one at all. If we are to believe that the International Settlement is "home," the novel immediately subverts that notion, pulling the rug out from under us. After all, Christopher's cherished memories of a perfect childhood in the International Settlement were entirely built on subterfuge.

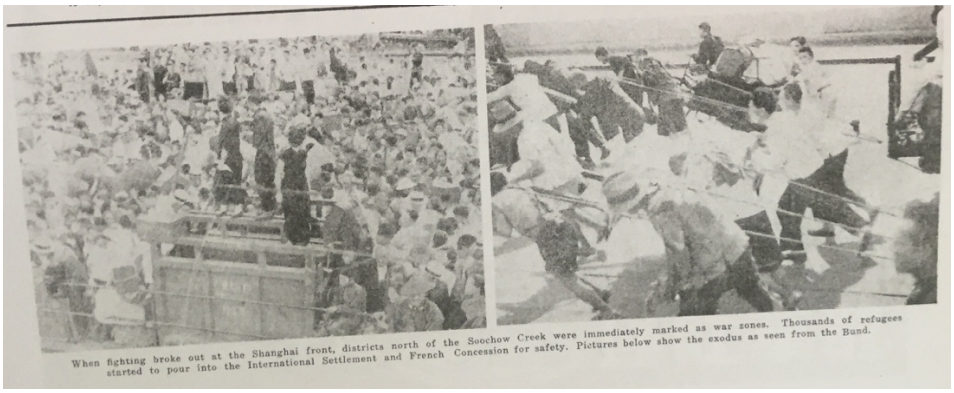

When fighting broke out at the Shanghai front, districts north of the Soochow Creek were immediately marked as war zones. Thousands of refugees started to pour into the International Settlement and French Concession for safety. Pictures below show the exodus as seen from the Bund.

Fig 7[48]

[48] *The Young Companion*. No. 132. December 1937. The Liang You Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd. Shanghai, China. Archives, Shanghai National Library, Shanghai, China.

Fig 8[49]

The novel utilizes its genre merely as a guise to allow Christopher to move seamlessly through social situations, classes, cultures, and geographies while the reader must suspend disbelief in order to reveal the darkness at its heart. It is only when Banks returns as a detective that he is able to pierce through the façade of the International Settlement and emerge into the "real" Shanghai. Early in the novel we learn that Banks was obsessed with—even jealous of— an old friend's *connectedness.* "You always used to quiz me about my being 'well connected,'" the friend laughs bemusedly, continuing, "Well connected? Just what does that mean, well connected?" (5). Banks's key concern (and the novel's key theme) is thus highlighted well at the start of the novel. Recalling the

[49] *The Young Companion*. No. 132. December 1937. The Liang You Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd. Shanghai, China. Archives, Shanghai National Library, Shanghai, China.

imperative of *Howard's End*, "only connect!" Christopher's obsession regarding his friend's "well-connected"-ness belies the importance of the imperative for himself. As an orphan, it would seem Christopher is at a disadvantage on the London social stage, with no (family, social, political, etc.) connections of his own. Yet, it is Christopher—or us—who need "only connect!" to see, at the end of the novel, that he has been the *most* well connected all along, and not necessarily in the ways he had hoped. Christopher is connected to friends and family across geographies. As a detective, the very essence of his job is to make connections, both social and logical. But when the mystery is finally unraveled, we learn that Christopher had unwittingly benefitted from the illicit money derived from the opium trade, and that it was his mother's sacrifice of flesh and dignity to the Chinese warlord Wang Ku that bought his safety and freedom. His mobility and affluence is enabled through his mother's invisible labor. The illusion of Christopher—his narrative of the self-made man of the meritocratic success story, the orphan who climbed the social ladder through his own intellect and volition—crumbles to dust to reveal the ways in which the affluent imperialistic West was not self-made, but immanently guilty of benefitting from the exploitation of peoples elsewhere. Christopher's quest, Oedipal-like, returns him to himself. The answer to his quest(ions) after all—the capital that financed his education and way of life—is synonymous with his last name: Banks. The illicit international capital flows through the networks of the grey economy—the many unregistered "banks" of Wang Ku's—aided the construction of Banks himself. Like him, his beloved "home village" International Settlement, is also funded and maintained through illicit connections and capital. This symbolically shatters the myth of the developed West as independent, and

autonomous, as its wealth, stability, even political innocence has been maintained by outsourcing its dirty work to the disadvantaged.

If *When We Were Orphans* is a bad detective novel, why is it nonetheless still praised for its style? The concessions the reader is asked to make to proceed with the plot of the novel begin as a little odd but eventually become egregious, unmasking its realist foil: an offhand chat leads Christopher to Inspector Kung, who holds the knowledge to where his parents may be, but of course, has forgotten it. An opium-filled haze brings the memory back to him, dream-like. Christopher's random cab driver conveniently knows the actor Christopher needs to find and takes him there. Finally, the childhood friend Christopher has been reminiscing about, whom he has not seen since he was a boy miraculously appears in the warzone. This all happens at a rapid pace and Akira is led away by the Japanese before the reader has even paused to ask herself this: *Was this man even Akira?* Christopher's suspicious recognition of Akira smacks of a certain casual racism: All Asian people look the same.

Christopher's disturbing failure to recognize difference is presented earlier on as well. In the midst of all this violence, Christopher mistakes the dying throes of two separate men to be one and the same. He only realized they were different men because when he realized the man "was shouting in Mandarin, not Japanese," and says that "The realization that these were two different men rather chilled me" (277). Christopher continues, "So identical were their pitiful whimpers… that the notion came to me this was what each of us would go through on our way to death—that these terrible noises were *as universal as the crying of new-born babies* (my emphasis, 277). Philip Henscher's creeping discomfiture at the same "universal voice" he identifies in his review of the novel begins

to get at something similar: a lack of knowledge of cultural and historical specificity robs us of our ability to be empathetic creatures. And further, we must be aware of this lest we remain blind to the suffering of others. Christopher's realization provokes a belated realization in the reader; the novel snaps its fingers at us, such that our horror at Christopher recoils as a second wave of self-horror at ourselves for allowing ourselves to be led along unquestioningly by such a careless narrator. Christopher's self-interested and self-invested forced reading of who may well be an unknown wounded soldier as Akira to fit the narrative he has decided must and will work for him parallels Western critics' incuriosity and superficial readings of Ishiguro's Japan novels. Our ready concession to the performance of bad genre executed with first-rate style highlights how easily we can be distracted from being attentive to suffering in order to satisfy our own curiosities—we want to know how the novel ends, and barrel through— aligns us with Christopher's narcissistic will to knowledge, echoing the horror of the heart of darkness.

We have reason to be suspicious then, of Ishiguro's claim that he decides on the setting of his novel last. Ishiguro admits partially to his capitulation to an exoticized style for literary commercialization: "It's very difficult for me to distinguish how much Japanese influence I've actually inherited naturally, and how much I've actually generated for myself because I felt I ought to," he explained. "I think I certainly do have a tendency to create a Japaneseness about my writing when I do write books in a Japanese setting" (Clark). But critics are less sure of what to do about Chineseness in the specifically Chinese Asian locale—not least because Ishiguro's connection to Shanghai through his father is not so well known. Unable to perform the trite superficial readings of "Japaneseness," critics seem to have ignored the cultural and ethnic aspect of *When We Were Orphans*. Henscher

unwittingly points this out in his observation on the queerness of what he observes to be the *absence* of "local colour" in *this* particular book: "The single problem with the book is the prose, which, for the first time, is so lacking in local colour as to be entirely inappropriate to the task in hand." When *was* the "local colour" of Ishiguro's prose appropriate to the task at hand? What does not occur to Henscher, is *his own assumption* that previous books *were* in fact adept with or rich in "local colour." As I have shown earlier, this was certainly not true of the Japan novels. Indeed, Henscher's conclusion both indicts himself and the critics who laud the "cosmopolitan Ishiguro" and delivers the final thrust of my argument. He concludes that "The resolution is moving and graceful, but the problem of the voice is a universal one, present and incredible in every sentence." I argue that the perceived problem of Ishiguro's voice lies with the critics who read it as universal. His text in fact begs the reader to look beyond the veil of his aesthetics to mine the socio-historical, cultural aspects of his plots. Critics' inability to address Shanghai in the same way they wrote off Japan as purely aesthetic exposes their practice as precisely aestheticist.

His latest novel, *The Buried Giant,* which comes to us ten years after the publication of its precedent and that critics have again read as a puzzling yet beautiful fantasy novel, is set in Sub-Roman Britain. Ishiguro had mentioned in several interviews before and after the publication of *The Buried Giant* that he was inspired by interwar and postwar Japan, the war in the Balkans, and the Rwandan genocide. Insisting on reading Ishiguro's Asian novels superficially—sighing at the pathos-laden plastic bags that remind us of Japanese poetry, or tut-tutting at a story of the Sino-Japanese war as a whimsical failure at genre—dooms us to finding ourselves further and further afield, condemning us to, when we finally

put down the book, myopically believe we have closed the book on merely a queer Arthurian legend.

Appendix

Tan, Jerrine. “Nagasaki Peace Park Statue.” 2015. JPEG.

Text reproduced from plaque at Nagasaki Peace Park:

The Peace Statue

…The elevated right hand points to the threat of nuclear weapons, while the outstretched left hand symbolizes tranquility and world peace. Divine omnipotence and love are embodied in the sturdy physique and gentle countenance of the statue, and a prayer for the repose of the souls of all war victims is expressed in the closed eyes. Furthermore, the folded right leg symbolizes quiet meditation, while the left leg is poised for action in assisting humanity
-Nagasaki City

Speaking Otherwise: Reading Voicelessness and Considering Silence in Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*

My third chapter "Speaking Otherwise: Reading Voicelessness and Considering Silence in Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*" reads Lee's novel which broaches the controversial "comfort women" issue. *A Gesture Life* enshrouds the abuse of a Korean military "comfort woman," K, by Japanese soldiers in Asia in a palimpsestic narrative of nostalgic flashbacks. The silencing of characters in the novel by various other characters (Japanese by American; Korean by Japanese; women by men) pulls together intractable structures of power and hierarchy, complicating and thus refusing reductive readings grounded in identity politics, exposing the novel's investment as something beyond identitarian categories. In this chapter, I turn to a novel that bears some resemblances to *Lolita*, Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*. Like *Lolita, A Gesture Life* guides its reader through the novel with an unreliable protagonist as its central voice. As each novel unfolds, the reader is filled with a growing sense of unease that he or she has been complicit in something very terrible. Both protagonists are immigrants to the United States, building their new lives in American suburbia. Most importantly, it should be made clear that the protagonist of *A Gesture Life,* like Humbert Humbert of *Lolita,* is also a sexual predator, though since Lee's novel is not similarly preceded by notoriety, this fact dawns more slowly upon the reader to different effect, highlighting a different version of masculine prosopopoeia that obscures violence against women.

The narrator, Doc Hata, is a Japanese man (Korean-born, and adopted by Japanese parents) living in suburban America with his adopted presumably African-American-Korean daughter. The novel toggles between the present day, where Doc Hata is a retiree in a respectable and affluent suburban neighborhood in America, and his time as a medic

stationed in South East Asia in World War 2 where he met "K." K is a Korean girl brought to his station to serve as a military "comfort woman" with whom he develops (what he perceives to be) a close relationship, believing that he is protecting her from the evil intentions of cruel Captain Ono, the sinister camp doctor. Finally, however, his cowardice and self-absorption result in K's tragic death. After immigrating to America, Doc Hata sets up a medical supply store and ingratiates himself to the community, becoming a respected figure, if never a beloved one. He also adopts and raises a mixed-race Korean orphan girl named Sunny, after whom he names his medical supply store. Cracks in his carefully maintained veneer of perfect kindly unobtrusiveness begin to show upon closer examination of his relationships with the women in his life—with K, Sunny, and even Mary Burns, a woman in his neighborhood with whom he develops an ill-fated romance. Despite his efforts at grappling with his memories, the ghost of K continues to haunt him in more ways than one.

Lee has often been compared to Kazuo Ishiguro and has said in interviews that he admires Ishiguro's work: the New Yorker lauds *A Gesture Life* for being "A wonderful mixture of Richard Ford and Kazuo Ishiguro" and his latest novel *On Such a Full Sea,* is said to "[recall] the work of Cormac McCarthy and Kazuo Ishiguro." These comparisons displace attention from the political issue of sexual slavery onto the plurality or universality of his voice. Like Ishiguro, Lee, left his birth country of South Korea very young, at the age of 5, and moved to America. Like Ishiguro, Lee is a person of East Asian ethnicity assimilating into a predominantly white society. Interestingly, Lee's first two novels also feature Asian protagonists, turning to his first white protagonist in his third novel (like Ishiguro in his Man Booker Prize winning *The Remains of the Day*). Yet, beyond the

superficial parallels between the two writers' biographies, careers, and the genres they flit across, there is little actual similarity between Ishiguro's and Lee's styles.

Lee's choice of protagonist and narrative voice begs questioning: after interviewing dozens of women with the initial intention to tell the story from the perspective of a "comfort woman," Lee chooses an immigrant Japanese man, Doc Hata, for his narrator, a decision which opens itself to obvious feminist criticism. *Why?* This chapter will read the occlusion of the female voice to consider the impossibility of representation and the disingenuousness of discourse in order to reimagine a way of recuperating a silenced voice. What happens when noisy protest ceases to effect change? What kind of alternative resistance might silence, aesthetics, or artifact offer? How might one speak otherwise, especially when political speech is rendered ineffectual, and silence is politicized as weakness or victimhood? I argue that the novel in fact uses this narrative conceit to make a case for the resistance and resilience available under oppression. Instead of reading K as merely the victim—as an allegory for Japan's war crimes in Asia—I examine how K repeatedly chooses silence, creates an alliance with Hata through a shared language, establishes a connection through storytelling, and refuses reproductive futurism.

I also look at the motif of the suffering female as mute and reified art objects in the novel through the work of feminist theorists such as Barbara Johnson, to recover the position of the mute victim. I contend that the novel is a feminist one as it subverts victimhood not by conferring K with the authority of the narrative voice, but by demonstrating how she leverages the various forms of resistance available to a victim with no power and argue for ways in which K is not merely an allegory for history, but a figure advocating a distinct form of resistance. Finally, these claims pull together to show how

Hata's male, first-person narration is part of the fabric that undergirds the novel's feminist position. Hata's narrative voice is an ultimately powerful heuristic as it places female testimony beyond fetishization. Finally, through Barbara Johnson's examination of the structures of victimhood, power, and speech, in which she reads victimhood as in fact "the most effective *model* for authority" because victimhood is conferred upon the most "highly-valued speaker" (153), I turn to demonstrate how Lee stages Hata's cloying claim for victimhood as yet another display of male self-pity by placing *his* testimony in the sobering context of historical violence, and in doing so makes the novel into an enactment of Johnson's feminist claim.

In the final section, I will address the US setting of the novel and Hata's unusual ethnic status and how they invite us to position the work and its author in relation to the usual Asian American categories. Hata's complex character challenges identitarian categories as it resists the deployment of superficial identity politics, forcing us to contend with the multitudinous character of Asian American literature itself within the framework of America and global politics. My primary focus in the body of this chapter, however, will be on how Lee's decision to frame a narrative about the sexual enslavement of the comfort woman from the perspective of a male perpetrator negotiates certain pitfalls that are apparent in other Korean American and feminist approaches to this topic.

The Problem with Memoir and Korean American Prosopopoeia

There is an understandable feminist impulse to "give voice" to these military "comfort women," yet many manifestations of this attempt to "give voice" continue to be yet another version of prosopopoeia—often in the form of researchers in the West retelling

stories and interviews to Western audiences for their consumption. The term "to give voice" is problematic because it suggests that these women begin from a place of voicelessness and, completely passive, therefore need to be *given* one. It is not in fact true to say that "comfort women" need to be given voice because they have been speaking up. Kim Hak-sun, the first woman to speak about the issue publicly, came forward with her story in August 1991. To say then that they need to be given a voice when they *have* been speaking out then effectively erases whatever they have worked to say, rendering it unheard. In this chapter, I look at the ways in which this mantle of "giving voice" has been taken up by the Korean American community through the example of Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman,* alongside the more popular genre of memoir, as well as other Korean American reactions. As I will suggest, what's problematic about a work like Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*—which is a more conventional novelization—that is apparent in the particular interest that a number of Korean American women have taken in this issue is that it invites a certain colonial gaze and appropriation, trafficking in a form of identity politics that allows one group of women to speak for another group of women, or, to allow one group to inhabit the position of victim by speaking in the mode of grievance for the other. This perversely bears some resemblance to the way Humbert Humbert's form of prosopopoeia operates. Before turning to take a closer look at how Chang-Rae Lee's novel is working differently, I begin in this segment by examining ways in which these women *have* used their voice—the rise of the issue in Korea as women began to speak out, the political traction among the Korean American community, and the documentation of the issue in memoir and historical fiction.

Feminist scholars on both sides of the United States-Korea divide have observed this strong investment in the "comfort women" issue on the part of Korean and American women. Exploring the causes of what she describes as "Korean American feminist fascination with Korean military prostitution," Elaine H. Kim argues: "Korean American women may be interested in comfort women and sex workers because as Asian women living in the U.S., they too are marginalized and suspect as possible traitors to the Korean nation, and because they too feel subject to the processes of racialization and sexual objectification" (x). In a 1997 essay, Korean feminist scholar Cho Hae-joang notes that "Korean American women seem to have great interest in the problem of comfort women," continuing that "when I asked some of them why this was so, they explained that it was because they were living in a racist society as Korean descendants and this problem is really close to their hearts" (qtd. in Kang 32). In fact Asian men are often desexualized in American popular culture and such marginalization and diminishment through sexual assault as a means of oppression is one that cuts deeply into the Asian American male psyche as well. The orientalization and sexualization of Asian women has often happened alongside the cultural castration of Asian men in Western cultures. It is then possible to understand why the topic of the sexual subjugation of Korean women can feel personal to Korean American men and to see how analyzing the suffering of "comfort women" shores up the complex pain of the inability to assimilate. And yet, Cho also noted that as a *Korean* feminist scholar, contemporary sexual harassment of young college women in South Korea "seems to be much more significant to me personally" (qtd. in Kang 32). This insistence on giving voice to the issue on the side of Korean American women can then be read as a kind of prosopopoeia as well—a type of imposition of first world feminism.

When the issue came to light in the 1980s, many Korean Americans rallied around the cause. Indeed, this outrage was shared by Americans in general, but the tangle of outrage, culpability, and disavowal of responsibility is more complex than can be seen at the surface since the "comfort woman" figure is in fact ex-centric to the national borders of the United States. Kandice Chuh reads the enfiguration of the "comfort woman" in both Lee's and Keller's texts as standing in for "the legacies of Japanese colonial occupation of and U.S. neo-colonial presence in Korea," which the Korean American figure of Doc Hata "must find a way of not only confronting but relating to ... in order to move from a state of selflessness to selfhood" (31). Like Hata, "The matter of Korean "comfort women" poses multiple problems—of nomination, of identification, of representation, and of knowledge-production" (Kang 31). Who can know and then, in turn, account adequately for both the historical event and its multiple subjects? Before that question can be posed, "who are and should be the "we" who must remember and represent this subject?" (Kang 31). The question of who gets to speak in this case moves the stakes past mere gender and across nations. No longer is it simply a question about Japan suppressing the speech of Korea, for instance—one has to consider too if it is a Korean American issue. And if so, is it also more largely an Asian American issue? (Since military "comfort women" exist in other parts of Asia too, even if Korea was disproportionately affected.) Are Korean Americans authorized to write on the subject? Should we be concerned if they narrativize or even fictionalize accounts by Korean women? Such representational and epistemological mobility of "comfort women" also alert us to the hidden discursive and ideological work for which this newly visible subject is enlisted (Chen 335). It follows that we would need to be "vigilant to how these different efforts become disciplined through their

categorization and slotting within specifically American regimes of knowledge production" (Chen 335).

As rape and sexual violence is still a topic of taboo in many cultures, it is indeed an issue that is generally shrouded in silence. It follows that silence is a motif that comes up repeatedly in discussions on the military "comfort women" issue, be it in fiction, the critical literature, or politics. The figure of the comfort woman is silenced, and her silence made to seem symptomatic of her complicity in her own abuse. In her essay on military "comfort women" literature, Allison Layfield details a great many films, novels, and journals, dedicated to "giving voice" to these military comfort women. Some examples are Dai Sil Kim-Gibson's 1999 documentary film, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women*; A book of black-and-white photographs and testimonials published in 2000 by the Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues, Inc. titled "Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military"; A 1996 thesis titled, "An Unsung Lament: The Suffering of Korean Women Taken for Military Sexual Slavery During World War II" (Layfield 72). One author, Therese Park, outlines her motivations in her essay titled "To Give a Voice," explaining that she "wanted to become a channel between them and the Western world, so that their voices could be heard loud and clear…" (qtd. in Layfield 72). Even the critical literature on the issue replicates this trope: "The Deafening Silence of the Korean "Comfort Women": A Response Based on Lyotard and Irigaray" by Constance Youngwon Lee and Jonathan Crowe is just one of many examples of essays on the issue that reference silence in their titles. Suffice to say *there is a lot of talk about silence*. Of course, this compulsion to testify for military "comfort women" is not insincere or misplaced nor necessarily wrong. Certainly, these women were abused and robbed of their

agency and this desire to narrativize and structure that trauma is one step in reclaiming some semblance of power.

However, the unquestioned claim of "giving voice" produces several other problems. For one, it works to *produce* the problem of silence, or, in other words, to "produce silence as a problem to be remedied" (Layfield 73). This is done in large part by figuring "comfort women" as voiceless and as needing to be given a voice. This is belied by the preexisting accounts of this topic in various forums and texts that gave rise to the initial discovery by the Korean/American artists, including the surviving women's direct public testimonials, making this figuration of military "comfort women" as "voiceless," ultimately disempowering. Secondly, the focus on "their" silence and voicelessness works to necessitate and to authorize the Korean/American writer/artist/scholar to assert her own voice or vision in the act of "giving voice" to the "comfort women." But who is authorized to speak *for* these women and why? Lastly, there is also the issue of reception: Readers internalize the voiceless powerlessness of these survivors or accept their silence and helplessness as an a priori position.

It is in no small part because silence is such a crucial topic of debate on the issue that most military "comfort women" novels take the form of the memoir—either written by a survivor herself, or fictionalized by an author. It has understandably become an important genre in reclaiming agency and power. Rosa Maria Henson's *Comfort Woman: A Filipina's Story of Prostitution and Slavery Under the Japanese Military* is an example of one such memoir. However, the form of the memoir gives rise to problems related to how we consume trauma as a culture, often commodifying trauma as a literary subject. In her essay "Consuming Trauma; or, The Pleasure of Merely Circulating," Patricia Yaeger

describes the dangers of coopting and commodifying stories of trauma (turning pain to aesthetic pleasure), by sensationalizing stories of suffering and violence and re-traumatizing the victims. She warns specifically that academics are "busy consuming trauma…obsessed with stories that must be passed on, that must not be passed over…but are drawn to these stories from within an elite culture driven by its own economies" (228). In other words, sensationalizing, fictionalizing, or even merely detailing accounts of rape can in fact be a deterrent to true comprehension of an incident of sexual assault, precluding analysis in some cases; strong, emotionally powerful experiences can distract from or stand in for the need for analysis. And in the case of historical fiction, is it a desirable outcome for fictional narratives to exceed or overshadow the first-person testimony of survivors? I want to argue that a turn away from the confessing victim-survivor memoir and a deliberate aestheticized silence in *A Gesture Life* opposes the pitfall of commodification of trauma by refusing to indulge in the sensationalization that produces emotions such as scandal and shock which often stand in for more considered approaches to the sensitive issue of sexual assault (Madsen 84).

Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* is a notable example of an award-winning piece of fiction on the subject writing by a Korean American woman. *Comfort Woman,* published in 1997, two years before *A Gesture Life,* paved the way for a well-primed critical and popular reception for Lee's novel. *Comfort Woman* won the American Book Award, given by the Before Columbus Foundation, a group dedicated "to the promotion and dissemination of contemporary American multicultural literature." As Allison Layfield outlines in her essay, Before Columbus Foundation has "always employed the term 'multicultural' not as a description of an aspect of American literature, but as a definition

of all American literature" (109). Therefore, the foundation views "multicultural literature as synonymous with American literature," and thus the "story of "comfort women" was validated and recognized as an American story that affirms and contributes to the multicultural composition of the United States" (Layfield 109). Texts receiving this award are often canonized as multicultural literature in public school and college classrooms, and the award itself is often mentioned as part of the novel's appeal (Layfield 110). In this way, the novel's borrowing of the trauma suffered by peoples elsewhere seems to have given it the inadvertent advantage of legitimizing itself as "multicultural" and canonical, thereby trafficking in a form of imperialistic and postcolonial prosopopoeia as well. Within the frame of such "multiculturalism" often bestowed on minority literature, the privileged position of the writer or scholar is easily effaced. In literary and other representations of "comfort women," "What becomes elided in this willful subjectivization is the profoundly undemocratic (re)production of the archives, which by their own partial construction can never speak *for* these women" (Kang 25). In addition, as Kang recognizes, the popularity and acceptance of "comfort women" narratives is "bound as much, if not more, by the techniques and protocols of producing a 'good novel' in English as it may be about publicizing the subject of 'comfort women' for American readers" ("Conjuring" 32).

Like Keller, many artists in the 1990s sought to publicize and complicate understandings of "comfort women." The literature produced about this topic reflects artists' desires to "give voice" to a silenced subject. This coincided with the first of the Wednesday Demonstrations, the longest-running protest in the Guinness World Book of Records, which occurred on the 8th of January 1992, and which I will return to later in this chapter.

Instead of a memoir in which a woman's voice is hardly heard for all the fetishistic attention paid to the specific moments of horror described, Chang-Rae Lee's variously multiple and diverse settings, plot, and characterization force us to confront our prejudices and our judgment of cruelty beyond the simple structures of stereotypical assumptions: One cannot simply write off Doc Hata's hypocrisy as a representation of Japanese xenophobia and hegemony, for Doc Hata is also ethnically Korean. His relationship with his adopted daughter is fraught as she is half African-American and half Korean. His own sense of magnanimity with regards to race and ethnicity is blighted when he requests a "Korean girl" and recognizes, in himself, his disappointment when he sees that Sunny is half-black. While K is Korean, the view we get of the war is not from the geographical space of Korea (which has a long, and hence in ways, more obvious or more internationally recognized, troubled relationship with Japan), but countries such as Singapore and Burma, whose experience of the Second World War have not been sufficiently explored in our wider collective archive of world history. This forces us to take the perspective of the Greater East Asian War rather than merely the Pacific Theater of World War 2, that for political purposes on the world stage have largely revolved around Japan and Korea. The use of an unreliable narrator also schools the reader into recognizing assault when it refuses to name itself.

Suspicious Speech

Surely it is a worthwhile goal to reclaim and assert the legitimacy of female speech—in testimonies, in politics, in law, and in fiction and literature. However, we would be remiss not to take into account the many legitimate and pressing reasons for why we

should be suspicious of female speech. By that I do not mean to suggest, of course, that women do not tell the truth; rather, I point to the attention that needs to be given to the many attendant factors relating to why women have not been able to speak in the past, when they have not been heard, when they have been accused of lying, when they have been convinced by those who oppress them to speak (or act) against their own interests, and when speaking the truth has often been a threat to their safety. Since speech, sexual violence, and agency are ineluctably entwined in the novel and in relation to the issue surrounding Korean military "comfort women," in order to understand what is going on in *A Gesture Life,* we need to take a broader look at the issues surrounding speech and consent, especially because K never verbally consents to intercourse with Hata at any point. To narrow the breadth of such an unwieldy and complicated topic, I focus here predominantly on the issue of consent and how or when it is verbalized, if at all, and the ways victimhood and consent might be differently legible and mobilized in different cultures.

The concept of "victim" is shunned by many feminists and non-feminists alike for its apparent eclipse of agency" (Alcoff 124). However, putting concepts such as "victim," and "speech as agency," into a global framework sheds light on their limitations and, I argue, allows us to reclaim silence (especially when speech proves unreliable, ineffective, or useless) and to imagine female agency in powerfully different ways. Further, the universal alignment of power with speech is unhelpful and becomes problematically disempowering when we do not take into account individual and particular cultures across the globe. I propose in this chapter that speech and even non-speech can be mobilized in ways that reinscribe female agency especially in spaces and cultures in which women do

not have the privilege of speaking freely and consider that the a "mute" statuesque posture which opens up space for undecidability may in fact *say* more.

In many cases of sexual assault and abuse, women and children are motivated to protect their assailant(s)—or at any rate appear as if the arrangement is consensual—as many are often dependent on them for various reasons (economic, psychological, etc.). Even the most generous reading of the relationship between K and Hata, in which we might believe she felt some genuine affection or closeness toward him, cannot be divorced from the power differential inherent in their relationship—the fact that she was his prisoner, that he held her life in his hands, and that she could have be assaulted or abused by him at any time.[50] This allegorizes Japan's assertion of superiority and hegemony over the entire Asia Pacific region and Japan's plan for a "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere." Indeed, rape is such a prevalent tool of war precisely because sexual dominance in war is inextricably tried to nationhood and sovereignty. Contrasting the concept of honor against contract models,[51] in her article "Discourses of Sexual Violence in a Global Framework," Linda May Alcoff highlights that it is a universal effect that a violation produces effects on other persons besides the victim, suggesting that "crimes against individual women are always and also crimes against the others that they are in relation with, perhaps their families, children, communities" (131). In the case of military "comfort women," it is an extreme metaphor for the subjugation (and in the case of Korea, annexing) of an entire

[50] A similar account of how a camp doctor would be assigned to "inspect" the women in the "comfort women" quarters is recounted in Rosa Maria Henson's memoir. In her account, the camp doctor often kept the women back after inspection and raped them himself.

[51] Contractual thinking is what limits us from understanding sexual violence in certain instances such as prostitutions or within the bounds of marriage as rape. This is twofold in the case of military "comfort women" as these women were described as "volunteers" when many were in fact, conned, or even forcibly taken from their homes. It gets further complicated in the case of many working prostitutes who were conscripted into such military sexual service. See Linda May Alcoff.

country. Indeed, Kalpana Kannabiran explains that just such communal and shaming effects motivate rapes of "women of minority groups—religious as well as caste—which signifies the rape of the community to which the woman belongs" (33). Unfortunately, because "cultures with less individualist proclivities may have their own reasons to eschew the concept of the victim, which is, after all, an attribution about an individual's treatment at the hands of another or group of others," (Alcoff 135) the mobilization of the term "victim" can be particularly insidious in East Asian countries as many societies do not want to admit to having been subjugated, leading governments to act against the interests of groups of women in their countries, in a misguided effort to preserve national pride. Within this framework, Captain Ono's extension of "mercy" or "generosity" to K regarding her upbringing or pedigree is part of the same humiliating and damaging assertion of power. Given the multiply coercive actions of rape, "rape might quite effectively be used to alter the subjectivity of persons, of their social and sexual selves, their interrelations with others, and the role they are capable of playing in a family and community" (Alcoff 131). In the case of military "comfort women," this becomes particularly pronounced and complex. Many women learned to pleasure men "well"—by that I mean quickly and effectively so as to shorten the experience.[52] In addition, they learned to *appear to be pleasured* in order to mitigate any further abuse, demonstrating what Barbara Johnson so poignantly describes in "Muteness Envy," that "women are silent about two things: their pleasure and their violation… which allows culture not to be able to tell the difference between the two" (139).

Further, rape and sexual abuse are defined in widely variant ways across cultures and countries, which has challenged the United Nations' effort to prosecute war crimes.[53]

[52] Rosa Maria Henson's memoir also provides several accounts of such behavior.
[53] See *Prosecutor v. Kunarac* 2001.

Often, in contractarian ways of thinking about consent, "consent is tied to rationality and emotional maturity, concepts that have not been associated strongly with women in most cultures. This weakens the role that consent can play in protecting women from violence and makes the concept of consent more vulnerable to a diverse set of uses against women" (Alcoff 131). Verbal consent, and by extension, the agency associated with the speech act, is thus diminished in these cases. This is pertinent because one of the major untruths that was circulated at the time in order to mitigate the soldier's guilt was that not only were these women "volunteers," but that many of them were coming from the sex industry—an issue that made the prosecution of military sex slavery a war crime even more unwieldy.

The alternating ways of considering military "comfort women" as victims or non-victims then can *both* adversely affect their well-being. Wolf defines victim feminism as "when a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness…[that] takes our trousseau reflexes and transposes them into a mirror-image set of 'feminist' conventions" (135). Though Wolf's characterization of victim feminism is damning, Alcoff astutely points out that her arguments are in fact diagnostic of the current discursive arena (134). In "Muteness Envy," Babara Johnson offers a subversive yet optimistic and empowering reading of "victim feminism," in which she suggests that both men and women vie for "who gets to claim victimhood," because it is in fact conferred upon "the most highly valued speaker" (153).

In a debate on the term "victim" at a feminist roundtable on prostitution in Japan,[54] two distinct points of view were voiced: Kuninobu expressed wariness about relying on consent, whereas Masumi Yoneda argued for an epistemic privileging of the first-person

[54] See Alcoff

point of view—in other words, arguing for the agency that comes with speech and assuming absolute self-knowledge. I sympathize with Yoneda's admonishment about giving women epistemic authority over the nature of their experience as probably "a response to the way in which women are epistemically disauthorized in nearly every culture" even as it is just as important to consider how many women are unable to, not ready to, or otherwise pressured into not recognizing abuse against themselves as abuse (Alcoff 135). And it is on the controversy and complexity of this debate on the alternating suspiciousness and empowerment of self-narration that the power of Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* turns. Just as Yoneda's claim acts as a "contextually informed heuristic responding to cross-cultural phenomena of epistemic disempowerment" (Alcoff 135), I argue that Chang-Rae Lee's choice of a male protagonist-narrator conversely acts as a potentially powerful—if initially ironic—heuristic for the importance of considering female speech and female testimony: we are trained to, forced to, or otherwise learn to recognize rape in a male testimony that—like so many—often blatantly denies it or even genuinely is not able to recognize it as such. Because K never verbally agrees to sexual intercourse, we as readers have to learn to "read" her "speech." Since we are learning to parse and evaluate a scene of sexual abuse and non-consensual sex through an unreliable male narrator who has an obvious investment in convincing his audience that the sexual relationship was a willing and consensual one, Chang-Rae Lee takes away the possibility for victim-blaming. As K never verbally says yes *or no,* both before and after the act, the onus lies on the reader to *realize* the violence that has taken place, removing the possibility for castigating K as simply trying to shirk responsibility.

Speak Otherwise: Resistance and Rejection

Constructing comfort women as silent obscures the fact that they have in fact been speaking. It is true that the plight of these women and the fact of the abuse they had suffered had been much denied and obscured in the years following the war, but this began to change in the 1990s when Kim Hak-sun came forward in August 1991 as the first surviving "military comfort woman" to share her story. The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan was established in 1990 and made demands for reparations on behalf of these women as well as called for formal apologies from the Japanese government. On February 6, 1996, the United Nations declared its condemnation of Japan for the sexual enslavement of tens of thousands of women for Japan's imperial troops during World War Two (Soh 1226). The Korean Chongsindae movement for redress suggests that feminist political activism has been essential to raising public consciousness about the problem of "military comfort women" (Soh 1232). Books on the issue have been published in Japan since the 1970s and the politicization of the issue in South Korea and Japan began in the late 1980s. In January 1989 women's organizations in Seoul staged a demonstration march protesting the government's plan to send an emissary to the funeral of Emperor Hirohito (Soh 1232). Finally, during the state visit of President Roh Tae Woo to Japan in May 1990, feminist activists raised the issues of the suffering of the Korean people during Japanese colonial rule and demanded reparations for "comfort women" in particular (Soh 1232). In August 1991 Kim Hak-sun, then in her late sixties, became the first Korean woman to give public testimony to her life as a "comfort woman" for Japanese military troops during the Pacific War (Soh 1233). To perpetuate the myth that these women continue to need to be given a voice is to rob them of their voice a second time.

And the myth cannot be supported even at the level of the novel's conception, for Lee himself conducted dozens of interviews with surviving "military comfort women," who willingly shared their experiences with him, on a research trip to South Korea for the novel. Lee flew to South Korea and interviewed several of these women and subsequently spent more than a year trying to weave their stories into a cohesive narrative. Consequently, Lee does not write the novel in the voice of a "comfort woman," but nonetheless rehearses, through the figure of Hata, a version of problematic prosopopeia, as it is Hata's voice that narrates the stories of the "comfort women." However, the novel gives readers the resources to discern in K's words and actions an agency that exceed the narrator's rendering of them. This agency emerges, paradoxically, especially in those moments of aestheticization that reduce her to a mute stillness. "I probably wrote three-quarters of a book in that vein," he said. "But I began to feel that what I had written didn't quite come up to the measure of what I had experienced, sitting in a room with these people. I began to feel that there was nothing like *live* witness" (my emphasis, Garner). It is particularly interesting that Lee should conclude that there was nothing like "live witness." If there is no such thing as live witness, what would it mean to have a witness that was not alive? Later in this chapter, I take this question literally and turn to look at "non-live" witnesses in the form of the statue motif in the novel and political "comfort women" statues in Korea and in other parts of the world. I investigate what it would mean to read the trope of silence in the face of injustice as subversive rather than undesirable. What capaciousness and power can survivors be imbued with by reading silence as undecidability rather than as a problem to be solved?

In many ways, K serves as a straightforward analogy for Korea and highlights Korea's attendant history of colonial violence. While this is not a unique or creative reading, it is nonetheless, an important one. The assertion of national powers and enforcement of authority in wartime are often inscribed through the enactment of sexual violence on women's bodies. During the World War 2, up to 200,000 women, the majority of whom were Korean, were forced into sexual slavery and made to serve Japan's military forces under the euphemism "comfort women." The refusal of Japan to acknowledge and take responsibility for the mistreatment of these "comfort women" has been a major obstacle to Japanese-Korean relations since the war. In his early article on the novel, "Gender, Race, and the Nation in *A Gesture Life*," Young Oak Lee offers one such straightforward analysis of the gender, race, and national politics taken up and complicated by the novel. Indeed, rape as an allegory for an attack on national sovereignty is one that is painfully pervasive in war literature: Nora Okja Keller's novel *Comfort Woman* includes a graphic scene that explicitly demonstrates this in which Induk, one of the military "comfort women" begins yelling "I am Korea" while she is raped. On a different war, *The Sympathizer* by Viet Than Nguyen includes a similar scene in which a double agent, when asked her name, screams "I am Vietnam" as she is gang raped.

But the troubling rape scenes in *A Gesture Life* are not ones of overt, spectacular violence or of screaming victims, but rather, of quiet domination that could almost, frighteningly pass equivocally as moments of tenderness. Saidiya Hartman writes about "the diffusion of terror and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property" (4). After spending more time with K, Doc Hata begins to have feelings for her. The sinister camp doctor, Captain Ono, has kept K away from the comfort

house for erstwhile unknown reasons, and has finally requested to see her. K desperately pleads with Hata to kill her, so she can die with dignity. He cannot agree, and while she feigns sleep, he begins to caress her:

> She was sleeping, or pretending to sleep, or somehow forcing herself to, and she did not move or speak or make anything but the shallowest of breaths, even as I was casting myself upon her. […] Then it was all quite swift and natural, as chaste as it could ever be. And when I was done I felt the enveloping warmth of a fever, its languorous cocoon, though when I gazed at her shoulder and back there was nothing but stillness, her posture unchanged, her skin cool and colorless, and she lay as if she were *the sculpture of a recumbent girl and not a real girl at all.* (my emphasis, 260)

This line finds a perverse literary precedent in the troubling scene which marks Humbert's audacious transgression into prohibited territory, in which he masturbates with Dolores Haze "safely" in his lap. He describes her as a two-dimensional, rippling photographic image, and believes that she was not a real girl at all. There is little evidence to believe that Lee was directly inspired by Nabokov, yet his language here bears striking resemblance to the scene in *Lolita*:

> …and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not her, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita—perhaps more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own. The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that

affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark. (62)

The manipulative rhetoric here is shocking. Humbert insistently repeats that Dolores Haze is "safe," and that she "knew nothing" and he had "done nothing to her" at the same time that he ends this scene of abuse by turning the verb "abuse" on himself in an aggravatingly simpering attempt at self-abasement and sympathy. The audacity of Hata's deliberately fraudulent description of his assault as "chaste" is infuriating as it echoes with Humbert's insistence that Dolores Haze was "safe," while the one suffering abuse was himself. The metaphor of the "languorous cocoon" that Hata found himself in, like a still inchoate butterfly, would find no deeper admirer than Nabokov, passionate lepidopterist with an intimate knowledge of the horror that beauty can hide. While Dolores Haze is reduced to a photographic image, K is fixed as a different kind of art object: a sculpture.

In her essay "Muteness Envy," Barbara Johnson traces the "idealization of female muteness already in place in the aesthetic tradition" and the ways in which it allows moments of sexual violence to be aestheticized and glossed over (142). Examining Daphne's literal aesthetic reification in place of being raped by Apollo, Johnson describes how "[t]he privileged aesthetic moment is a freeze frame just prior to ravishment" (142). While this "privileged aesthetic moment" prior to the rape, is excluded by the unreliable narrator, Doc Hata, what we do get, perhaps more insidiously, is a freeze frame *ex post facto* where her rape is retroactively written over, reinscribed and rewritten by him as aesthetic, as if it had not touched her. Thus, he convinces himself of her consent, and his innocence. But what kind of consensual sexual relation is possible under domination—when the utter powerlessness of her "no" means it can always be taken to be a "yes"?

Earlier in the novel, a disturbed and troubled soldier had dragged off one of the girls (K's sister—and so, in a way, a surrogate for K) and slashed her throat, killing her. The soldier, Endo, was sentenced to death, "charged not with murder, but with treasonous action against the corps. He should be considered as guilty as any saboteur who had stolen or despoiled the camp's armament or rations" (189). This exposes any pretense or ambiguity in how the girls were viewed—merely as property, in their use-value for the soldiers, and not humans at all. As Saidiya Hartman points out, the dual invocation of person and property makes issues of consent, will, and agency complicated and ungainly (80). The female "volunteer" comfort woman, here, as property, being *will-less*, is presumed always willing. K's silence in this instance, becomes construed as consent and acted upon as such, and we as readers are complicit in erroneously believing this up till the point at which Hata tells us he realized she was crying. As he is about to leave the room, Hata thinks that K is whispering his name, but upon listening more closely, realizes "that she was fitfully crying, though in quelled gasps, as if she were trying to hush herself" (261). As we readers are tethered to Hata's handicapping first-person narration, his belated realization of his misrecognition of K's pain for affection causes us to realize that we have anchored ourselves to a solipsistic, unreliable, and cruel narrator, unable to discern suffering for his own pleasure, and further that we have read K's silence wrongly.

Perusing her naked body, Hata notes that she is "coolly burnished" and the last thing he registers before he rapes her a second time is that "[he] thought she was the most beautiful *statue* of herself" (my emphasis, 294-5). Hata reifies K as an art object—a "beautiful statue," but an object nonetheless. This time, afterward, she does not cry, but seems to shrink into herself, and, as if from the world: "For that is, finally, what she would

escape if she could, not the ever-imminent misery and horror but the gentle boy-face of it, the smoothness and equability, the picture of someone heroic enough to act only upon his own trembling desire" (295). He unmasks here his own cowardice and weakness, which, in its good-looking meekness, passes as mere timid virtue concealing the same ugly violence of domination.

It is by forcing the reader to realize this that the novel enacts its feminist thrust, for it is when we are made aware that we have read K's silence wrongly that we are able to attune ourselves to how she speaks *otherwise.* K survives by literally speaking differently—in a different language. Not only is she not passively silent, she cannily uses her linguistic ability to attempt to alter her situation and to draw *Hata* out of *his* silence. She deliberately uses the common language she shares with Hata as leverage—both to establish a more intimate connection with him, and to subtly get him to align himself with her. While trying to get K to comply at the camp, Hata reveals his Korean ethnicity to K when he finally resorts to speaking to K in Korean, which he knows she will surely understand. There is an immediate primacy placed on the Korean language (*her* language) as it is in Korean that he comes into being, for upon hearing him speak, "Her expression turned instantly, not in mood so much as aspect, the way she gazed at me *as though I had magically appeared from nothingness*" (my emphasis, 232). It is this revelation of Hata's that allows K to turn the tables on him and assume some form of power when she, in turn, interpellates him: "And then she said, quite plainly: "You are a Korean." […] she said, not looking away as she spoke" (234). K derives power from asserting herself in her own tongue, "[sounding] much more confident and mature… than when she mumbled and half-whispered in Japanese. And there was an uprightness about her posture" even causing Hata

to feel "unsettled by her forward bearing, as I was at once amazed and strangely intimidated," unable to act on his "impulse to order her to be silent, harshly command that she leave immediately" (234).

Emboldened by her knowledge of Hata's Korean ethnic origin, K uses their common language to force a shift in the power relations between them. By getting him to speak in his mother tongue, she coaxes him into familiarity, even forging a kinship with him. She thereby inadvertently pressures a realignment of himself with her, by default, betraying his fellow soldiers, camp, and by extension, his adopted country. She tells him that his voice (when speaking Korean) reminded her of her brother's, turning the experience of a common language that bespeaks a nationalistic bond into an even more intimate *familial* one—"But I think, sir, that most Japanese would never bother to learn to speak Korean as well as you do…When you first spoke outside, I thought it was my younger brother talking to me again. Your voice is just like his" (234-5). They tell each other stories about their pasts, or fantasy futures, thereby escaping the abjection of their present situation. By getting him to cathect onto either the past (his Korean origins) or future (the places they will visit together) because the present is untenable (where he is a Japanese soldier, and she, his Korean captive), she effectively gets him to untether himself from his Japanese national bonds. Having turned the tables on Hata by insisting on speaking their common language (*her* language, and the one he has disavowed) on her terms, she renders Hata voiceless—"I cleared my throat, but nothing would come out" (238)—and is able to assert herself, even speaking over him—""My Korean name is Kkutaeh," she said, speaking over me" (239). Even though he "did not wish to go on conversing with her any longer…[he] found [him]self listening to her closely," allowing

the common language he shares with K to even initialize a schism between himself and his fellow soldiers, himself noting that the "steady rolling tone" of the language was like "*ours* and not, *theirs*" (my emphasis, 239). Even though he tries to disavow the affinity he feels towards her as the hot-blooded reaction that "any young man might naturally feel for a young woman," and not a connection of "blood or culture or kind," he admits that speaking to her in "[his] childhood language [had] stirred [him] in an unexpected way" (239). K's speech also unwittingly gives away something of herself and her upbringing and class which works to protect her in ways she had not predicted. Hata reflects on that fact that "her talk was also not vulgar or harshly provincial-sounding as were the other girls'; she was obviously educated, and quite well read" (239). In spite of himself, he finds conversation with her so alluring that his allegiance to the Japanese Imperial Army is compromised, for it was "when she was willing to talk with [him]," asking after his childhood and both his Japanese and Korean families, "that [he] lost [him]self" (243).

Further, she also leverages the way she is only read superficially—which is to say, as pure surface with no interiority and therefore also no humanity; as object rather than person—to ensure her survival. Her body is regularly inspected only as a piece of property, for the ways it can be used to serve the camp soldiers. Since she is only seen and read as an object, she manipulates this "bad reading" of herself as mere body or object to her advantage. We learn that "K admitted to [Hata] that she had not been menstruating some days before, that she had intentionally pricked her thumb with a wood splinter and smudged the blood around her private area and thighs, in the hope that the commander would reject her" (243). In this way, the reading of her as *merely* a body to be exploited leads to the

*mis*reading of her body when it is only read for its utilitarian value and thereby preserves her life and integrity.

Statue Politics and the Politics of Adjacency

Perhaps the scene that best reclaims female silence is the one that initially appears quite isolated and unrelated to the events of the novel. Hata has just spent a day with his estranged adopted daughter, Sunny, and her son Thomas. Ruminating on the role he can play in his grandson's life and the ways in which he perceives he has failed Sunny, he comes upon a boy and a girl packing up in a Halloween store:

> … he messed up her work. This happened twice more until finally the girl took the cloth and shook it open and placed it over her own head. The boy was confused. She sat there with her face covered in black, and he yelled at her once and then rose abruptly and left her. The girl remained there, under the veil, unmoving for some time…I felt I understood what she was meaning by her peculiar act, how she could repel his insults and finally him by making herself in some measure disappear. As if to provide the means of her own detachment. It was because of this notion—as well as the simple cloth itself, similar enough to the swath Sunny once found in a lacquered box in my closet—that I remember the girl, Kkutaeh, the one I came to call simply K, and the events in our camp in those last months of the war. (221-2)

It is this scene that first recalls K to Hata and is the reader's first introduction to the character. Not a physical resemblance but the "notion" of "[providing] the means of her own detachment" causes Hata to remember K. It is not speech, but the adoption of a certain

silent posture that becomes a form of resistance, refusal, or even repulsion. The girl's refusal to meet the aggression of the boy with any overt aggression of her own is a display of a Bartlebysian politics of refusal—a silent and sustained expression of "I would prefer not to" that is no less uncompromising and powerful in lieu of words.

In "Muteness Envy," Johnson begins by parsing Keats's *Ode To A Grecian Urn,* which ekphrastically depicts the story of Daphne and Apollo. Daphne is transformed into a beautiful laurel tree and therefore escapes sexual violence. In "Acts of Stillness: Statues, Performativity, and Passive Resistance," David Getsy, expanding upon Barbara Johnson's essay, asks, "If, in Johnson's formulation, muteness becomes the condition that both sparks and authorizes rape, paternalism, and objectification, then how does muteness operate in relation to surrogates for human beings that stand before us and do not speak?" He is thinking here of sculpture, and it is to sculpture that I turn to now. Indeed, as I have shown earlier, Hata repeatedly aestheticizes K and refers to her as a sculpture or statue before he violates her, as if having turned her into an art object, he is then licensed to defile it. He describes "[h]er skin [as] cool and chaste to me, almost sisterly, *alabastrine*" (my emphasis, 263). It is as if the female subject, having been converted to an inert sculpture, silent, thus assents to her violation.

Against the narrator's interpretation of the girl's concealment of herself as an attempt to repel her affronter by disappearing (suggesting a shrinkage of self), I suggest that it in fact facilitates an absolute, even transformative assertion of herself: she transforms into an unyielding object—unmoved and hence immovable.[55] It also invokes and subverts

[55] I am inspired here by Anne Cheng's examination of cladding and ornamentation in relation to architecture and Josephine Baker's performances in her essay "Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility" and the relationship between the body, its covering, and objecthood.

the image of the submissive bride—the veil here black, opaque, and dramatic rather than sheer, white, and virginal. In her essay "Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility," Anne Cheng says that "objectification can be a kind of clothing too" (110). I would like to suggest here the inverse: that clothing (or cloth, at any rate) can cause a kind of objectification, one that can shield and protect one's interior subjectivity. Cloaked in the black silky fabric, the girl does not disappear, but is transformed. The synthesis of the two could be said to be imagined on the cover of the Granta Books 2001 edition of the novel which features a woman, presumably K, wrapped entirely in a black silky fabric, showing only her blurred feet, exposed shoulders, and half of her face peeking out from under a split in her curtain of silky black hair. The image, suggesting femininity and nudity, eroticizes her at the same time that the imperceptible melding of her curtain of flowing black locks with the sheen of the dark fabric literally objectifies her. The ambiguity between hair and clothing produces an oscillation between body and object. Proximity is contagion and the visual continuity between hair, body, and cloth insinuate the elements upon each other, blurring the line between the body and the object in a process of "ontological democratization" as Bill Brown calls it. I argue that it is not so much the girl's "retreat," as Hata reads it, or her silence, that reminds Hata of K, but rather, this sculptural or "object-like" element. In this way, not words but the body becomes a form of defiant protestation and stoic retaliation. By thus cloaking herself with hair or the black silk flag, K is able to retain some form of dignity and integrity. Hata's obfuscating narration, likewise, does the same for K's interiority. It comes as no surprise then, that, Doc Hata's full name is Kurohata, which means "black flag" in Japanese. And in fact, it is in this posture that Hata comes across K when she fools both the commander and Captain Ono into believing she was on her period:

"Her thick hair had come undone, and it fell in a shiny black cascade, totally covering her face" (230). She did not "pull up the hair that was messily covering her face" and was "[hardly] a person at all" (231). It is in this posture of opacity that she forces Hata to first use Korean to communicate with her.

The efficacy of such a stoic, sculptural politics of refusal can be observed in the political energy generated by actual, literalized "comfort women" sculptures in the midst of waning interest and activism around the political issue. The political resonances and effects of the comfort woman statues across the world, and in Korea in particular, offer a way to reimagine and reclaim the passivity so often used to indict women for their own abuse as a form of engagement and incitation to community and political activity and to challenge speech as the only manifestation of power and agency.

Fig. 1[56]

[56] Yonhap. *The Korea Bizwire*. 29 Oct 2015. koreabizwire.com/in-unity-there-is-strength-monument-to-comfort-women-gets-a-friend/44319.

Fig. 2[57]

Statuesque, and rendered into a statue, the "comfort woman" K is seen to invite her own violation and demise. But as a statue, delicate but resolute, of bronze rather than of alabaster, the comfort woman statues command a different gaze that opens the space for different action. Where protest continues into stagnation, the political excitation generated by the erections of the comfort women statues provides ruptures to the pervasive political stasis around this subject. The Wednesday Demonstration, a weekly protest held outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul, demanding recognition and reparation for "comfort women," holds the Guinness World Record for longest running protest. The first protest occurred on the 8th of January 1992 soon after Kim Hak-sun came forward with her story and must have informed the writing of both Nora Okja Keller and Chang-Rae Lee. On the 14 of December 2011, the first comfort woman statue was erected outside of the Japanese embassy in Seoul to commemorate the 1000th demonstration, provoking strong reactions from the Japanese government. The sculpture is of a young girl, hair cut short, with her fists balled up in quiet, but stoic defiance, her feet are bare and barely grazing the ground.

[57] Yonhap. *The Korea Bizwire.* 29 Oct 2015. koreabizwire.com/in-unity-there-is-strength-monument-to-comfort-women-gets-a-friend/44319.

Often, the sculpture includes an empty chair placed beside the girl, inviting not only participation, but also assembly. Seated, one engages with and becomes part of the sculpture, and the sculpture, engaged, becomes a bit more alive. Thus, the sculpture defying to be reified, promotes a politics of solidarity and adjacency. No wonder the sculptures feel so threatening despite their quietness: they incite participation, and in other words, proliferation. The sculpture seems to beget more of itself—with iterations in Glendale, California, Southfield, Michigan, Seoul, and one of the latest now in Busan which has literally doubled: the sculpture consists of a bronze Korean girl in traditional Korean dress, and next to her, sits a bronze Chinese girl in pigtails in traditional Chinese dress, made by a Chinese sculptor (See Fig 1 and 2). Leo Shi-yong who made the Chinese status said "Two years ago when I first saw the monument made by Kim Woon-sung, I was very moved. But at the same time I felt very lonely. Since Korea and China both suffered at the hands of the Japanese, I thought that a Chinese girl statue might keep the other statue company."[58] An empty chair next to the two girl statues is also part of the sculpture and serves as an ever-open invitation to join an ever -growing resistance. These contentious sculptures gather about them a vivacity of political energy. In January 2016, the Japanese ambassador to Korea was recalled in light of the erection of this "comfort woman" memorial in Busan near the Japanese General Consulate. As recently as November 2017, yet another comfort woman statue memorial erected in San Francisco caused the mayor of its sister city, Osaka, to cut ties with the city. This latest memorial has one more girl than the last, comprising three girls to represent three countries: Korea, China, and Philippines.

[58] From "In Unity There is Strength: Monument to "Comfort Women" Gets A Friend". 29 Oct 2015. koreabizwire.com/in-unity-there-is-strength-monument-to-comfort-women-gets-a-friend/44319.

In this way, sculpture, the body, and speech, can be mutually constitutive and mutually inform each other as forms of resistance and refusal. Acknowledging Shoshana Felman's claim that "the speech act is always doing something more and other than what it is actually saying" (qtd. in Butler 179), if we consider if it is "right that verbalization remains the norm for thinking about expressive political action" (Butler 18), rethinking the speech act can allow us to imagine differently what is done by certain kinds of bodily enactments: the way bodies can "do" or "say" or protest even if they are sculpturally silent.

Even the event of K's murder feels quietly triumphant. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that it is finally in forcing her own murder that K triumphs, for she finally escapes a life she has decided she does not want to live out. Hata is unable to deliver a swift death to K and therefore consigns her to a violent and tragic end. But it is K who charges forward to meet her death, having killed Captain Ono just before, she cuts the lieutenant with a scalpel, so that, enraged, literalizing the silencing of victims, "he punched her hard enough on the mouth that some of her teeth flew out, like tiny white birds" (303). The matter-of-fact tone with which this description of such violence is delivered is chilling, and doubly unnerving because the literal silencing and fragmentation of the girl is so brazenly aestheticized into the symbol of purity and peace: white doves—the perverse invocation of which serves only to belie the fact that there is no peace to be had, and no future to be hoped for. In a situation where there is no good choice and no good outcome, K nonetheless acts to choose the end she wants for herself. The reader can piece together K's harrowing end from Hata's narration, the description made more sickening by his elisions than by his inclusions—"It was the men. Twenty-five of them, thirty of them… Some were half-dressed, shirtless, trouserless…They were flecked with blood…One with his hands and

forearms as if dipped in crimson…" (304). K is presumably gang-raped and murdered—her brokenness literalized in her being torn asunder in what can only be imagined to be a Bacchic frenzy. Her death mirrors that of Enchi, who was blown apart by a bomb, similarly ending up in pieces up in the trees in a clearing. Literally dismembered, she is (re)membered by no one but Hata. After the "comfort woman," K, is finally literally torn asunder by the multiple agents that try to subjugate her and subject her to their will, Hata, like Agave to Pentheus, sets about to gather her remains:

> Yet I could not smell or hear or see as I did my medic's work. I could not feel my hands as they gathered, nor could I feel the weight of such remains. And I could not sense that other, tiny, elfin form I eventually discovered, miraculously whole, I could not see the figured legs and feet, the utter, blessed digitation of the hands. Nor could I see the face, the perfected cheek and brow. Its pristine sleep still unbroken, undisturbed. And I could not know what I was doing, or remember any part. (305)

Hata's paralepsis ("I could not smell… I could not feel… I could not sense… I could not know… or remember…") is poignantly yet pointedly effective because it traffics in the rhetoric of denial and disavowal at the same time that it narrates its own confession. The painful irony of this is embedded in the language itself—he "could not…remember" even as he literally re-members K. Nonetheless, the narratological choice to stage her death in an extra-diegetic scene removes the fetishistic lens through which trauma is so often consumed and instead places the responsibility (and horror) of imagining the scene squarely on the reader's shoulders. One is forced to confront the frightful images we conjure up as well as to face the fact of the unknowability of her suffering. Even to the very

end, in K's murder, the novel "places responsibility for knowledge on readers, emphasizing the importance of the interpretive act" (Chuh 101). It is in this liminal space of ambivalence—of knowing and undecidability, imagination and responsibility—without the condescension of either projecting a voice onto her or making her into alternatingly a fetishized victim or a martyr that the novel returns agency and dignity to K; to the last, her interiority is preserved. The perfection of the dead baby, in this way, doubly reflects K's final triumph. The unborn fetus that Hata collects both symbolizes the failed and racist dream of the "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere," (alluded to in Captain Ono's possible eugenics plan) the ill-fated plan that K resolutely refused to bring to term, and also her literal interiority—"perfected," "unbroken, undisturbed," to the very end.

Muteness Envy

Lee's novel glaringly does not do the work of other novels in the categories *A Gesture Life* might fall (or want to fall) into. As a "comfort woman novel," it makes no pretenses about not "giving voice" to the "comfort woman."[59] As a novel about immigration and its attendant traumas, it does not attempt to trace a lineage to a "Motherland," nor does it return to the trope of a mother-daughter narrative.[60] In fact, at every point, the link is disrupted—many of the major characters do not have an origin story, nor do we have any way of really uncovering "where they came from" except in the most superficial and opaque of ways. In fact, the deliberately convoluted identities that feature

[59] See Layfield.

[60] Seminal and well-known works in the field such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* as examples of this trope. Laura Hyun Yi Kang makes note of this as well.

in the novel present what appears to be an investment in identity politics that buoys its realist mode while simultaneously subverting it and deconstructing identitarian categories.

At the outset, Chang-Rae Lee's narrative formulation may seem to affirm the postcolonial politics that Gayatri Spivak details in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" regarding how "the 'subaltern' cannot appear without the thought of the 'elite,'" literally demonstrating, through the conception process and narrative construction (the male first-person narrator) of his novel, that there is no access to the subaltern consciousness outside dominant representations or elite documents—the award-winning Korean American immigrant writer returns to interview dozens of military "comfort women" only to tell their story through the lens of a privileged man. This is why the memoir is still the most popular form for "comfort women" novels—it appears to "give voice" to these women. I argue further for the recuperative and feminist effects of Lee's narrative choices. The use of a male first-person narrator and protagonist who does much to occlude the actual physical violence involved in the history of military "comfort women" does two things: firstly, it removes the fetishistic lens through which we view the often detailed self-narration of the crime of sexual violence, and secondly, the identities of the characters in the novel are so deliberately multiply layered and the hierarchies of power between them so convoluted that it resists the deployment of identity politics, forcing the reader to reassess their own assumptions about race, gender, class, and hierarchy.

Addressing Foucault's project, Spivak says that "It is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe" (75). Spivak's framework for understanding and interrogating power and representation is usefully analogous to the specific structures of

power and colonialism that I investigate in this chapter in regard to Japanese colonialism and oppressed military "comfort women" as well. As I explored earlier in the chapter, popular means of "giving voice" to the comfort woman—through memoir, reported interviews, historical fiction, mythicizing—often in fact demonstrate that "The intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self's shadow" (Spivak 75). Spivak reminds us that after all, "one cannot put together a "voice"" especially since "the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves" (93, 82).

Spivak's final imperative requires an intensity of self-awareness and self-reflection. She furthers that

> In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* 'unlearns' female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized. (90)

It is in the gap between the inadequacy of mere substitution of a lost figure (or what I read in this project as prosopopoeia) and the strict self-disciplining that threatens to render all critical work insufficient that my interest lies. How do readers and critics move from one to the other? What modes of reading and interpretation can be employed and how can interpretations of speech and silence, activeness and passivity be subverted? *A Gesture Life* performs for us how "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears" (Spivak 102). Where the silent victim *is* an "irretrievable consciousness" her "disappearance" is marked by "a violent aporia between subject and object status" (Spivak 102). Indeed, in the absence of access to her interiority,

the figure of the woman resides somewhere between unreadable woman and unknowable statue, between subject and object. But ambivalence dwells in these interstices and it is in learning how to deal with and interpret ambivalence that we may begin to get close to a complex individual which remains silent.

Barbara Johnson offers one way of thinking of what is unsayable and what is not said through her discussion on ambivalence. In her introduction to *The Feminist Difference,* she points out how "most discussions of ambivalence treat ambivalence as a temporary, unfortunate, and remediable state of feeling" suggesting that "perhaps *that* is the problem" (2). She posits instead that "Perhaps there is something healthy about claiming the right to ambivalence…If resistance is always the sign of a counter-story, ambivalence is perhaps the state of holding on to more than one story at a time" (2). I suggest that staying with ambivalence might in fact be an even more capacious and radical act, one that employs the "best tools" of postcolonial discourse to critique itself. Indeed, this runs parallel to what Spivak writes when she is concerned about what the work is *not* saying: "what the work *cannot* say is important, because there the elaboration for the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journal to silence" (81). Johnson's writing on ambivalence in relation to euphemism works similarly. Johnson concedes that while "Euphemism may be a way of avoiding conflict, …it also functions as an "X" marking a spot where later, perhaps, a poet will be able to say more. Protest may not yet be voiced, but at least the spot has been marked" ("Euphemism" 96). What is not said euphemistically marks a space for elaboration in lieu of an utterance. Shuttling between considering the comfort woman as subject and object, person and statue, allowing space to acknowledge compliance and violence, even pleasure and abuse, opens up the ambivalence inherent to her interiority. These "silent" statues then,

(and by extension, postures of silence which are more active than they may appear on the surface) act euphemistically in Johnsonian terms and are doing more than they seem (or say). I take this argument further to contend that not only does it mark the spot where someone *will* be able to say more, but that the euphemism or silence itself *is* saying *more than it seems* in what I read to be an act of active resistance.

Indeed, the ways in which we read and react to accounts of female sexual violence reveal plenty about our imbedded assumptions and the ways we think about female agency. As Johnson says, "When men employ the rhetoric of self-torture, it is *read* as rhetoric. When women employ it, it is confession. Men are read rhetorically; women, literally" ("Gender" 123). Men are imbued with genius, significance, and multiple meanings from the get go and conversely, women are not. When Humbert and Hata repeatedly bemoan how they have been internally tortured, their language is admired for its style.

Kandice Chuh and Laura Kang's discussion of Asian American women and the "comfort woman" issue in particular are part of a feminist genealogy beginning with Barbara Johnson and Gayatri Spivak. Laura Kang's project in exposing how "The sometimes facile but more often fraught attempts to account for Asian/American women could underscore how different disciplines privilege particular modes of subjection" focuses on "foregrounding of the particular historical circumstances, ideological suppositions, and methodological tactics that enable and constrain that compositional instance" finds a precedent in Spivak's postcolonial work (3). In *Imagine Otherwise,* Kandice Chuh argues that "Hata's narrative nonetheless relies on distinguishing between K and Sunny as victim and agent, respectively" (109). I resist this conclusion and demonstrate instead that while K's abject circumstance certainly avails her to the label of

"victim," seemingly without agency, she asserts and deploys her individualism and agency in various different ways. Ultimately, my interest in K is one that aims to demonstrate the power of ambivalence—to show that a person's assertion of their desires, dignity, agency, complicity and denial can coexist with the fact of their abuse—because endowing a person with the capacity for complexity and contradiction is more empathetic and dignifying than merely pitying a victim.

Chuh reads the opening line of the novel ("People know me here.") as one that is "too pastoral to be accepted without question" (101) therefore allowing Lee to establish "part of the interpretive challenge of the novel as the need to resist seduction into uncritical belief" by a self-abasing and "friendly" narrator. One of the main points of Chuh's arguments in her reading of *A Gesture Life* is that in making Hata an ambivalent figure, "[Lee] offers an acceptance of undecidability as the mechanism for claiming agency in directing and being accountable for one's life" (100). It is not clear whether or not Hata is deliberately deceitful, but nonetheless readers are left unsure about Hata's ability to accurately perceive, evaluate, and render the motives that have shaped his representations of events in his life (101). I read the character of Hata more harshly, but agree on the eloquence and elegance of Lee's challenge to his readers to dwell on ambivalence in another figure in the novel—the absent center of the novel, K. If Lee's novel follows the logic of misogyny, in learning to question and resist it, we learn to resist the logic of misogyny.

In Kang's formulation of what she calls the "compositional subject" that is the Asian American woman, she invokes Foucault's formulation of the role of the "Examination" in the "intertwined making of the human as both a productive body and an

intelligible body" and how it sounds "useful warnings to the recent effusion of compositional efforts about Asian/American women" (17). This formulation is in some ways analogous and therefore useful to my interest here in female speech. Just as power is enforced in Kang's project through imposing what Foucault calls "a principle of compulsory visibility" which "maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (187) because constant and compulsory surveillance transcribes visible bodies into a "field of documentation" and "a network of writing," so legitimacy and power is enforced through an insistence on women's speech.

This can work in worrying ways as women are encouraged to "speak out" only to have that speech disciplined or delegitimized—at one level negating the speech act itself, and at another level, serving as a disciplinary measure to caution against further speech. One need only think of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and Anita Hill to recall a history of women's speech subject to examination, surveillance, documentation, and subsequently delegitimization. The implicit teleology of silence-to-speech, unheard-to-loud-and-proud protester affirmatively structures a certain form of speech as the ultimate goal, the promise of which will finally imbue the subaltern/the "comfort woman" with legitimacy and coherence that was, by definition, not there before. Citing recent rhetoric, Kang points out that "the repeated rallying cries of "breaking silence," "coming to voice," and "making visible" presuppose some absence, repression, and marginalization as the ontological rationale and political motivation for particular articulations of self and community" (20). This means that the composition of the subaltern subject (or in this case the figure of the "comfort woman") is reliant on her emergence into speech recognized as speech by the dominant culture. If we know that the "minority voice" is often used for purposes of

Othering by making difference mainstream through such tags as "multiculturalism," is such speech necessarily desirable and good, and for whom? Indeed "the textual production of "Asian American women" as a distinct object of knowledge through the partial interests and chance collisions of grassroots activism, ethnic studies in the university, state-sponsored knowledge production on girls and women in response to feminist efforts, and a commercial publisher's interest in a timely, profitable "topic of interest"" (Kang 13). This way of making of "subjects" is not necessarily liberating. The figure of the "comfort woman," K, then expose readings of minorities or persons outside of normative identitarian categories as subalterns who are entirely reliant on external representations and readings of themselves.

In my first chapter, I explored how Nabokov's heavily aestheticized and totalizing style works to distract the reader from the central horror of the novel—a crime that we become better equipped to discern when we simultaneously consider *Pnin,* a novel that familiarizes the reader with Nabokov's personally and historically contingent politics and ethics. If Lee's writing attempts a similar stylized quality—one that several critics praise him for—the landscape of the American Dream on offer is disrupted by the novel's toggling between the presentation of idyllic American suburban life (which clearly conceals more than Hata cares to reveal) and a violent, visceral past grounded in the history of the Pacific Theater of the Second World War. Where the obfuscating haze of language lulls us into a stupor in *Lolita,* in *A Gesture Life,* Hata's jolting flashbacks to a historical moment of violence causes his stylized and pensive prose to feel more grating. Where Humbert's melodramatic and zany appeals to his reader to pity him can take on the quality of comedy and wit because it is clear he does not actually deserve pity, Hata's self-pity and

solicitation of pity feels more insidious and therefore more sinister. Hata's layered flashbacks have the texture of a labored performance of remorse—simpering and genuine attempts to derive pity through a deflated portrayal of self-guilt. Both men appeal to pity; both men yearn to claim victimhood. "It is in this male two-step—the axe wielder plus the manipulative sufferer, *both* of whom see themselves as powerless—that patriarchal power lies" (Johnson 153). To borrow from Johnson, "To speak about female victimization is to imply that there is such a thing as a model of male power and authority that is other than victimization" (152).

If Johnson is right, that "Far from being the opposite of authority, victimhood would seem to be the most effective *model* for authority, particularly literary and cultural authority. It is not that the victim always gets to speak—far from it—but that the most highly valued speaker gets to claim victimhood" and "feminism is so hotly resisted… because…*it interferes with the official structures of self-pity that keep patriarchal power in place*" (153) then Lee has effectively produced a novel in which a feminist muteness is the object of envy by the prosopopoeiac narrator. Instead of reading K as mute and therefore passive and devoid of agency, it is possible to imagine how she might speak otherwise—what it says when her mute stillness, statue-like, appears strong and stoic in the face of being narrated by someone else. And what it says when her narrator and abuser, through his desire to claim victimhood, exposes his muteness envy.

It is important that, although we may never know if Dolores Haze, too, had any perverse longing for Humbert or Quilty, or both, that space for ambivalence and unknowability can coexist with the fact of her abuse. In Spivak's essay, the teenage girl she writes about finds herself in an impossible situation and kills herself. In *A Gesture Life,*

K similarly courts and manufactures her own death. What speech is possible when all speech is guilty speech? The novel thus exposes our reading prejudices and implicit biases—so accustomed to a silent victim that we are not able on the one hand to discern her speech, or, on the other hand, to understand her silence as active instead of passive. We gain a better understanding of what has happened by looking past the male hegemonic voice and dwelling on the incomplete, unknowable, and undecidable female subjects. It is as Spivak declares: the subaltern cannot speak. The female intellectual as intellectual is not free to "dismiss her circumscribed task with a flourish" (82). The medium of literature is "important for feminism because literature can best be understood as the place where impasses can be kept and opened for examination, where questions can be guarded and not forced into a premature validation of the available paradigms" (Johnson 13). Literature then is not defined by a canonical set of works, but by the mode of work it encourages—" the work of giving-to-read those impossible contradictions that *cannot yet be spoken*" (my emphasis, Johnson 13). The novel therefore invites us to consider that accepting the unknowability of the subaltern consciousness might be part of the project of maintaining her integrity in an intellectual culture that would (and must) attempt again and again to speak for her. It is, to borrow from Gayatri Spivak, "to *recognize* agency in others, not simply to comprehend otherness" ("Teaching for the Times" 473).

"An Act of Faith": Feminism as Writing, Communitarianism, and Mutual Constitution in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

My final chapter reads Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being,* which tells the story of beleaguered and suicidal sixteen-year-old Nao from California who moves to Tokyo in the wake of the dot com bubble bust when her father loses his job in Silicon Valley. The difficulty in carving out a new life for his family drives her father to attempt suicide multiple times and Nao, fearing that he will one day succeed, and bogged down by her own troubles at school where she is unable to fit in as she is "too American," resolves to end her own life soon too. Before she does so, she forms an intimate bond with her centenarian grandmother, Jiko, who is a Zen Buddhist nun. Jiko, too, grapples with death and loss, most notably that of her son, in whom she found a kindred spirit, and whom she lost to the war when he was drafted as a kamikaze pilot. Ruth Ozeki herself is an ordained Zen Buddhist priestess and the novel literally foregrounds its investment in Zen Buddhism by opening with an epigraph of a poem by Zen Master Dogen. Thereafter, the novel opens proper with Nao speaking from the page, as it were, as we readers eventually realize that we are taking a metatextual peek into her diary: "Hi! My name is Nao, and I am a time being. Do you know what a time being is?" (3). We learn of Nao's tribulations analeptically through the character Ruth, a woman suffering from writer's block and a sort of literary avatar for the author Ozeki herself who shares the same name, who picks up Nao's diary in Canada after it has passed through the Great Pacific Trash Vortex and washed ashore after the 2011 tsunami in Japan.

Most critics writing on transnationalism or cosmopolitanism remark on the ambitious scope of the novel across time, space, cultures, and more—from the Second World War to Zen Buddhism to love hotels; from Tokyo to California to British Columbia—as yet another dazzling attempt to connect disparate threads on a global and international scale. Hsiu Chuan Lee's essay discusses the radical global interconnectedness broached by the novel and Marlo Starr explores the alternating empowerment and disempowerment implicit in the liberating potentials of technology and cyberspace and its global reach as suggested by the novel. Against readings focusing on globalization, I argue that the most expansive, imaginative, and ultimately, redemptive connections the novel makes articulate a profoundly communitarian and feminist politics. Through Nao's earnest lens, trite stereotypes of Japan such as suicidal salarymen and kamikaze pilots are made sympathetic. Against the men in her life who seem to have a drive for death, Nao, through her kinship with her feminist-anarchist grandmother and her imagined reader, ultimately finds the strength not to die, but to live. I show how the imaginative power of the novel lies not in its ability to connect across space, but in the redemptive and generative potential of the bonds of community and women and ultimately, its call to action in the face of uncertainty.

Even as the novel takes on an ambitious range of issues—from ecological collapse, revisionist history, empire, to ethics in warfare— it does so through a pervasive interrogation of form that is truly novelistic: it constantly questions the relationship between reader and writer, and reading and writing. This relation is staged between not just the two women, but with a third—Ruth Ozeki the author herself. Ruth lives on an island in British Columbia as Ozeki does. Like Ozeki, she is also half-Japanese and half-American.

Ruth is married to an artist named Oliver; Ozeki is married to Oliver Kellhammer, a German-Canadian environmental artist. For clarity's sake, I will refer to Ruth, the character in the novel, as "Ruth" and Ruth Ozeki, the author, as "Ozeki." The endless self-referentiality of the novel's narratological structure along with the effect of pastiche and *mise en abyme* leads the reader down a hall of mirrors, where the efforts to disentangle oneself as a reader from the text, can feel like kicking about in quicksand—each attempt to categorize individuals into the discrete categories—reader or writer—causing the act of reading to become increasingly vertiginous.

In this chapter I begin by revealing the ethical stakes of paying close attention to the narrative of a young girl whose cheerful and bright tone belies the violence and trauma she has to endure. The tone in *A Tale for the Time Being* always embodies a certain playful self-consciousness that is nonetheless ethically serious. How does the prosopopoeia in *Lolita* work differently in *A Tale for the Time Being*? How is *A Tale for the Time Being* similar to *Lolita* and why is it ultimately different? While Dolores Haze's story is written over and written by the cruel and alienating Humbert Humbert, Nao's story gradually floats to the fore through the act of careful reading by Ruth and those around her. Nao's story is not told through Ruth's words but in her own. Her story is not merely made up of her diary but also the letters written by her uncle and the email correspondence between her father and a Stanford professor which Ruth digs up. The different pieces of the narrative, like the plastic particles of the Pacific Garbage Patch, have to be brought back into relation with each other through the careful and sincere translation work undertaken by members of Ruth's community. Lastly, by incorporating elements of magic realism and through an intense meditation on quantum mechanics, the novel literalizes the idea of a mutually

constitutive reader-writer relationship. By investigating the versions of ventriloquism staged at the novel's multiple different levels—the metatextual and the diegetic—I argue that, unlike Humbert Humbert's solipsistic, oppressive, and all-consuming speaking *over,* Ozeki's novel advocates an expansive and generous way of "giving voice"—one that not only tries to speak for, but, through a structure of mutual constitution, to speak *to* and speak *with.*

Lolita

Given where this dissertation began, it is fitting to take up first how Ozeki's novel explicitly stages its relationship to Nabokov's. Fifi's Lovely Apron, a "French Maid Café," where Nao spends her time writing in her diary, is an undeniable allusion to *Lolita*, which *A Tale for the Time Being* also references in several ways. For starters, the French maid café aesthetic owes a cultural debt to *Lolita.* The French Maid café serves as the backdrop to Nao's writing, and evokes Nabokov's *Lolita* in one of its most curious contemporary iterations and most enduring cultural forms— its representation and circulation within Japanese contemporary pop culture. A quick image search on Google of "Lolita" yields not only predictable images of books covers of *Lolita* over the years, the posters of the two Lolita films, but also countless pictures of young Japanese girls in kinky "Edwardian and Victorian" outfits—thigh-high socks cover knock-kneed legs that end in infantilizing Mary-Jane shoes. Indeed, "Lolita fashion," or ロリータ・ファッション, which gained prominence in the 90s is still very popular in Tokyo today.[61]

[61] Scholarship on Nabokov is also thriving in Japan.

Fig. 1[62]

Like *Lolita,* one of the primary concerns of *The Tale for the Time Being* is sexual violence. Throughout the novel we observe Nao endure the bullying of her Japanese classmates which takes a toll on her both physically and psychologically: she bears bruises and scars from their pinching and cutting her, and finally, depressed and alone, she decides she will end her life. Early in the novel, she makes light of Tokyo's contemporary culture which heavily fetishizes girls of her age, cracking an awkward joke— which she immediately sweeps under a rug— about being raped and asphyxiated in a "love hotel." The violence in the novel, however, builds towards precisely this crescendo: Nao is almost raped once, and sexually assaulted or manipulated several times more. The setting of the scene in a hotel harkens back to The Enchanted Hunters hotel in *Lolita,* in which Humbert first plans to rape Dolores Haze, and finally consummates his lust for her. In fact, several scenes of assault in *A Tale for the Time Being* are variants of Nao's initial paranoid fantasy. Nao imagines that she might, while on a "date" with a salaryman at a love hotel, be tied up

[62] Image taken from Web: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Umbrella_Girl_-_Gothic_Lolita_fashion.jpg

with a plastic bag over her head and raped and left to suffocate. Her fantasy begins with a timid romanticism which goes sour fast:

> Maybe … I will be overcome with a fondness for him in spite of his greasy hair and bad complexion, and I'll actually condescend to converse with him a little bit…and if he can convince me that he's madly in love with me,….maybe we'll go to a club and drink some cocktails, and zip into a love hotel with a big Jacuzzi, and after we bathe, just as I begin to feel comfortable with him, suddenly his true inner nature will emerge, and he'll tie me up and put the plastic shopping bag from my new cardigan over my head and rape me, and hours later the police will find my lifeless naked body bent at odd angles on the floor, next to the big round zebra-skin bed. Or maybe he will just ask me to strangle him a little with my panties while he gets off on their beautiful aroma. (5)

This fantasy serves as a prolepsis for a later scene in the novel in which the incessant bullying she suffers at the hands of her classmates culminates in a horrifically violent scene. The cruel torments of her classmates come to a head when they accost Nao in the bathroom and humiliate her by filming the assault, subsequently stealing her panties to auction off on the internet. When her classmates assault her in the bathroom, they bag her head with her inverted skirt, manifesting a version of Nao's earlier imagined scene about being asphyxiated with a plastic bag around her head in a love hotel. The trite references to kitschy Japanese motifs such as "love hotels" and perverted (*hentai* 変态) awkward salarymen initially come across as jokey in ways that belie how the sexual violence to which they refer constitutes as a real threat. Nao later does visit a love hotel in which her earlier fears are more obviously realized and mirrored. After her first sexual experience—

one in which she is pimped out—which she convinces herself was loving and consensual, she is assaulted by yet another man who is paying her for sex, unmasking the first encounter as equally exploitative and transactional, disabusing the reader of any illusions they might have had that Nao had any agency in the matter.[63]

Indeed, like *Lolita, A Tale for the Time Being* reads like a hall of mirrors. But rather than dizzying the reader by causing her to wrongfully cathect to a handicapping, sinister narrator, and by clouding her judgement with the haze of aesthetic language, *A Tale for the Time Being* does so, not only through the self-deprecations and irony of Nao's tone, but also through the novel's scope—by its seemingly taking on *everything.* Characters are thrown in relation to each other across oceans and continents, threads of allusions spin out to irretrievability, and not only are unknowable and unknowably large oceans such as the Pacific integral to the (literal) movement of the novel, but so are—in the novel's final turn of the screw, in its turn to quantum mechanics and the metaphysical—infinite numbers of alternate universes. It is precisely this scope that suggests that the novel has some other ethical aim than Nabokov's novel and which I will return to later.

Unlike *Lolita,* the novel opens with *Nao's* voice. Instead of Humbert's ineluctably alluring lyrical lilt of tripping alliteration, which blinds the reader to Dolores Haze's suffering, Nao's voice bursts onto the page with exactly the sort of bright cheeriness one expects from a teenager: "Hi! My name is Nao and I am a time being. Do you know what a time being is?" (3). Where *Lolita* opens with Humbert speaking *about* Dolores Haze as a

[63] A visit to one such love hotel on Love Hotel hill in the bustling Shibuya district revealed to me the power differential implicit in such interactions, layered under the kitsch of the neon facades. No human interaction is required to book and enter a room in a love hotel; you can remain completely anonymous. In other words, no one knows you are there. However, the door of the room locks behind you, locking the occupants *in,* and can only be reopened when payment is made at a machine *inside* the room. Nao's fears, therefore, are very real.

way of speaking *for* her, *A Tale for the Time Being* gives us Nao's voice first-hand. Readers will later learn, however, that Nao does not in fact speak in the first-person, but only as an embedded metatext. Indeed, it is true that this is nonetheless a form of prosopopoeia since we receive it only second-handedly through the lens of Ruth, and of Ozeki. While modes of ventriloquism are constitutive of Ozeki's novel, I will argue in this chapter that something more capacious—rather than insidious— is at work here. While the misogynistic mechanism of prosopopoeia is evident in *Lolita,* I argue that Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* attempts to approach the paradigm differently, in ways that are distinctly feminist and Asian American—though in quite expansive ways. If, in some ways, Chang-Rae Lee attempts to respect the integrity of female silence—or, at any rate, critique the lack of female speech— by demonstrating the audacity of male prosopopoeia in *A Gesture Life*, the "muteness" of women can only be charted, even if inaccurately, by other women. As Spivak writes, "the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves" (82). Furthermore, the prosopopoeia in *A Tale for the Time Being* is not just one-sided nor only done by men to women; Ruth is not ventriloquizing Nao, but they are mutually engaged and mutually constituting. This will have ramifications for the ultimate argument I am making here, which is that Ruth's gesture of "giving voice" is a feminist and unselfish one. Since her very ontology is predicated on Nao's writing and therefore producing her as a reader—"You wonder about me. I wonder about you"—Ruth's authorial voice is not necessarily the voice of authority; there is no hierarchy as both reader and writer about are bound by a dynamic relation, characterized and presented in a mimetic chiasmus. This is a happy cooperation and one that is imaginatively active and productive: "maybe none of these things will happen except in my mind and yours… together we're

making magic, at least for the time being" (5). In this way, agency is conferred onto Nao at the same moment that Ruth discovers her own agency.

The Book and the Body

In Marlo Starr's essay "Beyond Machine Dreams: Zen, Cyber-, and Transnational Feminisms in Ruth Ozeki's A Tale for the Time Being," the "potential for radically disrupting traditional gender norms and binaries," of "both cybertechnologies and Buddhist philosophies" is discussed in relation to the deconstructive projects of postmodern feminist theory (Starr 101). Starr invokes Donna Haraway's take on cyberfeminism and the "image of the cyborg as a postcorporeal amalgamation, blending human and machine to undermine traditional ways of perceiving and categorizing human bodies" (Starr 101). The cyborg does not reinforce binaries like man/ machine, mind/body, and male/female but instead exposes how these dualisms are constructed through cultural ideology (Haraway 1985, 180–81, Starr 101).

But while cyberspace features quite prominently in the novel and facilitates communication and research, I argue that the novel's interest goes beyond the technological and is instead rooted in the acts of writing and reading, especially in their physical and material forms. For one, Nao *chooses* to write in a diary she specially picked out, expressing how much she liked the *feel* of the diary as well as the privacy and security it would afford "I loved the worn feeling of the cover, and I could tell it would feel so good to write inside, like a real published book. But best of all, I knew it would be an excellent security feature" (20). For another, she hates cyberspace. She grumbles that she hates it

when adults make you "feel like a malfunctioning cyborg. Not quite human" and constantly insists that "nothing stinks more than cyberspace" (137, 26).

The novel exhibits its interest in the literal by constantly playing with and subverting the relationship between reading and writing, reader and writer. Even the physical materiality of the diary performs its metatextuality and mise-en-abyme: it is a book within a book, a writer reading a writer written by another writer. We hold in our hands the novel written by Ozeki which is about Ruth, a writer, reading the embedded metatextual diary written by Nao. For purposes of clarification, I will refer to the events in the novel (Ruth's reality) as diegetic events and those in Nao's journal as metatextual events. Like a set of Russian nesting dolls, the diary is found wrapped, as Oliver peels its layers of covering apart, in "not just one bag" but "bags within bags" (9). This is just one of the examples in which the novel plays on and plays *with* the literal. In wondering how to make up for lost time, it occurs to Ruth that "perhaps a clue lay in the pacing. Perhaps if Ruth paced herself by slowing down and not reading faster than the girl had written, she could more closely replicate Nao's experience" (38). There is a desire, therefore, for the reader to align herself with the writer—to search for lost time by getting *in time.*

Nao, too, draws explicit attention to the physicality of the book, interrupting herself to insist, "but first I need to explain about this book you're holding" (19). She preemptively lays out her imagined reader's thought process in order to "cleverly" sneak in a cliché she has literalized: "when you picked it up you thought it was a philosophical masterpiece called *A la recherché du temps perdu* by the famous French author named Marcel Proust, and not an insignificant diary by a nobody named Nao Yasutani. So it just goes to show that it's true what they say: You can't tell a book by its cover!" (20). She explains that,

"What happened is that Marcel Proust's book got hacked, only I didn't do it" (20). Nao tries to assert her intelligence by citing her knowledge or appreciation of continental cultural objects and references, awkwardly and perhaps inadvertently illuminating trite racial stereotypes (cultural intelligence is exhibited by displaying a knowledge of European culture). Even the notebook she is writing in is a "hacked" notebook, the repurposed cover of –who else?—Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* refilled with empty pages.

Her explanation of her "hacked" book is further commentary on writing, and on the book as an object of knowledge—alluding to history, rewriting, and revisionism. On the one hand, the book has literally been "hacked," as in it has been butchered, ripped apart, and put back together, a primitive action. On the other hand, "hacking" also means gaining unauthorized access to data in a system (an online system, a computer, etc.)—a new security-threat of the postmodern technological world. In the case of the hack-job thrift store Proust book, both are true. Her playful use of the word hacking here lights on its multiple meanings, making temporal semantic connections. So Nao's diary is embedded within a "hacked" book, but it contains with it her uncle Haruki #1's letters that he wrote to Jiko during the war as well—letters that have since been used by a conservative government to push revisionist history, promoting a false view of the war.[64]

Ruth is not only associated with writing, and produced by writing (Nao's and Ozeki's), within the novel, she often *is* language, even down to its composite punctuations. This idea of a world created by writing is literalized in the imagery embedded in the novel this way as well. When the power goes out in Ruth and Oliver's house, we are told that "the rest of her body receded into the darkness of the room, but Ruth could see that her

[64] See Ienaga

back was curved like a question mark as she bent toward the screen" (39). She *becomes* a punctuation mark, a caesura in the plot, a marker of time in writing. In a sense, Ruth is being time: just as Nao had interpellated her ("You're my kind of time being"), she becomes a time being in a tale (4).

If Ruth can become writing, or even *is* writing, the reverse can be true too. Ruth feels the warmth of the cover of the diary as she reads it one evening and knows that the heat has "less to do with the spooky qualities of the book and everything to do with the climate changes in her own body" (38). She understands that her interaction and handling of the book affects it, that heat from her own body can be transferred to the book and in turn felt by her. Not only is this a meditation on the recursive nature and reflexivity of writing and reading, "in this description, the diary is not a static object with a fixed narrative but instead functions as a body that is shaped as much as by its context of origin as by its secondhand owner" (Starr 116). The physicality of the book itself allows a visceral connection between the two women and confirms the existence of Nao as a real person, beyond merely being a character in the diary. At one point, while fiddling with a worn corner of the diary, Ruth wonders, "Had Nao worried this corner between her fingertips, too?" (34). Later on, when she finishes with the diary, she observes to herself that it felt cool to the touch and upon closing the book, "worried the broken corner like a loose tooth" (393). It is worth noting here that the kanji for book (本) and body (体) are very similar.

In many ways, for Ozeki, the text and the body not only meld together but are even commensurate. She addresses the materiality and visual aspect of writing when she describes how "Print is predictable and impersonal, conveying information in a mechanical transaction with the reader's eye. Handwriting, by contrast, resists the eye, reveals its

meaning slowly and is as intimate as skin" (12). The contrast might be likened to Walter Benjamin's description of the difference between painter and cameraman, magician and surgeon in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The magician maintains the "natural distance" between himself and the patient through "the laying on of hands." As if she were aware of Roland Barthes' writing on writing in *Empire of Signs,* which encourages the reader to "to follow the trajectory of the hand which has written it…[which would] [permit] this reading to repeat the course of the writing's labor," Ruth describes her experience of reading Nao's handwritten diary as an almost visceral one—"her eye wasn't really taking in their meaning as much as a *felt* sense, murky and emotional, of the writer's presence" (Barthes 45, Ozeki 12). In fact, Ruth even understands the book as an extension of Nao's body—an amalgam of her daily experiences; not merely a record of written experiences but a time capsule of physical particles that have travelled. At one point, she holds the diary close to her nose and identifies the smells absorbed into its glue and paper; she inhales a scent of "bitter coffee beans" and something "sweetly fruity like shampoo" which she realizes must be Nao. (Handwritten) words on a page here serve as proxy for the person, anthropomorphizing the words and diary, making them come alive in a sense, as if constituting a person.

Reading *In Time* / Writing *Out of Time*: The Literal

The novel makes explicit its task of complicating and challenging the relationship between writing, reading, and existing (and I will suggest later, living). Ozeki suffuses the novel with long passages in which she considers the existential paradigms implicit in the acts of reading and writing, further complicating these considerations by nesting them

within a convoluted metatextual narrative structure. She even stages these paradigms through conversations between characters, and in doing so, further introduces the variables of gender, class, race, that bear on these issues.

The novel establishes a complex narrative structure in which it is hard to situate oneself as a reader—one is reading Nao's words through Ozeki who is reading through Ruth—or to ascertain who the writer is—Nao, Ruth, or Ozeki? Who is reading and who is writing? And who produces whom? In Ozeki's words, "there are those two worlds, but there are also the worlds of the past and the present. And then it bifurcates again or splits again; it is like a prismatic kaleidoscope" (Ty 166). By the end of the diary, Ruth is—and we are—left wondering, "who had conjured whom?" (392).

Nao actively interpellates her reader, writing her into existence at the same time that her reader reads Nao into existence. Indeed, Nao is cast as the narratological producer—"Once a message is sent out, a receiver needs to come into existence, into being, in order to receive the communication"— in other words, "Nao's message calls Ruth into being" (Ty 166). And Ruth, like a gracious and generous reader, obliges and abides: "Nao claimed to have written it just for her, and while Ruth knew this was absurd, she decided she would go along with the conceit. As the girl's reader, it was the least she could do" (38). And this is true at both the diegetic and metatextual level. But what this means, as I will explore further later in this chapter, is that this implicates the reader of the novel as well—calling into question our ways of being in the world, if and how we have been interpellated by the novel, and if so, what kinds of time beings we imagine ourselves to be, and how we envision our actions bearing upon the world.

Through writing, Nao literally composes Ruth and Ruth eventually finds that she, too, requires courage to reciprocally compose Nao through both reading and writing. While self-referentiality is a commonly repeated trope in Ozeki's work, nowhere has it been quite as obvious as in this novel. In *My Year of Meats,* protagonist Jane Takagi-Little is also modelled off of Ozeki herself—both are Japanese-American and mixed-race, and both work(ed) in TV production. However, in *A Tale for The Time Being,* Ozeki finally goes one step further. As Ozeki began to rewrite her manuscript in the wake of the 2011 tsunami, she realized that she would "just have to step forward and be in the book" (Ty 164). In this way, then, Nao interpellates not only Ruth, but Ozeki as well. Indeed this endless network of mutually constructing narrative forces impels a consideration of "radical interconnectedness" (Ty 161). As Starr writes, it is "through writing and reading, [that] Ruth and Nao forge a transnational kinship, a real connection in material form through the object of the diary" (113). In fact, though Ruth and Nao never meet in person, they "share and each take turns in producing the book's narrative progression, with each section alternating between Nao's diary entries and Ruth's response to them" (114). The radical interconnectedness is also shored up by the motif of the ocean as a vast connected and connecting body. Not only is the sea anthropomorphized, but people and the ocean are also described in like terms. We are told that "The sea was always heaving things up and hurling them back: fishing lines, floats, beer cans, plastic toys, tampons, Nike sneakers" (8).

In Rocio G Davis's essay, "Fictional Transits and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being,*" she argues that the novel's primary concern is "the relationship between a writer and her reader, based on the notion that the act of writing might conjure a reader" (Davis 93). Ozeki herself admits this in an interview with Eleanor Ty: "I wanted to write a story

about the relationship between a writer and a reader" (164). Indeed, several metatextural gestures "call attention to Ruth's act of producing the text the reader holds, even as she is reading a received text," all the while consolidating the interchangeability of Ruth and Ozeki (Davis 94, Krevel 116). Events in the text materialize this relationship, such as "the disappearance of the text in Nao's diary, and subsequent mysterious re-filling of the blank pages, which ensures the continuation of Nao's story, can either be explained, as Oliver suggests, by means of quantum mechanics principles, or by acknowledging that Nao's story is, in fact, written by Ruth (or both)" (Krevel 116). Such an assumption is corroborated through other events such as Ruth coming across the exact words Jiko uttered in the dream that Ruth had a week before when reading Nao's diary (Krevel 116).

The idea of reaching across time and space is one that Ozeki explores through the novel. Nao writes in the diary, "how cool is that? It feels like I'm reaching forward through time to touch you, and now that you've found it, you're reaching back to touch me!" (26). This idea is one that is referenced in one of the key events that grounds the novel in the real world: the 2011 tsunami that hit the east coast of Japan. Ruth writes about seemingly prescient lapidary warnings, explaining how, "in towns up and down the coast of Japan, stone markers were found on hillsides, engraved with ancient warnings: Do not build your homes below this point!" (114). Some of the warning stones were more than six centuries old and the mayor of a town destroyed by the wave said, "They're the voices of our ancestors… They were speaking to us across time, but we didn't listen" (114).

In order to put herself "in time" with Nao, Ruth sets certain reading parameters for herself such as pacing her reading such that she would be reading at the rate that Nao was writing, enforcing an injunction against "binge-reading," thus slowing down her

experience of Nao's life, or, at the very least, reading *in time* with it. We learn that Ruth's "first impulse when she'd started the diary was to read quickly to the end, but the girl's handwriting was often hard to decipher, and her sentences were peppered with slang and intriguing colloquialisms" (29). Nao informs the reader that Jiko "says that she does everything really really slowly in order to spread time out so that she'll have more of it and live longer" (24). Ruth mimics this in drawing out the experience of reading the diary over time so that she, too, will "have more of it" and in a sense allow it or her (Nao and even Ruth herself) to "live longer." If she does not finish the novel, Nao will not (yet) have died. But this meta-textual moment also implicates the reader: Ruth is Nao's reader, but now, so are we. Are *we* also supposed to slow down our reading? What would it mean if *we* simply binge-consumed Nao's narrative? (which of course, we do.)

If Ruth is being produced by the act of reading Nao's writing, and if Ruth Ozeki the author was responsible for writing Nao, who was producing whom? Are we read into existence, or are we written into existence? Is it both? And if so, if Ruth the writer in the "real" diegetic world is then, in a sense, being produced by the book, and is also part of the book, then what are the implications of that for *us,* as readers existing of this world? Indeed, as Oliver points out, ""it's not just *her* life that's at risk," "It calls our existence into question, too, don't you think?" … "I mean, if she stops writing to us, then maybe we stop being, too"" (344). As readers and as actors in this world, we are all implicated. Considered in these postmodern terms, Ozeki's novel, then, like Remedios Varo's painting, alluded to in Thomas Pynchon's postmodern novel *The Crying of Lot 49,* in which weavers in a tower sit weaving a tapestry which flows out to constitute the world, which includes, of course, themselves (they are, in other words, weaving themselves), begs the question, are we

weaving or being woven? A similar radical interconnectedness in *A Tale for the Time Being* was motivated by the 2011 tsunami and its widespread effects—the true extent of which is still unknown.[65] In an interview, Ruth Ozeki maintains that she believes that we are "all radically interconnected" (Ty 162). The naturalist John Muir had made a similar observation: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe. Indeed, Nao muses along a similar naturalist vein about the Anthropocene and our organic natures, hitched to nature as much as our stories are to each other: "Would I be washed out to sea? The sharks would eat my limbs and organs. Little fish would feed on my fingertips. My beautiful white bones would fall to the bottom of the ocean, where anemones would grow upon them like flowers" (193).

In this way, Ozeki literalizes ekphrasis and takes it to its *reductio ad absurdum*. As Haruki #1 says, "There are other words and other worlds" (258). World-making, therefore, is indelibly tied to words. Nao explains that "in Japan, some words have kotodama, which are spirits that live inside a word and give it a special power" (98). And indeed, words are the threads that weave together the tapestry of the world of the novel and beyond. The characters are bound together by writing—Nao, Haruki #1, Ruth, and Ozeki herself. Ozeki says of art that "Every act of representation is also an act of misrepresentation, so there is no way to represent without fictionalizing. I wanted to play with that in an overt kind of way but also look at the way this relates to the Buddhist understanding of self and no-self: the idea that we are all only the stories that we tell ourselves" (Ty 162). Viewed that way, the person and the personal is profoundly novelistic.

[65] There is news, for example, of radioactive tuna contaminated by the leak in Fukushima caught along the California coast. https://news.stanford.edu/news/2012/may/tuna-radioactive-materials-053012.html

Ruth pointedly remarks on this symbiotic relationship between reading, writing, and existing at several moments in the novel. Reading Nao's writing causes Ruth to self-reflexively reflect on her own approaches to writing: "She couldn't help but notice and admire the uninhibited flow of the girl's language. Rarely had she succumbed to second thoughts. Rarely did she doubt a word, or pause to consider or replace it with another. There were only a few cross-out lines and phrases, and this, too, filled Ruth with something like awe. It had been years since she'd approached the page with such certainty" (37). While percolating with Oliver about the events of the diary, she shrugs, "I guess I'll have to keep on reading to find out"—she *literally* does (35). And so do we. Indeed, reading produces the narrative in a way and in this case, it is two-fold: Ruth has to read to find out; *we* have to read to find out. But more than that, it is *our* reading that enables Ruth to read, since as much as Ruth's reading produces Nao, so does our reading produce Ruth. In this way, Ozeki comments on reading as a form of production, as a performance that is inherently and fundamentally active and productive.

Communitarian Politics of Pastiche

If the novel suggests that reading can be productive and active, it also suggests that it must be communal. The novel models what I am calling a communitarian politics of pastiche. There is the communitarian ethos embodied by the banding together of characters in the novel at multiple levels, both diegetic and metatextual. At the diegetic level, Ruth lives, symbolically and meaningfully, on an island. Precisely playing on the old adage that no man is an island, indeed, instead of being isolated and isolating, the islanders comprise a multiethnic community with innate and personal knowledge of disparate languages,

histories, and cultures. These points of connection between Ruth and the other members of her community spiral out to various other geographies and histories, revealing a global interconnectedness that was not immediately apparent before. Nao's diary is therefore the catalyst for a communal effort at not just self-knowledge, but also at piecing together a new and shared narrative. At the metatextual level, the dynamics between Nao and Ruth is constantly shifting, as they constantly toggle between writer and reader, each producing the other. A writer cannot exist without a reader, and vice versa. Ultimately, this allows the novel to advocate for not just a way of reading, but a way of being in the world. As we become similarly imbricated in the fabric of these "many worlds"—the diegetic, the metatextual, the real—the reader is invited to consider what it means to be an active and generous reader, and how our acts of reading are not solitary but can be grounded in community and can effect change in the realities of others.

Read this way, Ozeki's novel is therefore a deeply Asian Americanist project as it is defined in Kandice Chuh's terms, in which "Asian American literatures [are] epistemological projects engaged in a politics of knowledge" (Chuh x). *Imagine Otherwise* by Chuh "advances a critical approach to the study of Asian American literature that conceives of that work as theoretical devices that help us apprehend and unravel the narrative dimensions of naturalized racial, sexual, gender, and national identities" (Chuh x). It is in Chuh's framework of the discipline, which is not contingent upon identitarian categories and not necessarily correspondent or cathected to Asian American bodies, that I will use the term Asian American literature in this chapter. Reading Ozeki's dizzying novel within this framework of Asian American Studies is important to the "project of dislocating the dichotomous spatial logic that has long held together the boundaries of the

field" (Chuh 4). Indeed, it allows us to "see how the practice of holding "Asia" at a cognitive distance sustains a certain kind of imperialist epistemology responsible for conceiving Asian-raced peoples, among others, as Others" (88). Chuh's argument maintains that "the inadequacy of nation as conceptual parameter for understanding the complexities of subject formation is understood here as not simply a question of accuracy, but rather as one that is specifically ideological" (88). Chuh's theoretical framework, which is specifically disinterested in certain embodied experiences, is particularly useful for situating my project which sits between the fields of World Literature and Asian American Literature and for articulating a vocabulary for a collection of novels which lie in the gaps of these disciplines precisely because they deal with less discussed historical events and disciplinary issues such as East Asian colonialism and Japanese imperialism which have not been the subjects of as much critical attention. "The "area" of area studies … sediments the narrative of the genesis of the United States as rooted in Western Europe, erasing on one hand the significance of physical, territorial proximity while, on the other, actively distancing the "non-West"" (Chuh 89). Chuh's framework is therefore particularly generative for my dissertation which specifically challenges the aesthetic abstraction that certain versions of World Literature tends to prize, and which is interested in bringing together the novels of these differently racially marked authors with diverse historical and geographical backgrounds.

News of Ruth's discovery of the diary travels fast and soon the gossipy neighbours on the island all know about the diary and feel entitled to offer their two cents worth. They either ask her to get rid of it, or are openly jealous of her discovery and its potential creative value. They warn her about the dangers of radiation pollution from Japan. One woman,

notably named "Purity," expresses anxiety about radiation from foreign lands contaminating the island's food. "I don't want to get cancer and have deformed babies," she says (145). There is an alignment of toxicity with foreignness through the process of "racial mattering" as described by Mel Chen. Purity's statement thus taps into unvocalized fears about foreignness, consuming "the Other," and contamination and exposes a deep xenophobia not uncommon even within a diverse community.

But ultimately, the disparate parts of the community begin to pull together, like the story itself. In some ways, the island, with its pockets of different neighborhoods and public spaces, stages a microcosm of multiculturalism, community, and diversity. Groups congregate at post offices, restaurants, even cemeteries, and characters constantly hitch rides from each other or run into one another at the public beaches out of convenience or necessity. At one point, Muriel quips that A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous) is known as just "A" because "no one is anonymous on the island" (94). In "Sharing Worlds through Words: Minor Cosmopolitics in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being,*" Hsiu-Chuan Lee reads the novel "not as projecting a cosmopolitan ideal of human commonality and commensurateness but as undertaking a cosmopolitics that occurs through the process of storytelling, reading, and writing" (32). Once Ruth starts to read Nao's diary, the novel "plunges into a literary restructuring of the world by drawing previously nonexistent alliances and comparisons between people, times, places, ideas, and memories" (Lee 32). And there is an understanding that "cosmopolitanism no longer promises a solution to human conflicts and divisions; rather, real-life cosmopolitan experiences bring about inexorable mixtures, confrontations, and conflicts with differences and distances" and this

is something that the island *as a community* understands and undertakes cooperatively to a productive end (Lee 31).

The project is one that advocates what I am calling the communitarian politics of pastiche, one that does not preach assimilation, but acknowledges the strengths of diversity—even when unrooted, unwieldy, disjointed, or mismatched. The book that we hold in our hands, like the book that Ruth held in her hands, is equally one of pastiche. And it requires the efforts and abilities of more than an individual to fully decipher, much less grasp. The retrieval of this piece of "garbage" as Muriel calls it, galvanizes the community—and not merely out of altruistic or academic reasons, but often more trivial and mundane reasons that are equally intrinsic to communities and community-building such as gossip, boredom, curiosity, meddling. Benoit LeBec, "the dump guy" who drives the forklift is Quebecois and whose parents were literature professors is able to help Ruth translate Haruki #1's letters written in French (94). When Ruth was worried about not hearing back from Benoit, she goes to the post office to speak to Dora, who "knew everything about everyone" (144). Muriel asks Ruth if she has shown the letters to Ayako, who "[is] the young Japanese wife of an oyster farmer who lived on the island" (34). While Ayako was unable to read the writing, she was able to place the dates at 1944 and 45, recommending that Ruth find someone older to read the writing. Eventually, she takes it to Akira and his wife Kimi, an immigrant Japanese couple who were from Okuma City in Fukushima prefecture (the area most devastated by the 2011 tsunami) who own the sushi restaurant "Arigato Sushi," who offer to help Ruth to translate the Japanese letters into English (233). When Kimi expresses uncertainty about her English proficiency, their Canadian-born son, Tosh, who studies at McGill, interjects to volunteer his help as well—

"No excuses , Mom… I can't read the Japanese but I'll help you with the English" (235). Callie, a marine biologist and environment activist, is able to examine the barnacles on the packaging in order to estimate how long the lunch box had been out at sea. Oliver is a constant supply of random yet conveniently useful trivia which fill in the gaps in understanding. Each member of the community and their unique sets of skills and specialized or native knowledge are all recruited in order to put together the pastiche that is Ruth's "bag of garbage" and Nao's story. Together, they reweave the tapestry of the tale embedded within the bags of trash and in doing so, also contribute to constituting Ruth and by extension the world around them.

As Kandice Chuh argues in *Imagine Otherwise*, "the point is not to work toward resolving differences, to promote some version of assimilation, but is instead to insist on the productiveness of dissensus in demonstrating the impossibility of any objectivity, the irreducible inadequacy of any totalizing approach to or disciplining of knowledge" (28). Indeed, the myriad efforts of the community to put together a cohesive "tale" for Nao reveals precisely this. The very diversity of the community enables the project and makes it possible to undertake. But what it reveals is also that the project itself is impossible—for all translation and collation and historicization can only be, at best, a sincere approximation, a hopeful asymptote tending towards the truth. Neither the diary nor the many linked threads found on the internet can be beat into producing objective facts. The thrust of the novel lies in the nonetheless careful conscientiousness of this venture—its sincere and earnest acts of faith— that such exercises, such quests for story-telling, must be undertaken nonetheless.

Bullying: Writing as Courage

We know that Nao is bullied at school; we later learn that Haruki #1 was bullied in the military. *Can* Nao's bullying at school be compared to the bullying Haruki #1 suffered in the military? Haruki #1 suffers at the hands of a cruel leader in the military, while Nao is verbally teased in school. How can these acts of violence be equated? We soon learn, too, of Haruki #1's psychological suffering as a sensitive soul in a harsh military camp, a peaceful scholar in a violent milieu. We then also learn that Nao is physical hurt in school, pinched and cut to the point of being covered in scars. Haruki #1 is sodomized; Nao is almost raped in school and is sexually exploited and assaulted outside of it (in her attempt to escape her suffering in school). Are these acts of violence commensurate? Does it matter if they aren't? In 2010, as Ozeki was still working through her first draft of the novel, Tyler Clementi, a student at Rutgers University, killed himself after his roommate filmed him having sex with a man and posted it online, "outing" the then closeted Tyler. The case was one among many at the turn of the millennium of a new wave of cyberbullying, enabled by new technologies of seeing, and social media and raising issues of culpability.

Ozeki acknowledges in an interview that "If the book is about anything, it is about bullying, I suppose" (Ty 164). Indeed, the novel forces a sustained consideration of violence through a series of cumulative violent acts that become less equivocal as we proceed through the novel. In fact, "bullying" becomes an easy catchall phrase for all forms and scales of violence in the novel and beyond: bitchy mistreatment of a foreign exchange student is bullying; unethical corporate strong-arming to obtain technology for militaristic ends is bullying; the attack on Pearl Harbor is bullying; but then so must American treatment of Japanese-Americans be bullying—then what of the cruel behavior of Japanese

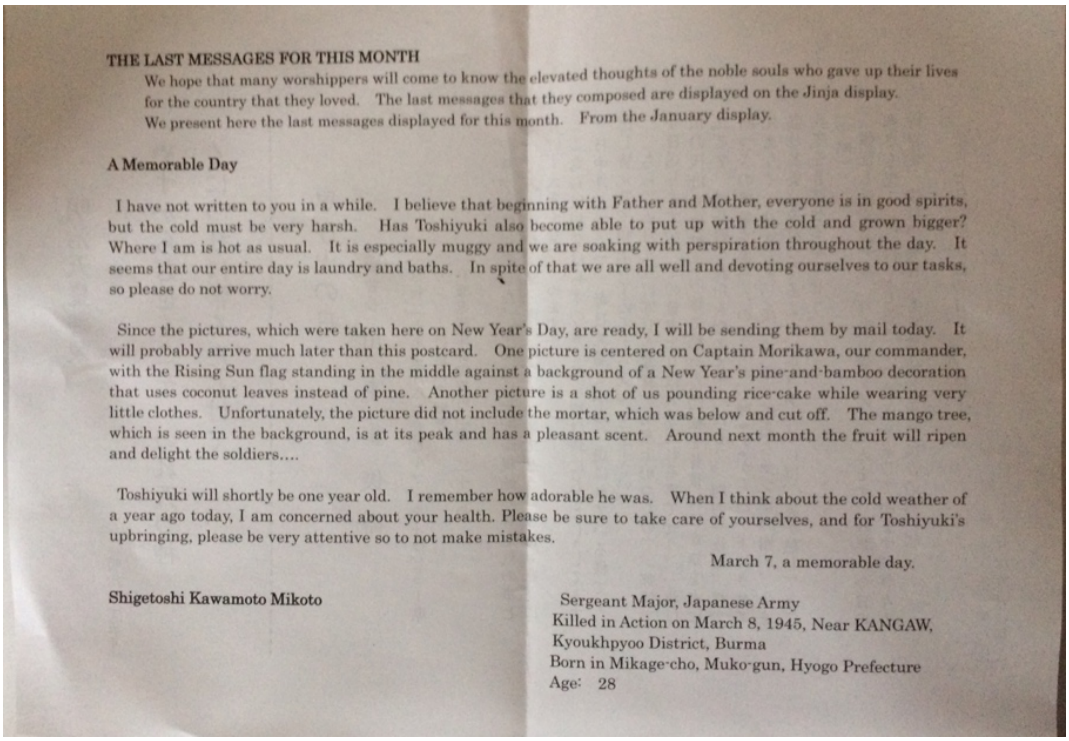
soldiers elsewhere in the Pacific Theater? What this does is that all forms of bullying and all forms of violence are then set on a single linear scale; they do not exist on different dimensions nor can they or should they be considered separately. "Bullying," therefore, names the examples of violence at various scales that the communitarian ethos of the novel is setting itself against. It matters that Haruki #1's pain matters. The novel forces us to concede that those acting under the orders of a violent and wrong government can also suffer and that that suffering can be legitimate—that they can be in pain for making choices in situations they did not choose. Here, the novel seems to model a way for us to "imagine otherwise." Humanizing kamikaze pilots is one way of instantiating how to imagine Asian American cultural politics "otherwise." Asian American scholars emphasize anti-Japanese-American racism as "bullying" as observed in the cultural disdain with which the American public looks back on Japanese American Internment Camps, and also in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which historians now largely agree was not, in fact, necessary to end the war. Yet, it seems difficult for Asian Americanists to, in the same breath, take interest in, or consider seriously, Japanese soldiers and the atrocities they notoriously committed in East and South East Asia. But both things can be true: Japanese Americans can have been unfairly discriminated against at the same time that Japanese soldiers elsewhere were unbearably cruel. It is the ethical responsibility of the critic and the historian to approach texts and historical events holding both facts in the balance, rather than making the argument for one while ignoring the other. In fact, it is the responsibility of the critic to accept a third fact: that Japanese soldiers can also be sympathetic.

When asked in an interview about how she wove together such disparate concepts and issues from bar hostesses to kamikaze pilots, Ozeki replies, "I see them all as

interrelated. I see them all as inseparable, a kind of interconnectedness" (Ty 161). Indeed, the suffering of a bar hostess cannot entirely be considered apart from the suffering of a soldier. Oliver acts as Ozeki's mouthpiece on this point when he bemoans, "We live in a bully culture. Politicians, corporations, the banks, the military. All bullies and crooks. They steal, they torture people, they make these insane rules and set the tone" (121). Indeed, later in the novel, we learn that not only are Nao and Haruki #1 connected by their shared experience of bullying, but so is her father—bullied by corporate and military interests when making an ethical stand. Here the novel's scope seems to expand yet again, becoming a pointed critique on the waning impotence of morality in the age of neoliberalism. The victimized "pure blood" Japanese Keiko in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* is reincarnated as her tormentor, manifesting Akira's fear in *When We Were Orphans* of not being "Japanese enough"; native born Japanese students terrorize Nao for growing up in California, for eating American food, for being larger—in other words, for not being "Japanese enough." Ozeki's novel is aesthetically and ethically complex precisely because of how easily the instances of violence or "bullying" that it foregrounds can be scaled. Where thinking about such instances as comparing discrete and isolated incidents may invoke a sense of incredulous comedy, forcing the reader to think about these events and issues relationally invites a more complex ethical engagement. This flexible, scalar, and even fractal rendering of bullying is significant for it is the correlative of the open-ended and multivalent communitarianism the novel espouses. If violence, isolation, alienation, and suffering is fractal and scalable, then so must its antidote. The ultimate upshot of the novel's communitarian politics which pulls together a diverse community with roots in different geographies in order to recuperate a narrative is therefore an ambitious and

optimistic one, enacting a scalable version of a Habermasian public sphere and communicative action.

Nao "deliberately deploys her diary to tell her story, if only to one person, partly in opposition to the YouTube videos about her that her classmates have posted—a contrasting version of the story" (Davis 99). She calls her text "an antiblog, because it's meant for only one special person, and that person is *you*" (26). Similarly, in the face of severe censorship, Haruki #1 deploys his letters written in French to his mother in opposite to the oppression he faces. The letters written by Haruki #1 in Japanese are stoic and run-of-the-mill. As pointed out by Davis, the "tone of these letters—formal and distant—suggests that they could have been written by anyone, their generic content expressing less filiality than a standardized ideal Japanese soldier's perspective" (Davis 96). At the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo, which houses Yushukan, the only WWII museum in Tokyo, little wooden boxes can be found on the grounds which hold bilingual pamplets printed on both sides with reproduced letters from kamikaze pilots. One such pamphlet from January 2018 is reproduced below. Indeed, the tone and content of Haruki #1's Japanese letters are hardly distinguishable from those housed within the museum and reproduced on pamphlets.



THE LAST MESSAGES FOR THIS MONTH

We hope that many worshippers will come to know the elevated thoughts of the noble souls who gave up their lives for the country that they loved. The last messages that they composed are displayed on the Jinja display. We present here the last messages displayed for this month. From the January display.

A Memorable Day

I have not written to you in a while. I believe that beginning with Father and Mother, everyone is in good spirits, but the cold must be very harsh. Has Toshiyuki also become able to put up with the cold and grown bigger? Where I am is hot as usual. It is especially muggy and we are soaking with perspiration throughout the day. It seems that our entire day is laundry and baths. In spite of that we are all well and devoting ourselves to our tasks, so please do not worry.

Since the pictures, which were taken here on New Year's Day, are ready, I will be sending them by mail today. It will probably arrive much later than this postcard. One picture is centered on Captain Morikawa, our commander, with the Rising Sun flag standing in the middle against a background of a New Year's pine-and-bamboo decoration that uses coconut leaves instead of pine. Another picture is a shot of us pounding rice-cake while wearing very little clothes. Unfortunately, the picture did not include the mortar, which was below and cut off. The mango tree, which is seen in the background, is at its peak and has a pleasant scent. Around next month the fruit will ripen and delight the soldiers....

Toshiyuki will shortly be one year old. I remember how adorable he was. When I think about the cold weather of a year ago today, I am concerned about your health. Please be sure to take care of yourselves, and for Toshiyuki's upbringing, please be very attentive so to not make mistakes.

March 7, a memorable day.

Shigetoshi Kawamoto Mikoto

Sergeant Major, Japanese Army
Killed in Action on March 8, 1945, Near KANGAW,
Kyoukhpyoo District, Burma
Born in Mikage-cho, Muko-gun, Hyogo Prefecture
Age: 28

Fig 1[66]

In his essay, McKay describes the ways in which Japanese servicemen have been reduced "to sword-swinging automata," in Western consciousness, "while elsewhere in the Anglophone world, depictions of Japanese servicemen have been foreclosed with a suicide that is seen as inherent to character type, not state indoctrination or coercion" (McKay 388). Ozeki's novel aims to humanize the kamikaze pilot by tessellating a combination of complex experiences. We learn of Haruki #1's reluctance to participate in war because he is a scholar and does not believe in violence and did not support the war effort. We sympathize further with him because we learn that he was severely bullied and tormented while serving in the military. Finally, we work through the moral quandary he faces in the

[66] Tan, Jerrine. "Letter from Yasukuni Shrine". 2017. Jpeg.

mission he is given—one might hear W.B. Yeats's Irish Airman here: "I know that I shall meet my fate// Somewhere among the clouds above; //Those that I fight I do not hate." As McKay argues, in Ozeki's work, "the kamikaze pilot is rescued from oblivion and provided with instances in which the complexity of his motivations attains a significance simultaneously true unto itself and healing to the pained circumstances of the protagonist" (McKay 8).

The manifestations of Japan postwar culture can be read largely as subversive acts in reaction to the widespread repression during the war. For example, Sianne Ngai has written extensively on "cuteness" or kawaii culture in Japan as a postwar phenomenon, exemplifying the Japanese people's desire to subvert and reclaim the symbol of a cartoonish, feeble, and effeminate Emperor that was made to act under America's yoke, which up till the end of the war, they had believed to be a veritable god. With regard to sexuality, Igarashi points out how, for some, "sexual enjoyment marked the postwar liberation of Japanese bodies and expressed defiance of the regulatory regime that demanded bodily sacrifices" (McLelland 63).

Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Benedict 1946) has played a big part in the global perspective of suicide in Japanese culture, promoting the idea that Japan's apparently high suicide rates have to do with the fact that culturally, Japan permits suicidal behavior to some extent (Takahashi 1997, 138, Traphagan 90). Such assumptions stereotype Japanese culture and ignore the fact that it is not unusual for suicidal Japanese to show many of the same "risk factors" for suicide as people in other countries, "including psychiatric disorders, prior suicide attempts, lack of social support systems, male preponderance, older age, various kinds of loss, [and] family history of suicide" (Takahashi

1997, 138, Traphagan 90). Japanese identify various forms of self-killing using different terms (Traphagan 2005). The generic term for suicide is *jisatsu.* However, this term is not used for ritualistic or ceremonial self-killing, or, indeed, in the case of kamikaze pilots and torpedo bombers that Japan used in the second World War. As Takie Lebra notes, *harakiri* or *seppuku* refers to a form of ritual self-killing that was a "privilege reserved for the samurai class that saved the offender from the disgrace of being put to death by an executioner" (Lebra 1976, 190-191, as quoted in Traphagan 93). Another form of self-killing that occurred often in World War II was known as *gyokusai* 玉砕*,* which refers to dying without surrendering to a group (Lebra 1976, 191). The term literally means "the shattering of a jewel/jade," "a beautiful collapse" or "destruction or end of life" and there is a strong sense that this sort of death is both beautiful and honorable. Japanese people firmly do not view such forms of self-killing as *jisatsu* suicide but feel that they represent honorable forms of death. Nao explains that Haruki #1 died by *gyokusai*, a "suicide attack, human wave attack" (245).

Ozeki owes a "debt to the writings of the officer class of kamikaze pilots and, more specifically still, to those who had been previously kept from the war by virtue of their commitment to tertiary education" (McKay 8). In fact, "638 of the eventual 769 officers who served in the Tokkoʔtai corps" were Japanese students from elite tertiary institutions, not unlike Haruki #1 (McKay 8). Ozeki's novel attempts to subvert and challenge the stereotype of the robotic kamikaze pilot, so driven to kill his enemy that he is indifferent to the loss of his own life—an important image that contributed to the belief that the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was necessary to stop such an unstoppable enemy. Haruki's description of his mission exposes the false romance of

patriotism associated with the dying for one's country—"Tomorrow I will tie a cloth around my forehead, branded with the Rising Sun, and take to the sky" (217). Though Nao initially thinks of her uncle's mission as a kamikaze pilot as noble, she eventually realizes that his true bravery lay in his thoughtfulness and his courage to go against the orders given to him. He is able to reclaim not only his dignity and integrity through his writing which endures, but helps Nao and her father do so as well.

Feminism in *A Tale for the Time Being* as Acts of Faith

Just as the novel imagines an inventive version of "Asian American Studies," one uncoupled from a racially marked body, and imagined as a theoretical structure or mode of critique, the novel similarly advocates an inventive version of feminism—one not rooted in mutual exclusion, but is instead expansive and reciprocal, accepting and reliant on community and allyship, as well as mutually constituting. The feminism that I argue is modelled in Ozeki's novel is a daring one, unafraid of failure and therefore characterized by it. By this, I do not mean it is weak or failing, but rather that it is defined by sincere attempts toward an optimistic goal in a bleak landscape. Ozeki stages bad readings by good people, both male and female, implicitly gesturing to the fact that men are an integral part to the feminist project as well. This is highlighted in the way both Ruth and Oliver "read together"—Ruth reads the passages out loud as they lie side by side in bed and Oliver *listens.* We are shown a literal dynamic of allyship and adjacency. If Ruth is compared to writing, Oliver is often compared to the natural world. While reminiscing on her romance with Oliver, Ruth muses about how she had "always been fascinated by the meandering currents of his mind," the tug and tide of his thoughts described like an ocean (56). But

more than the tension between the fictional world of words and the natural world is staged via Ruth's and Oliver's relationship. Their unique mutual understanding within their marriage allows Ozeki to highlight the genderedness of reading practices, showcasing instances of "bad reading" on both sides.

Ruth and Oliver get into a huge fight because she is upset that Oliver thought it was "nice" for Nao to find a new friend in Babette, clearly misunderstanding that Babette, Nao's "friend" is really just a pimp, out to exploit Nao, and does not care for her at all (293). Being attuned to (sexual) violence here is clearly laid out as something women are always vigilant about and which men do not even seem to *see*, even when it is happening right in front of them. Conversely, there is something that Oliver *does* see, which Ruth does not, and this upsets her even further: that "C. imperator" who bid on Nao's panties online, was in fact Nao's own father (295). Oliver was able to make the connection between the staghorn beetle origami that Nao's father had folded, and the online username of the bidder, "C. imperator," the Latin name for the bug. This gendered difference in reading is something Nao inherently understands (as a writer) about her reader: "Sometimes I hope you're a man, so you'll like me because I'm cute, but sometimes I hope you're a woman because then there's a better chance you'll understand me, even if you don't like me as much" (299).

This staging of gendered bad reading also gives the lie to the fact that cyberspace is uniform or unifying. While some recent cyberfeminists imagine the Internet as a tool for "corrupting patriarchy" because gender and race are not "visible" online in the same way they are in real life, (Daniels 2009, 102, 110), in *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, Lisa Nakamura contends that the body does not simply go away in virtual

reality. Instead, bodies "get tricky in cyberspace" (Nakamura 2002, 8). Nakamura examines Internet identities and representations of "otherness," in terms of race, class, sexuality, gender, economic class, and age, showing how identity is "still [stereo]typed online, still mired in oppressive roles even if the body has been left behind or bracketed" (4). If letters are the globally connecting technology in the novel, they work in the same way. Kimi and Benoit, who both help to decipher Haruki #1's Japanese and French letters respectively, also remark on the genderedness of his writing, both absolutely sure that they were written by a man.

Through writing and reading, Ruth and Nao forge a transnational kinship, a connection as real as the diary. Starr argues that it is this brand of transnational feminism, "created by Nao and Ruth's relationship, that the novel offers as an alternative to both cyber- and Buddhist feminisms" both flawed in their own ways (Starr 113). Cyberfeminism may encourage a belief in an absence of difference when difference is still deeply rooted in our experiences and relationships and interactions. Buddhist feminism on the other hand may privilege a passivity in the face of injustice and violence (whether to oneself or to others). Indeed, in both instances of sexual assault Nao displays a self-destructive passivity which she believes to be transcendent. When her classmates abuse her, she tries to practice *zazen,* or meditating, and when she was pimped out for sex, describes poignantly her disconnect from herself—"while he did things to my body, I just went to the silent frozen place in my mind that was clean and cold and very far away" (335). When Nao is jolted out of her passivity both by being called back by Jiko's text message and extreme pain, her moment of both self-reflection and alienation is literalized through the motif of an endlessly reflecting mirror loop— "I looked up and caught sight of a naked girl in the mirrors,

endlessly reflecting… I hugged myself and the girl did, too. I started to cry and we couldn't stop. I turned away from her and quietly gathered up my school uniform…" (336).

In spite of the novel belabouring the point of Ruth's lack of productivity (she has not published a second book in years; she has been paralyzed by writer's block), Ruth, in fact, *does* a lot. Even though she has not completed her memoir, she has systematically taken down notes over the course of many years, accumulating pages and pages of writing. When faced with the "mystery" of Nao's diary, Ruth is endlessly active, and the text itself is littered with evidence of her efforts in the form of footnotes. We learn that Ruth found herself constantly "logging on to the Internet to investigate and verify the girl's references, and before long she had dragged out her old kanji dictionary, and was translating and annotating and scribbling notes about Akiba and maid cafes, otaku and hentai" (29). In the end, it is the amalgam of these piecemeal efforts that enable her to "find" Nao or at least to put some version of the tale together, a fitting metaphor for the feminist project or any project of knowledge production after all. When she finds the pages of Nao's diary suddenly empty, she heeds Oliver's advice that perhaps she needs to fill in the blanks. Finding herself in a dream with Nao's father, she reveals to him what she knows and finally, she is the one who plants Haruki #1's French letters into his urn, returning the story to Nao and to herself.

The novel thus exhorts us to do as Ruth does, encouraging activity rather than passivity even in the face of a desolate and vast unknown. She models a way of dealing with uncertainty, living and acting in the face of an unsolvable dilemma. Ozeki notes that *A Tale for A Time Being* is an attempt at "playing with the idea of a recursive self: if the character Ruth isn't the ultimate authority, who is the ultimate authority? Is Ruth-the-

author [sic] the ultimate authority, and if so, does this create yet another world? It is these parallel worlds again—the multiverse that exists, I think, in our relationship with the page, with story. We are creating these multiple universes when we fictionalize" (Ty 167). Ozeki explains that even though we have no idea and no way of knowing, "there is *an act of faith* at the end that will generate results. Nao is out there somehow" (Ty 169, my italics). After Ruth wakes up from the dream in which she intervenes to speak with Nao's father and subsequently places Haruki #1's letters in the urn, Oliver soothes her by saying that "at least [she] tried" and tells her to check the diary (354). When she opens it, the words on the page have indeed miraculously reappeared, with Nao thanking her for "not losing faith in [her]" (354, 359).

Courage therefore lies in keeping faith and in fictionalizing to enable and produce possibility. Seen this way, the novel's turn to quantum physics is not an esoteric one nor a dramatic brushing aside. It is the answer to Gayatri Spivak's imperative—that even in the face of certain and continued failure, the critic is not free to dismiss her responsibility with a flourish. "The subaltern cannot speak. … The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (Spivak 104). While "one cannot put together a "voice"" one can and must continue to sincerely try, while leaving open space for ambiguity or ambivalence (Spivak 93).

In this way, Ozeki models a way of practicing the politics that Kandice Chuh calls for in *Imagine Otherwise*. Chuh asserts that

> To imagine otherwise is not simply a matter of seeing a common object from different perspectives. Rather, it is about undoing the very notion of common objectivity itself and about recognizing the ethicopolitical implications of multiple

> epistemologies—theories about knowledge formation and the status and objects of knowledge—that underwrite alternative perspectives. (2)

Marlo Starr reads the novel as representing an "overt performance of [the] Buddhist propositions of interbeing," which emphasizes an interdependent, collective identity over an independent self (114). Ozeki's novel thus structurally and thematically illustrates what it means to defy a "notion-based territorial imagination," contributing to "the project of dislocating the dichotomous spatial logic that has long held together the boundaries of the field [of Asian American literature" (Chuh 87). Like race, ethnicity and national identity in Lee's novel, the multiple spinning threads of nation, time, space, ecology in Ozeki's novel suggest that Ozeki is not *merely* interested in those categories qua categories. It is clear that Ozeki is not working in the mode of realism. Meta-fiction and magic realist elements make us highly aware of the fact that we are reading fiction and in turn, aware of the capacious abilities of fiction and world-making—what is it actually able to *do.* In Ozeki's novel, fiction and storytelling is not a solitary project but a communitarian one, inviting and involving the participation of different members of the society. As Davis points out, "the novel's key conceit is its continual reference to and curiosity about the writers within it, all of whom labor, with varying degrees of success, over multilayered life writing projects" (98). Ozeki's novel encourages an acceptance of unknowability as the mechanism for directing our intention in the pursuit of reclaiming agency and working against oppression. Ozeki therefore calls for courage, and aims to lead by example, choosing finally to "step into the novel" putting herself within it and leaving herself and her writing open to its wiles (Ty 169). It is clear the ways in which the world has influenced

Ozeki's writing, but the novel also aims to demonstrate that by writing we can not only actively engage with the world, but also be part of the process of creation, a Heideggerian "worlding."

In trying to inhabit everything, Ruth Ozeki's novel is one that is also profoundly about the Anthropocene. Donna Haraway begins her essay "Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene" with Virginia Woolf's word "*Think we must.* We must think" as an epigraph. It is the urgency relayed to feminist collective thinking-with by Puig de la Bellacasa. Haraway offers no easy solutions to the troubles we find ourselves embroiled in and those we have created for ourselves. For Haraway, the only way out of the trouble is to stay with it. She says, "I want to stay with the trouble, and the only way I know to do that is in generative joy, terror, and collective thinking" (Haraway 34). Haraway reminds us that "the *doings* of situated, actual human beings matter. It matters which ways of living and dying we cast our lot with rather than others" (Haraway 59, my italics). Haraway's epigraph may be an insistence on thinking, but it is clear that it is also a call to real action. The only way forward that she can envision is by "chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures" (Haraway 61). In that same vein, the imperative relayed by Ozeki's model of feminism might be rewritten as "Do we must. We must do."

Ruth as a unique reader of Nao's is full of care for the text. She goes against a form of transnational feminism that embodies the "dangers of creating a totalizing vision—"the simultaneous denial and universalization of difference"—and the problems presented by notions of a "global sisterhood," a feminist discourse that insists on universal "sameness" between women and inadvertently reinforces hegemonic structures" (Kaplan, Alarcón, and

Moallem 1999, 3, Starr 117). Abiding by Kandice Chuh's direction for a politics of heterogeneity, under Ruth's careful stewardship, the events and specifics described in Nao's and Haruki's diary and letters are treated respectfully, where "difference is neither celebrated nor subjugated, but is instead historicized and particularized" (86). Ruth and Nao's feminist bond is unique even within Ozeki's ouevre as it "emphasizes community while maintaining conceptions of "self" and "other"" allowing for "connection across national, cultural, and spatial boundaries but does not require a denial of differences between them" (Starr 120).

Just as she has the power to call a reader into existence from across the ocean, her reader, Ruth, has the power to participate in creating or writing Nao's life. We are intensely aware of Ruth's engagement in creating the text we hold in our hands at the same time that we recognize we are reading a received text through her. Ruth and Nao's transnational relationship "represents a process of mutual co-creation, a model of feminism that emphasizes intermingling and interdependence over nondualism or a unitary form of identity" (Starr 120). Ozeki herself has spoken about how she knew that "somebody needed to read Nao's diary," that it was about "playing with this idea of how you hold the story of yourself" (Ty 164, 163).

Coda

To Be *and* Not To Be: Schrodinger's Cat

Hamlet's famous meditation on all things from epistemology, ontology, and life itself—"to be or not to be"— is characterized by brevity and also by mutual exclusion. To be *or* not to be—one, *or* the other. *Lolita*, too, written with a solipsism that could rival Hamlet's own, is defined by such mutual exclusion: either Dolores Haze is alive and we are never privy to the pleasures and horrors of Humbert's "confession," or we hold the book in our hands and concede that Dolores Haze is dead. Ozeki's novel is similarly characterized by such binaries, but rather than mutual exclusion, it is defined instead by mutual *inclusion.* Instead of a separation between two possibilities, there seems instead to be an *oscillation* between what is and is not, what is there and not there in the novel is always mediated by writing. Every binary presents itself as simultaneous, resonating with potentiality and brimming with possibility, even concluding with the metaphysical conceit of the simultaneous existence of all possible worlds.

Schrodinger's Cat is a repeated motif through the novel, discussed both as the quantum mechanics experiment *and* the actual pet cat that Ruth and Oliver own who is simultaneously conjured by Nao as part of the image of Ruth Nao creates. In Nao's first lines, she muses, "Do you have a cat and is she sitting on your lap? Does her forehead smell like cedar trees and fresh sweet air?" (3). Later, in the last lines of the novel, Ruth will write back, "I do have a cat, and he's sitting on my lap, and his forehead smells like cedar trees and fresh sweet air. How did you know?" (403). The Schrodinger's Cat experiment describes a set up in which a cat is put into a steel box into which there is equal probability that a poisonous substance will or will not be released in an hour. After that hour is up, *before* the box is opened to be observed, not only is there an equal probability that the cat

will be alive or dead, but until you observe it, the cat *is both alive and dead,* at the same time. What the experiment purports is that every time such a dual possibility occurs in the world, a schism is created and the world splits, giving rise to ever-growing possibilities and worlds, "adding up to an infinitely all-inclusive, and yet mutually unknowable, web of many worlds" (415).

In some ways, Haruki #1's urn enacts the metaphysical dilemma of Schrodinger's Cat, and is both empty and full. The urn is empty of his remains, containing only a word, which is all that remains. Jiko explains that "They sent us a box with the remains of our beloved children. If the bodies weren't found, they put in a piece of paper. They couldn't just send an empty box, you see" (247). She expresses her disdain and sardonic amusement at receiving Haruki #1's empty box of remains—"To send a word, instead of a body!" (248). Haruki's urn is empty of his remains, and contains, instead, a piece of paper with the word *ikotsu* written, the Japanese term for remains. The paper therefore both symbolizes and *is* what remains—Haruki's literal remains given as writing; Haruki remains as writing. In the form of the contents of Haruki's urn, we are given the idea of writing *as* remains. In *Empire of Signs,* Barthes writes that "Writing is after all, in its way, a *satori: satori* (the Zen occurrence) is a more or less powerful … seism which causes knowledge, or the subject, to vacillate: it creates *an emptiness of language.* And it is also an emptiness of language which constitutes writing; it is from this emptiness that derive the features with which Zen, in the exemption from all meaning, writes gardens, gestures, houses, flower arrangements, faces, violence" (4). The kanji for Ikotsu, or remains, is 遺骨. The characters literally translate to mean lost or misplaced bones. Once again, what is symbolized or represented is both what is there and what is not there— is both there and not there. Ruth,

too, embodies this duality and is both there and not there, the destabilizing of her ambivalent ontology rooted in her very own name. Ruth explains the phonetic translation of her name: "in Japanese, Ruth is either pronounced *rutsu,* meaning "roots," or *rusu,* meaning "not at home" or "absent"" (59). Her name therefore suggests both a groundedness (in "roots") and/or an absence or lack. This oscillation between two opposite meanings incites a paranoia that appears to be a dead end. But the energy of oscillation between two poles contains a deep potentiality, even as it perseveres through time, brimming with energy at the frisson of dynamic relation.

In the introduction to *The Feminist Difference,* Barbara Johnson points out that "Most discussions of ambivalence treat ambivalence as a temporary, unfortunate, and remediable state of feeling" and encourages us to consider that that may in fact be the problem (2). "Perhaps there is," she writes, "something healthy about claiming the right to ambivalence" (2). "If resistance is always the sign of a counter-story, ambivalence is perhaps the state of holding on to more than one story at a time" (Johnson 2). Johnson considers what might give rise to the fear of speech or the problems of speaking—that what will be revealed is the "contradiction that had been hidden inside the unsayability of what feminism has now given voice to" (3). Indeed, "once women begin to speak, we begin to differ with each other" (3). Ozeki's novel seems to take this anxiety as its starting point and turn it into something transformative and generative. The novel stages this internal and meta conflict and contradiction across and within characters. Women can contradict each other or even themselves.

Untethered from the overdetermination of the aesthetic tradition of women's silence, Nao and Ruth can be chatty, in a sense. Their playfulness, coyness, or shyness is

not centered around a male audience and does not imagine that a male audience specifically is privy to it and is also therefore generous and sincere. Freed from the ways in which female speech has been disciplined by patriarchal society, the relationship the two women form is a capacious one—one they lean into in times of need and which offers support simply by existing.

The connection between what we know (or think) and what we do is defined by the connection between the epistemological and the ethical. In an essay on paranoia and uncertainty, Namwali Serpell explains that "The task of the critic has become to advocate for the uncertainty of literature as the source of its ethical value, either by burrowing into the fecund density of an ethical morass or by sketching the bleak, desolate impasses of an existential ethical reality" (223). One vision "sees literature as the intense, specific, full unfolding of a complex ethical reality we struggle to know, while the other suggests that literature's point is in fact that we cannot know it" (223). Both are uninterested in uncertainty, either rejecting it or writing it off as foreclosing any explanation. Serpell views these two approaches as "rendering [uncertainty] the *end* of an epistemological hunt rather than… registering its possibilities as the *beginning* of an ethics" (Serpell 223). In the case of *A Tale for the Time Being,* I argue that this refusal of foreclosure, the decision to "stay with the trouble" and register its ambivalence and possibilities, as Haraway and Johnson exhort, is precisely a feminist ethic—one that emerges from an understanding that identification is impossible and advocates action despite understanding that representation must always entail misrepresentation. Such action and such writing is brave and self-aware, always already in the mode of comprehending its limits, and comprehending too, the need to continue to *do more* in spite of it, shedding, therefore, the delusions of righteous ethical

gestures. This inventive and generous feminism is not the feminism of the era of Catherine Mackinnon—even as it may acknowledge its debt to it—and rejects the idea that feminism requires rejection or foreclosure because the road before was difficult and the road ahead will continue to be so. Feminism after all is not served by the insistence on the bleakness of insufficiency or inadequacy, but strengthened instead by collective effort.

When we begin to read *Lolita,* we are aware that the words on the page are available because Dolores Haze has died. The ethical gesture in this case is enacted in forcing the reader to be intensely aware of our culpability and participation in the suffering of one girl and to get us to question our feelings about our involvement. Ozeki's novel, in contrast, ends with no proof that Nao is out there, after all. Ozeki's novel is the least historical of the four in this dissertation, but in spite of that—or perhaps *because* of that—it is the most powerful. We have to consider *Pnin* in order to comprehend the Russian liberalism that underpinned Nabokov's ethos in *Lolita,* and we have to consider the postwar period of industrial recovery and trauma in Japan in *A Pale View of Hills* in order to understand the inability of Western critics to sufficiently address American imperialism and Japanese guilt. We need to turn to an unspeakable event of systematic sexual slavery in the Pacific Theatre and the silence that shrouds it in *A Gesture Life* in order to complicate the notion of aesthetic ekphrasis and prosopopoeia. Unhinged from a reliance on historical violence (though it is there in discussions of the Second World War and 9/11) and not anchored by a single foundational historical event, Ozeki's novel is more speculative and therefore more worldly and world*ing.*

The novel's final move is a mirroring one, with Ruth interpellating Nao as she herself was interpellated in the first pages, through writing: "You wonder about me. I

wonder about you." These two mimetically chiasmic lines not only mirror each other, but symbolically bracket the entire novel, as if in an embrace. But like the novel itself, this bracketing is powerful because it is not a foreclosure—like the novel, it is generative because it is not hermeneutically sealed. Recall that W.H. Auden's famous lines that "poetry makes nothing happen" is followed by the line "it survives,// A way of happening, a mouth"—survives, in other words, as the organ of speech and its potential for speech. Nao is not ventriloquized here but rather, *called out to*. The final gesture of the reader's is therefore to listen for an answer. Where the central interrogation of this dissertation has been speech, it concludes with the call to listen. Listening, therefore, is not poised as a posture of an ending, but an invitation: the beginning of speech.

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