ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: LOOKING UP: READING FOR SETTLER COLONIALISM IN CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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This dissertation examines how contemporary Asian American literature engages settler colonialism not through direct representation of Indigenous characters or moments of Asian-Indigenous encounter, but through formal and narrative strategies that illuminate the structural logics of settler colonialism. While much of Asian American literary scholarship explores settler colonialism through explicit references to or representations of such interactions, this project instead asks we might read for its presence in the absence of such representations. I argue that literary form offers a crucial site to understand how Asian American literature engages the entangled logics of settler colonialism and racism. To this end, I read four contemporary Asian American novels for their formal and narrative strategies: the compromised status of truth and memory in the confessional form in *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen in Chapter One; the narrative cartography produced by a polyvocal crowd of narrators in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* in Chapter Two; and the questionable unity of first-person plural narrators in Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* and Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao* in Chapter

Three. Taking temporality as its organizing heuristic, the dissertation interrogates the dominant narrative arc through with Asian American history is typically plotted: a linear progression from migrant exclusion, to multicultural inclusion, to model minority assimilation. I read these novels as they relate to constructions of linear time—of past, to present, to future—through critical Asian American, Native, Black, and queer temporal interventions that disrupt such normative teleologies, and foreground the entangled histories of migration, racialization, and settler violence. By doing so, these I hope this project helps us expand the dominant formal and temporal frames and reading practices through which Asian American literature and subjectivity has been understood, and situate it within a broader critique of U.S. settler colonialism.

LOOKING UP: READING FOR SETTLER COLONIALISM IN CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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For my parents, who love words,

And their parents, who did too.

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Introduction

In July of 2014, I was pleasantly surprised to stumble upon an exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History called "Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation." Produced by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, the exhibit assembled an archive of textual, digital, and material objects to present to the public a glimpse of Indian America beyond the *Temple of Doom*-esque caricature of "turbans, temples, and a billion faces drawn from ancient history" that persist in the American imaginary.[1] The array of materials attested to "Indian American" as an identity in three parts: first and second in the discrete realms of the Indian and the American, and finally in the overlap between the two. This was effectively (and amusingly) visualized in an installation of a "typical" at-home dinner setting, in which a traditional stainless steel *thaali* was set directly across from a Corelle Butterfly Gold plate—the Indian and the American equally placed on the Indian American table. As the visitors walk through the exhibit, they get a clear and linear narrative of Indians in America beginning with the first documented arrival of an Indian in the United States in the late 18th century through to the contemporaneous moment in which every one in one hundred Americans was of Indian heritage. Positioned close to the exhibit space's exit was a wall populated by home pictures of modern Indian American families, a testament to the thoroughly ordinary obscured by narratives of technological innovation, spelling bee championships, and other high-profile Indian American "success" stories. At the center of this wall, at eye level, was a mirror, a direct invitation to Indian American visitors to literally see themselves within this expansive quilt of Indian America.

[1] "Beyond Bollywood," Google Arts & Culture, accessed March 20, 2025, https://artsandculture.google.com/story/beyond-bollywood/jwXRxW5esAsA8A.

I stood in front of the mirror and of course snapped a photo, the stylized text of the question on the accompanying text plate showing up as clearly as my reflection as its answer: "Indian Americans: WHO ARE WE?" Despite having this photo to this day, the image that has lasted in my mind over a decade later is not my own but a series of photographic diptychs also on display by artist Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, titled *An Indian From India*. Each diptych consists of an archival photo of an Indigenous person (predominantly from Edward S. Curtis's *The North American Indian*) next to a self-portrait of Matthew. All of Matthew's self-portraits are captured in the same sepia tone as Curtis's early 20th century photographs, and her reproduction of the composition, posture, and expression of each Indigenous subject, as well as Curtis's presentation of his photographs, is meticulous. One might pass through the exhibit and glance at Matthew's photos as mere replication of Curtis's photos, perhaps thinking little beyond a play on the word "Indian" and letting out a derisive snort at the semantic legacy of Christopher Columbus's arrogance. However, the striking details that emerge upon closer inspection of An Indian from India invite us to reconsider not only the linguistic conflation of "Indian" but also the structures that have produced and sustained such confusion. More than mere surface-level mimicry, Matthew's series actively engages with—rather than merely replicates—the visual and historical archives she draws from. To view Matthew's diptychs as mere imitation would be to miss the deliberate ways she revises the originals; they are not passive reproductions, but carefully crafted interventions into the authority of the original images.

These interventions become especially clear when we attend to the details of the diptychs. Each of Matthew's self-portraits is captioned in the style of Curtis's photographs, making revisions to account for her own identity as an Indian in the 21st century United States: her counterpart to "The Belle of the Yakimas" is "The Belle of the Deccan Plateau;" "Feather

Indian" is accompanied by Matthew's "Dot Indian;" and photos of "Tom Torlino, Navajo, On Entry to Carlisle School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania" and "Tom Torlino, Navajo, Three Years Later, Carlisle" are positioned beside "Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Indian, On Entry to the United States of America" and "Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Indian, Nine Years Later, Providence." These variations are not simply textual; Matthew presents herself in a blend of Indian clothing, jewelry, and other adornments in the style of the Indigenous subjects rather than directly replicate or appropriate them. In "American Indian with War Paint/Indian with War Paint," for example, Matthew "mirrors" the Indigenous man in the photo by adopting the same pose and composition—but replaces his axe with an Indian scythe and wears decorative *chandan* designs across her temple instead of mimicking the man's paint. In the photos accompanying the images of Tom Torlino before and after entry into the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (known for its mission to "kill the Indian" in order to "save the man"), Matthew instead represents her experience of immigration to the U.S. She is first pictured unassimilated—"On Entry"—with her hair flowing, adorned with Indian clothing and jewelry, evoking without duplicating Tom Torlino's presentation. "Nine Years Later" her hair is slicked back, her face bare, wearing the blazer and collared shirt combination in fashion in the early 2000s that gestures towards Tom Torlino's buttoned-up Western-style suit. Finally, where each photo of an Indigenous subject bears the name of the white settler who staged and photographed them, Matthew's photos bear her own name—an acknowledgement of the power required to explore and voluntarily place herself "within" the colonial archive.

Matthew's photos have drawn polarizing critique. Shaista Patel argues that while Matthew's intent may have been to challenge dominant colonial narratives, *An Indian from India* ultimately renders Indigenous peoples a "metaphor through which she is able to emplace herself

as the racialized subject…without any lives beyond their need to grant her life."[2] Patel interprets Matthew's self-portraits as acts of mimicry that ultimately buttress settler domination and Indigenous absence. By visually placing herself as a racialized migrant alongside colonial images of Indigenous subjects, Patel contends, Matthew does not enact a dialogue between the "two Indians" but "literally step[s] into their place," resigning Indigenous peoples to history and privileging contemporary racial injury over colonial violence of a long bygone era.[3]

Where Patel finds in the series a failed solidarity unintentionally complicit with settler domination, Bakirathi Mani offers a more generous reading grounded in a transnational framework of empire. Mani asserts that the tension between the historical visual archive of U.S. settler colonialism and Matthew's contemporary self-portraits evokes the "ghostly presence" of the subjects not represented: the Indian subject colonized by the British. Reviewing the visual archive amassed by the British Raj alongside Curtis's images, Mani astutely argues that *An Indian from India* makes visible a "transverse relationship between anonymous Indians photographed in the late nineteenth century and the many unidentified Native subjects who are surveyed in Curtis's collection nearly fifty years later."[4]

Both Patel and Mani offer valuable insights into the transnational and transhistorical dynamics of power at work in *An Indian from India*, and their readings inform my own thinking. While Patel's close attention to the dynamics of caste and race is indeed crucial (which I address in Chapter Three), their interpretative emphasis on Matthew *replacing* the Indigenous subjects overlooks the ways the self-portraits actively *engage with* the archival images. Rather than

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[2] Shaista Patel, "Complicating the Tale of 'Two Indians': Mapping 'South Asian' Complicity in White Settler Colonialism Along the Axis of Caste and Anti-Blackness," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016), https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/633278.
[3] Patel, "Complicating the Tale of 'Two Indians.'"
[4] Bakirathi Mani, *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America* (Duke University Press, 2020), 73.

resigning Indigenous peoples to a closed historical past, Matthew's diptychs foreground ongoing histories of colonial violence and racialization by situating her own identity in critical relation to these legacies. This is most markedly achieved through the deliberate presentation of the images side by side—neither image is privileged; instead, they function as two halves of a whole—inseparable and mutually constitutive of the overall diptych. Without either half, the meaning is incomplete. Both photographs—the subjects they depict, the archives they emerge from, and the histories and violences they evoke—are equally important, which is why they remain equally represented. Through Matthew's myriad visual variations—altering attire, adornment, and posture in culturally-specific ways—Matthew both honors the original subjects and unsettles the circumstances in which they were photographed, refusing a logic of such simplistic substitution and demanding that we attend to both images as constructed and staged within specific dynamics of power. In this way, Matthew's work challenges singular narratives of empire by opening space for layered reflections on identity, displacement, and resistance. Where Mani ultimately analyzes "An Indian from India" as centering the contemporary South Asian diasporic viewer's desire for visual self-representation—one that is inherently "saturated by imperial ways of seeing" especially in museological settings—I find in the photos a struggle to make sense of the ways that settler colonialism variously produces and structures Asian American racial subjectivity across space and time.[5]

Let us return to Matthew's invocation of the doubleness of the identifier "Indian." The fact that it can refer both to someone from India and a Native American is a well-known

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[5] Mani, 117. Though not focused on colonized peoples themselves, the interconnectedness of British colonialism in India and the Americas is also the subject of Jonathan Eacott's excellent monograph *Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600-1830*, which traces the material flows of commerce and commodities (particularly textiles) amongst Britain, the Americas, and India, as well as the moral and political meanings that the British projected onto these goods and regions in the process of constructing their own imperial and national identity. Eacott, *Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600-1830* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

slippage—so well known that it can be easily referenced and played for laughs. "[Christopher Columbus] was a fraud who murdered and enslaved thousands of Native Americans," declared Hari Kondabolu during an appearance on *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell*. "But that's not the only reason I hate him—it's also personal!" He continues, "Columbus is the reason I have to tell people I'm an Indian *from India*…. Because of Columbus I had to deal with kids in school asking me where my bow and arrow and feathers were—first of all, that's racist! Secondly…that's *racist*."[6] Kondabolu's joke not only draws comedic cache from this semantic confusion, but also points to the deeper ontoepistemological weight carried by the term "Indian" as a direct consequence of colonial conquest and domination.

Gayatri Spivak calls the term "American Indian" the result of a "false hegemonic cartography," a misnaming that misplaces the colonized subject onto an "imagined native place."[7] Shona M. Jackson extends Spivak's critique to consider how the word "Indian" registers the processes of Indigenous misrecognition and marginalization, indexing the "long reinvention of autochthonous peoples in the Americas in languages, cultures, and juridical systems that socially and culturally produced them and maintained their subordination as Indian, as native, as other to (European) man."[8] Jodi Byrd thoughtfully critiques Spivak's characterization of the "Indian" in "American Indian" as simply reflective of the error of a "geographically challenged explorer," instead exploring the ways that the term "Indian" (and "Negro") has borne multiple meanings across various imperial contexts. To transform this historically and geographically contingent "Indian" into a stable reference to the people of modern-day India, Byrd argues, bears

[6] Hari Kondabolu, *Christopher Columbus Was A Demon by Hari Kondabolu*, YouTube video, 2015, https://youtu.be/TzJp43NOzXc. The segment was about Columbus Day and the New York Italian American population's persisting attachment to it, to which Kondabolu proposes the solution of Joe DiMaggio Day: "Look at his stats! Career .325 batting average, seven straight seasons of over one hundred RBI—and most importantly, *no career genocides*."
[7] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Imperialism and Sexual Difference," *Oxford Literary Review* 8, no. 1/2 (1986): 230.
[8] Shona Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 65.

subjective and disciplinary consequences that disproportionately impact Indigenous peoples of the U.S. Byrd asks, "What exactly is the proper use of 'Indian' in a world marked (and mapped) by European colonialism? How can 'American Indians' exist if they are always under erasure, always deferred by 'Indian Americans?'"[9] Furthermore, this elision intensifies the existing tensions between postcolonial studies—within which South Asia remains a dominant subject—and Native Studies, which challenges the assumptions and priorities of postcolonial discourse. Placing herself as a contemporary racialized immigrant *alongside* the Indigenous subject forced to exist as a visual relic of an imaginary past, Matthew embraces the slippage of "Indian" and challenges the notion that the (Asian) Indian American and the (Indigenous) American Indian cannot coexist in the same time or place, or that one must necessarily eclipse the other. "An Indian from India" not only plays on the semiotic slippage of "Indian," but stages and visualizes it, deliberately emphasizing a relationship between the Indian American and settler colonialism that is often obscured or superficially engaged in dominant narratives.

Matthew's diptychs thus do more than merely revisit the colonial archive, and in doing so they raise a set of interrelated questions that animate this dissertation. At the center is the question of Asian American subjectivity: how it is shaped by overlapping structures of power such as settler colonialism, racialization, migration, and citizenship, and how it may also be self-fashioned through acts of literary representation, however fraught. The series also compels attention to temporality—not as a singular and linear chronology, but as a layered, coexisting set of moments that disrupt neat periodizations of colonial violence and ask us to critically reorient ourselves in relation to the past, present, and future. In staging herself alongside historical images, Matthew foregrounds the ways in which colonial pasts remain entangled with the

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[9] Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 71-3.

ongoing colonial present. Likewise, as she presents the Indigenous subject colonized by the U.S. alongside the contemporary migrant from India—and, as Bakirathi Mani argues, conjures between them the Indian subject colonized by the British—Matthew encourages us to reconceptualize the space of the nation, one that forgoes official geopolitical boundaries to instead foreground the porous, constructed, and continually unsettled nature of national borders as products of ongoing colonial processes. Rather than treating racialization and settler colonialism as separate or sequential phenomena (as Patel argues), I understand *An Indian from India* as insisting on reading them coevally—as overlapping structures that variously produce subjects in relation to land, labor, and nation. Finally, the series raises questions of form and narration: what it means to represent the self, to inhabit or revise genres of resistance, and how aesthetic practices can reproduce or contest dominant modes of seeing, knowing, and being. These questions—of representation, space, time, form, and subjectivity—guide the chapters that follow, which explore how contemporary Asian American literary texts navigate the demands and contradictions of representation under ongoing settler colonial and racial regimes.

This dissertation takes the slippage explored in Matthew's work as a point of departure for a broader examination of how contemporary Asian American literature narratively and formally makes visible, questions, and critiques the ways in which in which settler colonialism structures Asian American racial subjectivity and life. I take as my subject of study four contemporary novels: Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), discussed in Chapter One; Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), discussed in Chapter Two; and Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014) and Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao* (2022) in the third and final chapter. It is important to note that the all but one of the novels I analyze do not represent

Indigenous peoples or characters directly.[10] Rather, following the imperative I see raised by Matthew's work, this dissertation takes as its guiding project the identification and critique of the *structures and logics of settler colonialism*—of course inextricable from the dispossession of Indigenous peoples—embedded within Asian American racialization, subject formation, and literature. In the following section, I trace the historical emergence of Asian American identity, literature, and critique, paying attention to the particular ways that the category has been troubled by an unshakeable instability since its inception. Though these histories are indeed well-rehearsed, I present them to emphasize the crucial ways in which Asian American identity politics, racial formation, and literary form are crucially entwined with one another, a tension that animates questions of Asian American studies' enduring relevance, urgency, and usefulness—particularly in the context of institutionalization in the university, and as what (or perhaps, more accurately, who) constitutes Asian America has been, is, and will always be in flux. I end this section with a consideration of literary form's ability to attune us to historical and material histories, and the specific ways that the subject is formed within them; I do this in conversation with the work of Fredric Jameson.

I then move to explain that very history as it is commonly represented in Asian American scholarship and historiography: as a story defined primarily through migration. I how the focus on migration within Asian Americanist critique tends to privilege discourses of citizenship and the U.S. nation-state even as it explores resistance, refusal, and negation. I contend that with a more active critical reading practice that attends to settler colonial logics, we can read Asian American literature for more complex and generative understandings of Asian American

[10] The exception is *Tropic of Orange* by Karen Tei Yamashita, which I discuss in Chapter 2. One of the seven main characters of the novel is Rafaela, an Afro-Indigenous Mexican woman, though my analysis does not center on her plot arc or Indigenous identity.

subjectivity as it relates in horizontal relationship to other groups and processes we might consider otherwise unrelated.

This is not to claim by any means that Asian American studies has completely neglected settler colonialism; on the contrary, I then review the body of scholarship that has pushed the field to engage more rigorously with and problematize its foundational principles typical taken as givens. It is in relation to this scholarship that I situate my proposed reading practice of attending to works of Asian American literature in which no Indigenous characters are directly represented. The extant Asian American historiography that engages settler colonialism is premised upon *encounter*: literal historical encounters between Asian American and Native peoples, such as on the plantations of Hawai'i, the construction of the transcontinental railroad, or the coalitional multiethnic activist movements of the 1960s and 70s. In the case of Matthew's photos, it is visual encounter, produced by Matthew's restaging of and positioning alongside photos from the settler colonial archive. Literary criticism in this vein focuses predominantly on the cross representations of Asian and Native characters, Asian traversals of indigenous lands (and conversely, Native traversals of Asia), and reading Asian and Native authors side by side. Rather than take this approach, I hope to explore how we might attend to the *processes* of settler colonialism as they function even in the absence of Indigenous characters. Put another way, the presence of settler colonialism as a foundational structure of time, space, and life in the U.S. does not only appear in the representational presence of Indigenous characters; how might we read for it when we do not have such instances of encounter? In this project, I attempt to answer this question through an attentiveness to literary form informed by intentional citational practice. While Native characters and Native-authored literary texts are not included in my project, my analysis draws heavily from scholars across Native, Asian American, Black, feminist, and queer

studies; through this citational practice, I limn the ways that such works of Asian American literature illuminate the entangled logics of race and settler colonialism even when the latter may seem absent.

In the final section of this chapter, I introduce and explain this dissertation's organizing heuristic of temporality. Reading the ways that both Native and Asian American studies have problematized the normative time produced by racial capitalism and the settler state, I offer this project as an exercise in reevaluating the dominant temporal narrative of Asian American history and identity. Within this narrative, Asian Americans are typically plotted within a neatly, forward-moving arc towards progress: first as migrants, strangers from a distant shore navigating exclusionary immigration and citizenship policy; then as one component of the multicultural American melting-pot, earning recognition and inclusion in terms of liberalism that obscures historical violences; and finally as "successfully" assimilated model minority subjects, situated close enough to white supremacy to not pose a threat to it and to disprove protestations that the U.S. has deeply entrenched structural racism. I read these novels as they relate to constructions of linear time—of past, to present, to future—through critical Asian American, Native, Black, and queer temporal interventions that disrupt such normative teleologies. I then conclude by briefly reviewing each of the dissertation's three chapters.

By doing so, these I hope this project help us expand the dominant formal and temporal frames through which Asian American literature and subjectivity has been understood, and situate it within a broader critique of U.S. settler colonialism.

Formal Frictions

It is well-established that early Asian American literary scholarship tended to "[delight] in the interchangeability of literary and historical evidence," reading literature as sociological or

ethnographic evidence rather than attend to its literariness.[11] This documentary approach to literature as bearing the burden of representation reflects the broader context from which Asian American studies—and Asian American identity itself—emerged amidst the West Coast ethnic studies and antiwar liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. For the multiracial activists of the San Francisco State College and UC Berkeley student strikes, achieving representation was the crucial first step towards the liberation of all Third World peoples. They understood racism as a colonialist system born at the intersection of ideological misrepresentation and material exploitation, one constantly enabling the other; this foundational recognition of the perniciousness of colonialism was bolstered and developed through coalition across ethnic activist groups as well as opposition to the Vietnam War. It was through the propagation of "racial myths"—institutionalized cultural narratives that justified exploitation according to race—that racialized peoples were kept subjugated.[12] A 1968 pamphlet by L. Ling-chi Wang disseminated by the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action at San Francisco State College observes, the "societal expectations of the predominant white society…plays a crucial role in determining the fate and behavior of the Chinese in the U.S." The cultural narrative that represents the Chinese community as a "hard-working, inscrutable, patient, non-militant people with lasting endurance and self-respect…expected to be super-human and take the worst in stride" allows for the double exploitation of the Chinese community by the white establishment and of the Chinese working class by the Chinese upper and middle class. Wang urges her Chinese American community members to "free ourselves from the tyranny of Chinese myth, to

[11] Colleen Lye, "Reading for Asian American Literature," in *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 484. Christopher Lee also provides a helpful review of the field of study; see Lee, *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

[12] Students for a Democratic Society, "What Is Racism?" (San Francisco State College), SF State Strike Collection, Special Collections, San Francisco State University, accessed August 18, 2024, https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/strike/bundles/187969.

solve our problems."[13] In order to liberate their communities ideologically and materially, the students of the Black Student Union and Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) had to take control of institutional representation.

Key to the TWLF's strategy was recognizing the university as the "most sophisticated level" at which racist myths are propagated, and therefore would be the site for potential radical change.[14] After years of student-run initiatives that emphasized diversifying university curricula and doing outreach work in their own communities,[15] the TWLF's strike demands can be summarized as threefold: first, the establishment of formal Third World and Ethnic Studies departments with the autonomy to dictate their own hiring practices and course offerings; second, that staff and faculty positions across all levels of university recruit and hire minorities; and third, that the university implement a system of open enrollment and financial aid for minority students so that it might "begin the serve the…non-white people who live in this urban community in poverty, in ignorance, and in despair."[16]

"Asian American" emerges from the ethnic studies movements a new formal field of study and an identity representing the lived sociopolitical reality of a heterogeneous and dynamic group of people, making Asian American identity one that has "from the beginning been in

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[13] L. Ling-chi Wang, "Chinatown and the Chinese" (San Francisco State College, December 6, 1968), SF State Strike Collection, Box 19, folder 163, item 2, accessed August 18, 2024, https://strikecollection.quartexcollections.com/Documents/Detail/chinatown-and-the-chinese/3127.

[14] Students for a Democratic Society, "What Is Racism?" The university is identified as the most sophisticated of "all the major channels of social education in this country – television, newspapers, schools." This articulation of education as a tool to preserve oppressive power structures and much of the TWLF's political positions drew heavily from proposals for Black Studies by Black student groups; see "Black Studies Proposal," Spring 1968, CES ARC 2015/2, Location 2:7 twLF box 2 Folder 7, Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley, accessed August 19, 2024, https://revolution.berkeley.edu/black-studies-proposal/.

[15] For a comprehensive timeline and history of the many community initiatives undertaken by student groups during this time, see Karen Umemoto, "'On Strike!' San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–1969: The Role of Asian American Students," in *Contemporary Asian America (Third Edition): A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Min Zhou and Anthony Christian Ocampo (NYU Press, 2016), 25–55.

[16] Wang, "Chinatown and the Chinese."

crisis."[17] Even in the contemporary moment, Asian American identity is inextricably linked to the Asian American studies and the American university, where students "often learn for the first time to think of themselves as Asian American subjects…many of whom go on to become involved in pan-ethnic professional organizations or pan-ethnic community organizations that are themselves engaged in the work of racial formation."[18] From the 1968 establishment of the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA),[19] the name "Asian American" inherently claims to represent a stable and coherent pan-ethnic coalition of peoples from across Asia; the actuality of that claim that has fueled significant Asian Americanist critique for decades, as Asian America is a formation constantly in flux, reconstituting and reconfiguring itself with every shift in global geopolitical relations and every new wave of migrants.[20] As early as 1969, Violet Rabaya lamented the Filipino position of being "an outcast in white society and an outcast among orientals [which] leaves the Filipino in that never-never land of social obscurity."[21] Rabaya's insight into the exclusions inherent in the then-prevalent term "oriental" reveal an anxiety that remains relevant in the shift to "Asian American;" that is, that "Asian American" would continue to represent Chinese and Japanese Americans and exclude Filipino Americans, whose "brown"-ness (as opposed to the growing popularity of Yellow Power) and distinct history of colonization with Spain and the United States did not align neatly with existing categorizations of "Asia."

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[17] Colleen Lye, "Reading for Asian American Literature," in *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 484.
[18] Lye, "Reading for Asian American Literature," 486.
[19] Amy Uyematsu, "Back in 1969: Protests, Yellow Power, and the emergence of Asian American Studies," in *Mountain Movers: Student Activism and the Emergence of Asian American Studies*, ed. Russell Jeung, Karen Umemoto, Harvey Dong, Lisa Hirai Tsuchitani, and Arnold Pan (UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2019), chap. 8, Kindle. The AAPA was founded by activists and scholars Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee, with the former credited as coining the term "Asian American."
[20] The tension surrounding "Asian American" as a pan-Asian identity is evident even in the early student strike organizing. Both the Philippine American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE, eventually changed to the Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor) and the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA) preceded the AAPA and served their respective ethnic communities, and remained distinct groups throughout the strike. Interestingly, the AAPA was made up primarily of Japanese American activists; see Umemoto, 36-8.
[21] Violet Rabaya, "I Am Curious (Yellow?)" *Gidra*, vol. 1, no. 7 (October 1969): 7.

Despite discourse concerning "Asian American's" representational limits, its use spread swiftly across campuses and activist groups; by 1970, there existed "at least forty progressive pan-Asian American grassroots organizations, four newspapers, and ten student and community conferences."[22]

This representational instability extended to Asian American literature as well, which—as it emerged alongside these political and institutional developments—became a site of active contestation. Christopher Lee captures this tension succinctly, noting that Asian American literature was "controversial from the start precisely because its foundational understanding of identity was being contested by different groups struggling to define what was still an incipient formation."[23] In the foundational monograph *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, Sau-ling Wong contends that Asian American literature should be studied as an "emergent and evolving textual coalition" that allows critics to "play a role in building their community," emphasizing the relationship between Asian American identity and literature beyond ethnographic value.[24] Scholars such Lisa Lowe and Kandice Chuh heralded a move away from rigidly defined identity politics in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, with the former arguing in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* that "[r]ather than considering 'Asian American identity' as a fixed, established 'given,' perhaps we can consider instead 'Asian American cultural practices' that produce identity."[25] As identity politics were reevaluated with attention to contingency, difference, and hybridity, a renewed interest in literary form emerged in Asian American literary study that looked for the ways that Asian American

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[22] Karen L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (Verso, 2016), 72.
[23] Christopher Lee, *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (Stanford University Press, 2012).
[24] Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 9.
[25] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 1996), 64. Though extremely influential, Lowe's argument was not without its critics—among them Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong and Jinqi Ling.

literature refused essentialism and national recognition; this is perhaps most evident in the critical interest in Asian American revisions of the classic bildungsroman, a form previously associated the earlier decades' identity politics and assimilation.[26] As Jinqi Ling observes in *Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature*, scholars and critics began to conflate the "notion of realist imitation with the logic of Asian American [nationalist] identity politics" and privilege non-realist aesthetic and narrative modes as "synonym[s] for heterogeneous recognition of difference."[27] Mark Chiang argues that this "seismic shift" was less in the interest in broadening the field's aesthetic horizons and more related to Asian American studies' "struggle for greater institutional legitimacy" which depended upon the accessibility of "literary texts that will allow critics to produce more sophisticated theoretical readings."[28]

In the vein of disciplinary institutionalization, Viet Thanh Nguyen also argues that the Asian American intellectual class have produced an ideologically homogenous field of study that, as it reacts to the "demands of American racism," disproportionately favors neat narratives of resistance ("bad subjects") and model minorities. Extending Jinqi Ling's critique of the ideological oversimplification of Asian American literary study, Nguyen contends that Asian American intellectuals "have not been as interested in critiquing how we ourselves may be obscuring differences of power within Asian America or the limitations to our own theory and practice that ensue from an ideological belief that Asian America is only a place of ethnic

[26] For a book-length study of the Asian American literary engagement with the bildungsroman, see Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Duke University Press, 2000). See also Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 97-127.
[27] Jinqi Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 19-20. Ling emphasizes that this trend in literary criticism was predicated upon an "obsolete form of realist *claim*" in order to "argue almost effortlessly about specific Asian American literary works' generic and epistemological breakthroughs and about others' aesthetic and ideological defects." Chapter 1 of this dissertation picks up on this line of critique (though not specifically in conversation with Lowe and Ling) in regard to postcolonial critique's tendency to mischaracterize realism's claims to totality.
[28] Mark Chiang, "Autonomy and Representation: Aesthetics and the Crisis of Asian American Cultural Politics in the Controversy over Blu's Hanging," in *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing*, ed. Rocio G. Davis and Sue-Im Lee (Temple University Press, 2006), 25, 29.

consensus and resistance to an inherently exploitative or destructive capitalism;" thus they participate in the "commodification of race and the practices of panethnic entrepreneurship in the academy."[29] Amy C. Tang further adds that even as the privileged form and narration shifted away from realism and towards experimental modes that aligned with prevailing politics of difference and anti-essentialism, Asian American literary criticism remained governed by "categorical assumptions" that ethnic writing was "intrinsically political and socially engaged, even when it adopts the narrative strategies found in ostensibly apolitical postmodern writing." This, Tang argues, amounts simply to a more "sophisticated form of racial essentialism" that ultimately neglects how "form and politics intersect within an ethnic text."[30]

In the nearly twenty years that have elapsed since Colleen Lye identified the presence of a "new formalism" in Asian American literary criticism, there has emerged a robust body of work that thinks complexly and productively about the formal, narrative, and aesthetic strategies developed and deployed by Asian American writers.[31] Building on this formal turn, rather than approach Asian American literature solely as a historical archive, this project emphasizes the ways these texts engage with narrative form, structure, and aesthetic strategies in ways that

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[29] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 5, 11, 6

[30] Amy C. Tang, *Repetition and Race: Asian American Literature After Multiculturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 138.

[31] Colleen Lye, "Racial Form," *Representations* 104, no. 1 (2008): 92–101, https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2008.104.1.92. See, for instance, the three edited anthologies published within a year of each other that Lye directly responds to: Rocio G. Davis and Sue-Im Lee, eds., *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing* (Temple University Press, 2009); Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung, eds., *Recovered Legacies: Authority And Identity In Early Asian American Literature* (Temple University Press, 2005); and Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi, eds., *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* (University of Washington Press, 2005). Other especially insightful examinations of Asian American literature's form and aesthetics that I am not able to review at length here in the interest of space are Long Le-Khac's *Giving Form to an Asian and Latinx America*, Yoon Sun Lee's exquisite *Modern Minority: Asian American Literature and Everyday Life*, Josephine Nock-Hee Park's *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics*, and Sunny Xiang's probing and astute *Tonal Intelligence: The Aesthetics of Asian Inscrutability During the Long Cold War*. Le-Khac, *Giving Form* (Stanford University Press, 2020); Y. Lee, *Modern Minority* (Oxford University Press, 2013); J. Park, *Apparitions of Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Xiang, *Tonal Intelligence* (Columbia University Press, 2020).

illuminate the ideological and material operations of settler colonialism. In this regard, my understanding of formal analysis is indebted to Fredric Jameson. While this project does not claim to uncover or propose entirely new forms or reading practices, it does insist on the critical importance of attending to the formal and narrative dynamics through which settler colonialism and racialization co-constitute Asian American subjectivity—even, and especially, in Asian American texts that do not directly depict Indigenous presence. Drawing on Jameson's theorization of literary form as a "socially symbolic act, as the ideological—but formal and immanent—response to a historical dilemma," I approach the selected texts as dynamic sites where seemingly discontinuous social realities—diaspora and dispossession, recognition and exclusion, presence and absence—are momentarily illuminated into relation.[32] In his analysis of T. W. Adorno, Jameson illustrates how formal analysis can mediate between seemingly irreconcilable domains by staging their encounter within a unified framework:

> Stylistic juxtaposition of music, symbolic logic, and financial sheets? The text under consideration is all of these things…. For its most characteristic connectives are less signs of some syllogistic operation to perform than they are equivalents of the "just as ... so" of the heroic simile.
>
> Nor does the sudden exchange of energy involved really tell us anything new about either of the elements…indeed, we must already know what each of them is, in its own specificity, to appreciate their unexpected connection with each other. What happens is rather that for a fleeting instant we catch a glimpse of a unified world, of a universe in which discontinuous realities are nonetheless somehow implicated with each other and intertwined…contingency temporarily transmuted into necessity. [33]

This dialectical formalism, he suggests, does not offer direct explanation or causality but instead reveals a deeper historical logic through juxtaposition and metaphor. In a similar way, this project attends to how Asian American literary texts bring into relation historical, social, and political forces that are often treated as separate—Asian American migration, racialization, and

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[32] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 1981), 189.

[33] Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 7-8.

the structure of settler colonialism—by staging their direct encounter through formal and narrative choices.

Christopher Lee further sharpens this formalist reading, drawing from Jameson in *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* to define the aesthetic as a "mode of cognition" that "illuminates the internal logic of the idealized critical subject as well as the conditions under which it is manifested in literature."[34] For Lee, literary form does not just reflect subjectivity but actively produces it—what he calls the *idealized critical subject*. This subject is not given but emerges through the representational procedures of fiction and the formal analyses that "reveal the operations of the subject as well as how it is rooted in social particulars."[35] Form, in this sense, reveals not only how subjects think, but under what social and historical conditions such thinking becomes possible. Lee's insight clarifies that the literary is not merely a mirror of political life (paralleling Jameson's argument that form is not simply a container of content), but a space in which social and political subjectivities are forged, imagined, and tested.

Reading Asian American literature through this lens does not produce resolution, but rather a *momentary intelligibility*, a glimpse of how racialized subjects are differentially positioned in relation to and inextricably entwined with questions land, labor, and the powers of the settler state. Jameson's evocative description of historical form captures the transformative potential of this momentary reckoning:

> It is not too much to say that through such a historical form there is momentarily effected a kind of reconciliation between the realm of matter and that of spirit. For in its framework the essentially abstract character of the ideological phenomenon suddenly touches earth, takes on something of the density and significance of an act in the real world of things and material production… what had only an instant before seemed inertia and the resistance of matter, the sheer meaninglessness of historical accident…now finds

[34] Christopher Lee, *Semblance of Identity*, 13.
[35] Christopher Lee, *Semblance of Identity*, 15.

> itself unexpectedly spiritualized by the ideality of the objects with which it has been associated, reorganizing itself, under the pull of those mathematical systems which are its end product, into a constellation of unforeseen uniformities, into a socio-economic style which can be named.[36]

By "realm of matter," Jameson refers to the material conditions—land, labor, and economic systems—that shape lived experience, while the "realm of spirit" signals the ideological and subjective formations that arise from these conditions. The "momentary reconciliation" this historical form effects thus highlights how literary form can briefly unify sociopolitical contradictions into a meaningful whole. This project relies on such moments of dialectical "reconciliation" or "momentary intelligibility" as crucial sites for reading Asian American literature's negotiation of settler colonial power and racialized identity. As Jameson puts it, historical form brings together "abstract" ideology and "real world" materiality, revealing the structural conditions under which subjectivity and power coalesce.

This momentary unification described by Jameson parallels the formal experiments in the Asian American novels I examine—through fragmented storytelling, spatiotemporal cartographies, or shifts in narrative perspective—that unsettle dominant narratives of assimilation and foreground the contradictions of racialized settler colonial belonging. This reading practice thus opens new pathways to understanding both the state and racialized subjectivities as historically grounded and intricately intertwined. The texts I read not only thematize the contradictions of Asian American racial formation—simultaneously positioned as foreign threats and assimilable citizens, expendable laborers and upwardly mobile professionals, perpetual outsiders and complicit participants in settler colonial life—but also formally enact these tensions. Each chapter of this dissertation traces how the selected novels reorient our understanding of time and space through their formal and narrative maneuvers: *The*

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[36] Jameson, *Marxism and Form,* 8.

Sympathizer's refraction of the confessional form powerfully demands painful, sustained confrontations with the past; *Tropic of Orange* anchors itself in the present here-and-now through its polyphonous cartography of Los Angeles, illuminating the possibilities of decolonial coalition liberated from the dictates of the past and the postponements of the future; and *On Such a Full Sea* and *The Immortal King Rao* variously adopt first-person plural narrative voices to speculate collective subjectivity and futurity beyond settler racial capitalism.

The formal experiments and aesthetic strategies deployed by Asian American writers not only challenge dominant literary conventions but also register the deeper structural tensions of racialization and national belonging. To fully grasp the stakes of these formal choices, it is necessary to contextualize them within the historical and political development of Asian American studies' engagement with indigeneity and settler colonialism. I turn now to these disciplinary lines of inquiry and their implications for Asian American critique.

Settlers from a Distant Shore

The overarching story of much of 20th and 21st century Asian American cultural production and criticism is one of migration, devoted to tracing the history of populations moving from Asia to the United Sates and exploring the complex interrogation and acceptance of racial subjectivity. At the center of this scholarship is the construction of the figure of the Asian in America as perpetually foreign, a legacy of the long history of exclusive immigration policies, exploitative labor practices, and uneven administration of citizenship that renders them as always and only alien. As Lisa Lowe argues in *Immigrant Acts,* Asian American subjectivity is marked by a particular history of alienation that situates the Asian American political subject in a "critical apposition to the category of citizen," expanding and contracting accordingly to accommodate the shifting characterizations of Asians as alternatingly and simultaneously exotic,

barbaric, meek, cunning, and suspicious.[37] The Asian American is both within and outside of the United States: included in the workplace as labor, and excluded racially, linguistically, and culturally from the national polity; the Asian subject in America is thus a site upon which the U.S. nation seeks to resolve the politico-economic contradictions that define its national character. These contradictions of immigration and belonging produce an "unfixed liminality" inherent to the Asian American subject.[38] This condition, she argues, not only enables Asian American cultural production to serve as "critical negation of the U.S. nation" but also positions it as a site that "shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state."[39]

Lowe is hardly the only scholar to center migration in the study of Asian American history and cultural production. A foundational work of Asian American history, Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* offers a sweeping narrative of the diverse experiences of the waves of Asian immigrants and their descendants in the United States, laying the groundwork for understanding Asian American identity as shaped by transnational migration and systemic racism. In *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, David Palumbo-Liu mounts a (now canonically-accepted) critique of the inadequacy of the hyphenated term "Asian-American" to signal the unresolved tensions and disruptions within the construction of Asian American identity, particularly those stemming from histories of global migration, exclusion, war, and trade. He instead offers "Asian/American," the solidus (/) foregrounding the fraught and contested nature of the relationship between "Asian"

[37] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 12.
[38] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 19.
[39] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 29.

and "American," calling attention to the processes of racialization, dislocation, and national belonging that complicate any unified or stable identity.[40] Questions of immigration are at the core of Mae M. Ngai's socio-legal history *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, which looks to the period of notoriously restrictive immigration policy between 1924 and 1965 to examine the emergence of the racialized "illegal alien" as a new kind of subject whose "inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and legal impossibility"—an "impossible subject."[41] Like Lowe, she considers the mutually constitutive relationship between alien and citizen, but reveals that this binary is necessarily complicated by the shifting boundaries between legal and illegal immigration that "can be crossed in both directions."[42] Min Hyoung Song picks up chronologically where Ngai concludes in *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American*, examining how the influx of Asian immigrants post-1965 has shaped Asian American identity and literary production, focusing on how contemporary authors grapple with the legacies and pressures of racial representation.[43]

To be clear, I am not dismissing immigration as a defining subject and framework of Asian American study—to do so would be a glaring omission, and rightfully raise more eyebrows than insights. However, perhaps due to the emphasis on immigration and its transnational dimension, Asian American literary study has been belated to rigorously account for racial subject formation within the framework of settler colonialism. There is much ado about the journey *from* the homeland, the settling *in* United States, and the negotiation of the push and

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[40] Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, Updated and Revised Edition (Little, Brown and Company, 1998); David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford University Press, 1999).
[41] Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 4-5. It is worth noting that Ngai's monograph does not exclusively cover Asian American immigration; it also examines Mexican immigration and labor in the United States.
[42] Ngai, 6.
[43] Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Duke University Press, 2013

pull *between* the two places. But, as my prepositions demonstrate, these lines of inquiry close down the possibility of engagement with the historical and ongoing realities of Indigenous genocide and dispossession that underpins the existence of the nation-state. More significantly, such an erasure obfuscates how settler colonialism structures Asian American racial formation. Rather than reject immigration as a central theme, I aim to build upon this vibrant body of work theorizing the Asian migrant by placing it in conversation with analyses of settler colonialism, in order to more fully understand the multiple, overlapping structures that shape Asian American subjectivity.

Since the late 1990s there has been a sustained effort to engage with settler colonial critique and Indigenous studies alongside Asian American studies; there has been a particularly lively scholarly conversation surrounding the exemplary situation of Asians in Hawai‘i emerging from Native Studies. In a 2000 special issue of the *Amerasia* journal, editors Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Nakamura raised the issue of the Asian migrant as settler, complicit in the U.S. imperial powers that continue to dispossess Native Hawai‘ians and obstruct Hawaiian sovereignty.[44] Haunani-Kay Trask's essay in this issue illuminates how the "immigrant hegemony" of Asians in Hawai‘i is premised on two key factors: first, that Asian settlers greatly outnumber Native Hawai‘ians in terms of population, and second, that because of their upward economic mobility and involvement in the processes of statehood, Asian immigrants over time have been able to rearticulate themselves as Hawai‘ian "locals."[45] Trask's explication of the transformation of the "immigrant" to the "local" rightly attunes us to the ways in which the

[44] Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Okamura, eds. "Whose Vision? Asian Settler Colonialism in Hawai'i." Special issue, *Amerasia Journal* 26 no. 2 (2000). See also Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura, eds., *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawaii* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008). Incidentally, it was Ronald Takaki (himself raised in Hawai'i) who introduced the concept of the Asian American settler—not in opposition to the Native, however, but to the concept of the perpetually foreign Asian in America; see Saranillio, *Unsustainable Empire*, 15-6.
[45] Haunani-Kay Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai'i," *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 2 (2000), 2-3.

single-minded focus on Asian immigration and alienation often reinscribes settler narratives that spatiotemporally and rhetorically displace Indigenous peoples, obfuscating their collusion with the nation-state at the expense of Native Hawai'ian communities and sovereignty. Dean Itsuji Saranillio builds on Trask's scholarship in *Unsustainable Empire: Alternative Histories of Hawai'i Statehood*, examining how Asian dominance was a key dynamic in both Hawai'i's initial disqualification from statehood—as a "largely Asiatic territory"—as well as in the construction of a harmonious multicultural melting pot that lead to statehood's eventual imposition against Native protestation.[46] In *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty*, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui reveals the "many ways, some subtle, others crude, [that] the racialization of Hawai'ians was co-constructed in relation to Chinese and Japanese presence on the islands," particularly debates over blood quantum that drew upon the racial triangulation of white- Hawai'ian-Asian as well as anti-Asian rhetorics that emphasized the alien Asian in opposition to the white American and the potentially assimilable Hawai'ian.[47]

In more recent years, Asian American study has expanded the terrain of its study of settler colonialism beyond Hawai'i. Though of course Hawai'ian scholarship has informed other approaches to indigeneity, Hawai'i's particular population demographic in which Asians constitute a majority, and its history of annexation render it difficult to apply to geographic contexts beyond the islands. In a broader disciplinary turn, Canada has emerged as a particularly rich site of analysis, owing to its unique composition of Indigenous, settler, migrant, and racialized populations, as well as its history of enslavement and settlement distinct from that of the U.S.; this has led to a heightened visibility of Indigenous issues in comparison to the U.S.

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[46] Dean Itsuji Saranillio, *Unsustainable Empire: Alternative Histories of Hawai'i Statehood* (Duke University Press, 2018), 25-7.
[47] J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity* (Duke University Press, 2008), 19-20.

(though of course this visibility not without its own limitations and contradictions). This is has given rise to a robust body of scholarship by Canadian scholars exploring the intersections between Asian and Indigenous communities, such as Larissa Lai's examination of "Asian Canadian" identity and literature as premised upon an extended consideration of the ways in which Indigenous writers and critics "did the front-line work" on decolonization that benefit Asian Canadian writers, as well as a confrontation with the reality that "Asian Canadian liberation within a national frame is built upon the disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples."[48] Scholars such as Marie Lo, Malissa Phung, Nishant Upadhyay, and Rita Wong have also enriched this field of Asian Canadian and Asian North American critique.[49]

The convergence of Asian American studies and Indigenous studies has helped generate more flexible and expansive geographic frameworks, challenging the dominance of the U.S. nation-state as the primary unit of analysis, with scholars like Manu Karuka, Rebecca N. Liu, Quynh Nhu Le, Pacharee Sudhinaraset, and Erin Suzuki looking to the hemispheric Américas, the Pacific Rim, and transpacific and transatlantic oceanic routes in their studies.[50] There is an

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[48] Larissa Lai, *Slanting I, Imagining We: Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014), "Introduction," Kindle.

[49] See, for example: Marie Lo, "Model Minorities, Models of Resistance: Native Figures in Asian Canadian Literature," *Canadian Literature: A Quarterly of Criticism and Review* 196 (April 2008): 96–112; Malissa Phung, "Asian-Indigenous Relationalities: Literary Gestures of Respect and Gratitude," *Canadian Literature*, no. 227 (2015): 56–72, https://doi.org/10.14288/cl.v0i227.187794; Jennifer Adese and Malissa Phung, "Where Are We from? Decolonizing Indigenous and Refugee Relations," *Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada*, 2021, 117–42; Nishant Upadhyay, "'We'll Sail Like Columbus': Race, Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, and the Making of South Asian Diasporas in Canada" (PhD diss., York University, 2016); Nishant Upadhyay, "Making of 'Model' South Asians on the Tar Sands: Intersections of Race, Caste, and Indigeneity," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 5, no. 1–2 (2019): 152–73, https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.5.1-2.0152; Rita Wong, "Decolonizasian: Reading Asian and First Nations Relations in Literature," in *Asian Canadian Studies Reader*, ed. Roland Sintos Coloma and Gordon Pon (University of Toronto Press, 2017), 225–42.

[50] Incidentally, three of these five scholars (Le, Sudhinaraset, and Suzuki) are published in Temple University Press's series Critical Race, Indigeneity, and Relationality, edited by Antonio T. Tiongson Jr., Danika Medak-Saltzman, and Iyko Day. Though other scholars have attended to the construction of railroads as imperial projects, in *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* Manu Karuka articulates a theory of *railroad colonialism* as co-constitutive of the modern imperial state and finance capitalism; to develop this concept, Karuka looks not just to Indigenous-Asian encounters in the U.S. context, but also to the implementations of railroad colonialism across Africa, Asia, Australia, and the broader Americas. Rebecca N. Liu considers the legacy of the indentured Asian coolie laborer in the Caribbean in contemporary Asian American culture and labor.

exciting body of scholarship taking Asian Americanist critique to new places to chart alternative geographies of Asian American subjectivity and experience within frameworks of settler colonialism. Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, for example, looks to the relocation of Vietnamese refugees to Israel and the unincorporated territories of Guam to consider the military, political, and colonial tensions and solidarities that emerge amongst the seemingly disconnected structures of the U.S.'s war in Vietnam, Palestinian liberation struggles, and Chamorro decolonization.[51] In *Space-Time Colonialism: Alaska's Indigenous and Asian Entanglements*, Juliana Hu Pegues looks to the understudied context of Alaska to formulate a theory of *settler orientalism*, or the discourses by which Alaska Native peoples are rendered temporally and spatially excluded from Alaska (and the U.S. nation-state) because of their geographic and perceived ancestral proximity to Asia.[52]

Quynh Nhu Le's monograph considers the hemisphere—specifically the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Brazil—exploring how British, Spanish, and Portuguese colonialisms paralleled and differed in the racial hierarchies they instituted and their biopolitical, juridical, socioeconomic, and historiographic legacies. In *Worlds at the End: Los Angeles, Infrastructure and the Apocalyptic Imagination,* Pacharee Sudhinaraset brings together writing from communities as localized as Southern California and as expansive as the Pacific Rim to track how ideologies manifest destiny has sustained material networks of migration, labor, and militarism. Erin Suzuki examines the relation that has emerged between Asian American and Pacific Islander identity and culture, arguing that Asian Americanist study must engage with Indigenous epistemologies if it is to avoid replicating settler colonial erasure. To this end, she examines Asian and Pacific Islander literary works (passages, as in narrative texts) together to limn a series of relational oceanic connections (passages, as in movements or trajectories) of U.S. occupation, labor exploitation, and environmental degradation, as well as potential embodied solidarity and virtually imagined futures. Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (University of California Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd1c7m4. R. Liu, "The Asian American Contract: On Useful Labor and Social Reproduction in Severance and Minari," *American Literature* 96, no. 3 (September 1, 2024): 473–99, https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-11398655; Le, *Unsettled Solidarities: Asian and Indigenous Cross-Representations in the Américas* (Temple University Press, 2019); Sudhinaraset, *Worlds at the End: Los Angeles, Infrastructure, and the Apocalyptic Imagination* (Temple University Press, 2024); Suzuki, *Ocean Passages: Navigating Pacific Islander and Asian American Literatures* (Temple University Press, 2021).

[51] Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, *Archipelago of Resettlement: Vietnamese Refugee Settlers and Decolonization across Guam and Israel-Palestine* (University of California Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.123.

[52] Juliana Hu Pegues, *Space-Time Colonialism: Alaska's Indigenous and Asian Entanglements* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2021). A key dynamic that settler orientalism (and Pegues's broader study) picks up on is the Bering Strait Theory, which proposes that the earliest inhabitants of what is now the Americas—called "Paleo-Indians"—arrived via a land bridge connected to what is now Asia. Though these migrations would have occurred over fifteen thousand years ago—and could have facilitated travels in both directions (as Joy Harjo points out, "There is no such thing as a one-way land bridge")—it has been rhetorically weaponized to discredit Native claims to sovereignty and land in the U.S. by recharacterizing them as Asian immigrants rather than Indigenous peoples. It is also underwritten by the colonial logic of *terra nullius*, casting what is now the Americas as an empty land and the

These forays of Asian American studies into Native and settler colonial critique mark not only an expansion of geographic and political scope, but also a deepening engagement with the entangled logics of race and colonialism. However, this convergence has not been without friction. Within Native Studies and settler colonial studies, the settler/native binary has served as a foundational analytic to name and critique the structural antagonism between settler domination and Indigenous sovereignty. In this binary configuration, "settler" and "native" are not "inherent qualit[ies] that individuals carry with them," but "supra-individual" and "site-specific" relationships to the land (and its Indigenous peoples) one occupies that can change based on circumstance and location.[53] Proponents of this binary, such as Patrick Wolfe and the earlier discussed Shaista Patel, maintain that racialization, while significant, operates secondarily to this primary opposition; Wolfe concedes that while the "evils of racism and colonialism typically intertwine," the breadth of colonialism exceeds that of racism because it "also incorporates a political dimension that cannot be expressed in the language of phenotypes."[54] While critique grounded in the settler/native binary serves as an indispensable reminder of settler colonialism's active and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples and lands, the characterizations of racial formation upon which it relies are woefully inchoate and risk reinscribing essentializing logics of race.

Scholars across disciplines have offered critiques and revisions of the settler/native binary to account for the question of racialization. Among the most forceful interventions are those advanced by Afro-pessimist thinkers, who argue that the setter/native binary is insufficient to

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"Paleo-Indians" as the first settlers or citizens, thus justifying subsequent colonial domination. Though this particular dynamic is beyond the scope of this dissertation, for a more detailed education please see Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 199-201, and Vine Deloria Jr, *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact*, (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1997).

[53] Patrick Wolfe, "Introduction," in *The Settler Complex: Recuperating Binarism in Colonial Studies*, ed. Patrick Wolfe (University of California Press, 2016), 3.

[54] Wolfe, "Introduction," 14.

apprehend the singularity of the abjection wrought by enslavement. In *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Frank B. Wilderson III constructs a triangular structure of positionality: the Savage, the Settler/Master, and the Slave (the titular red, white, and black, respectively).[55] While the Slave remains ontologically dead, Wilderson argues (after Fanon), the Savage remains ontologically possible through its claims to sovereignty that create a positive relationship with the Settler/Master; the Savage is "half-alive" as it "shuttles between the capacity of the genocided object and the capacity of the sovereign subject." Jared Sexton builds upon Wilderson's critique, arguing that the "study of slavery is already and of necessity the study of capitalism, colonialism, and settler colonialism" and thus calls for a reorientation towards a "truer" binary of "black/nonblack."[56] This configuration, Sexton contends, properly addresses the primacy of racial slavery and antiblackness: "Slavery, as it were, precedes and prepares the way for colonialism, its forebear or fundament or support. Colonialism, as it were, the issue or heir of slavery, its outgrowth or edifice or monument."[57] For both Wilderson and Sexton, the enduring Indigenous calls for sovereignty represent a desire to be recognized on the terms of the settler state, and therefore perpetuate it and its fundamental antiblackness.

While I do not align with the "nearly totalizing black existential frame" espoused by Wilderson and Sexton nor Sexton's insistence upon black/antiblack binary,[58] their core assertions that indigeneity is not analogous to Blackness, nor settlement to enslavement, nor sovereignty to abolition remain crucial for nuanced discussions of race and settler colonialism. Although Sexton and Wilderson do not argue for a methodology of relationality—indeed, quite the opposite!—

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[55] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Duke University Press, 2010), 48-9, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw61k.
[56] Sexton quoted in Iyko Day, "Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 110, https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.2.0102.
[57] Sexton quoted in Day, "Being or Nothingness," 112.
[58] Day, "Being or Nothingness," 112.

their insistence on the incommensurability of racialized violence and ontology nonetheless informs my project, which attends to Asian American literature in relation to—but not collapsing into so as to obscure or replace—other racialized and colonized histories, spatiotemporalities, and identities.

This approach resonates with a broader body of interdisciplinary scholarship that resists totalizing binary logics by proposing alternative or revised frameworks of relation that attend to specificity and contingency. Explicating the aforementioned transformation of Asian migrants into Hawaiian "locals," Haunani-Kay Trask offers the term *settlers of color* to name the specific racialized position of the Asian as distinct from both the white settler and the Native Hawaiians within the colonial hierarchy of the islands; Candace Fujikane, Jonathan Okamura, and Dean Itsuji Saranillio have extended Trask's formulation to construct the figure of the *Asian settler* within emerging multicultural forms of settler colonialism.[59] Lorenzo Veracini considers the position of the *probationary settler* who "[waits] to be admitted into the settler body politic."[60] Though she does not do away with the setter/native binary altogether, Shona N. Jackson theorizes *Creole indigeneity* to more precisely examine the entangled of discourses of race, nationalism, and indigeneity in the context of the Caribbean. She investigates the "practices of belonging and becoming that have provided a new material, symbolic, and discursive relationship to the land for blacks, Indo-Guyanese, and Indigenous Peoples" often facilitated through labor and productivity, without forgoing the "unique tensions between settler and native—where native refers to a fixed identity of Indigenous Peoples and the inhabiting of that term by Creoles via their indigenizing and creolization processes—that still operate…throughout

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[59] Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony;'" Dean Itsuji Saranillio, "Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters: A Thought Piece on Critiques, Debates, and Indigenous Difference," *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, no. 4 (November 2013): 280–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2013.810697.
[60] Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 26.

the Caribbean."[61] Examining the mass displacement of refugees caused by the Vietnam War, Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi limns the *settler refugee condition*, or the "vexed positionality of refugee subjects whose citizenship in a settler colonial state is predicated upon the unjust dispossession of an Indigenous population."[62]

Jodi Byrd's formulation of *arrivant colonialism*, borrowed from Afro Caribbean poet Kamau Braithewaite, has been particularly influential in efforts to theorize the dynamics of race within settler colonial contexts. Byrd attends to those who arrived in the Americas via forced migration and displacement as a result of Anglo-American and European violence. Where Wolfe's settler/native binary dispenses with "voluntarism" entirely—emphasizing that to be a settler is a structural position rather than "an effect of the will"[63]—Byrd makes theoretical space to reckon with multiple overlapping colonialisms. This is not a wholesale absolution from settler colonial complicity for the arrivant—rather, it requires that "settler, native, and arrivant each acknowledge their own positions within empire and then reconceptualize space and history to make visible what imperialism and its resultant settler colonialisms and diasporas have sought to obscure."[64]

The influence of Byrd's arrivant colonialism can be seen in Iyko Day's *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism*, which rigorously investigates Asian North American literary and cultural history to limn the emergence of the Asian migrant laborer as symbolic of "bad capital." Day's argument is premised upon a revision of the traditional settler/native dichotomy, adding to the mix the figure of the alien, developing a

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[61] Shona N. Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 64. "I deliberately employ the loaded term settler to describe formerly enslaved and indentured peoples in order to recast the struggle among indigenous, black, and Indo-Caribbean peoples in the region. My goal is to illuminate the particular power dynamic of settler and native that continues to inform Caribbean social reality and identity formation" (3-4).
[62] Gandhi, *Archipelago of Resettlement*, 2.
[63] Wolfe, "Introduction," 2.
[64] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, xxx.

triangulated relationship amongst Native, alien, and settler to limn the simultaneous processes of Indigenous elimination and alien exclusion at the heart of settler colonial capitalism.[65] The subject position of the alien is historically *heterogeneously* racialized in North America, first by the enslavement of African peoples and later by the Asian migrant.[66] The distinction of the racialized alien is key to understanding their exclusion and "subordination under a settler mode of production driven by the proprietorial logics of whiteness."[67]

Day's complex formulation of Asian North American racialization marks a turn *away* from land loss as the singular constitutive factor of settler colonialism towards an examination of the ways settler colonial capitalism requires *both* Indigenous dispossession of land *and* a cheap exploitable labor force to work that land—one cannot occur without the other.[68] This triangulation structured around the simultaneous exploitation of Indigenous land and foreign labor is able to account more capaciously to the ways in which racial capitalism constitutes an organizing principle of settler colonialism more broadly, and how the racialized figure of the Asian alien becomes the physical embodiment of settler capitalist anxieties more specifically.

These alternative frameworks offer rich vocabularies for thinking across race and settler colonialism coevally, and I review them not to supersede or revise, but to carefully think with and through their provocations. My project is less about positing a new subject position within or configuration of the existing binaries, and more about reading Asian American literature as a site where such entanglements are felt, negotiated, and unsettled. Byrd's elucidation of multiple overlapping colonialisms—what she calls the *cacophonies* of colonialism, addressed in detail in

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[65] Day, *Alien Capital*, 112. "Aliens are as unnatural to the landscape as Indigenous peoples are natural. This is the double edge of settler colonialism."
[66] For a more detailed explanation of the historical and economic divergences of the alien's racial heterogeneity, see Day, *Alien Capital*, 25-33.
[67] Day, *Alien Capital*, 24.
[68] Day, *Alien Capital*, 34.

Chapter 2—embraces the inevitable chaos, confusion, and contradiction in the ultimate hope that it generates "written narratives and theorizations to represent the passage of time and the interaction of relationships and kinship differently."[69] Byrd connects this critical framework to the Choctaw concept of *haksuba*, which LeAnne Howe explains as what happens "when Indians and non-Indians bang their heads together in search of cross-cultural understanding."[70] Though perhaps less kinetic than Howe's collective head banging, Matthew's *An Indian from India* certainly puts heads together, creating from the overlapping violences in the misnomer "Indian" an invitation to reflect—without the expectation of neat or singular resolution—on the cross-cultural, -geographical, and -temporal tensions and possibilities therein.

Untimely Orientations

Haksuba's generative chaos—its capacity to destroy, to regenerate, or to do both at once—guides my approach to the Asian American texts I take up in this dissertation, each of which grapples in its own way with the enduring "headaches" of settler colonialism.[71] Each chapter attends to a distinct set of thematic and formal concerns, while also engaging with temporality in different ways.

The chapters are organized primarily by each novel's attention to time: Chapter One focuses on *The Sympathizer*'s attention on the past through the narrator's repeated demands to produce an acceptable confession; the second chapter examines *Tropic of Orange*, which is firmly rooted in the present moment of 1990s NAFTA-era neoliberal Los Angeles—both within its narrative and its publication context—which maps through its multiple narrating characters a more urgent call for care and coalition; and Chapter Three turns to two speculative fiction novels, *On Such a Full Sea* and *The Immortal King Rao*, which variously take up first-person

[69] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, xxvii.
[70] Howe quoted in Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, xxvii.
[71] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, xxvi.

plural narration to explore possibilities of futurity as capitalism, colonialism, and governance become ever-further intertwined. While this dissertation is organized along a broadly chronological temporal axis—beginning with the past, moving to the present, and culminating with speculative futurity—this order is primarily a heuristic device rather than an assertion of the inevitability or primacy a teleology of linear time. To be sure, each novel actively unsettles and complicates linear temporality in its own formal and thematic registers, demonstrating that time in Asian American literature is often nonlinear, recursive, and dialectical.

Indeed, exclusion from and dislocation within time are hallmarks of both Native and Asian American subjectivity and critique. Mark Rifkin's influential formulation of *settler time* elucidates how settler colonialism produces a normative, linear temporality that naturalizes Western notions of progress, erases Indigenous presence, and legitimates the ongoing occupation of Indigenous land by positioning Native peoples as part of a bygone past.[72] Jodi Byrd calls attention to the temporal erasure enacted by the "post" in postcolonial study, noting, "this question of when has haunted postcolonial and American studies as much as the question of who and where…often foreclose[ing] indigenous peoples of the Americas, Caribbean, and Pacific as already having been acknowledged without actually making them active presences."[73] This contradiction of being "located outside of temporality and presence" even as settler colonialism persists into the present and seeks to sustain its future through the dominance of indigenous lands and lives is what Byrd calls the *transit of empire*, and it brings to focus the serious material and embodied stakes of temporality: "Do Indians live life in the contemporary now? Are Indians part of the present tense? And finally, do Indians live grievable lives?"[74]

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[72] Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Duke University Press, 2017).
[73] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 6.
[74] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 6, 37.

Asian American studies as a field has a somewhat vexed relationship to temporality. "Unlike African American, Native American or Chicano literature," declares Susan Koshy in her influential and critical essay "The Fiction of Asian American Literature," "Asian American literature inhabits the highly unstable temporality of the '*about-to-be*,' its meanings continuously reinvented after the arrival of new groups of immigrants and the enactment of legislative changes."[75] Koshy argues that the hesitation to concretely establish defining stakes, questions, and requirements constitutes a "strategic deferral" on the part of Asian Americanist critics that is only exacerbated by the shifting demographics of the Asian population in the U.S. Where Koshy characterizes this indeterminacy as a shortcoming of the field, many contemporary scholars have found malleable constructions of time to be generative. In her theorization of Asian American inscrutability, Vivian L. Huang acknowledges the ways in which Asian Americanness is "not yet here:" a "belated or deferred sense of belonging to the US nation—not yet here because perpetually foreign—and still questioned as a political identifier with traction or use value." Huang draws from queer of color critique to argue that when confronted by this "temporal problem for Asian American life," inscrutability functions as a strategy that jettisons notions of origin or telos; instead, it "elucidate[s] other modes of relation in time and space" as a "mandatory survival strategy for Asian Americans, whose cultures and histories have figured in the United States as the spectral remnants of what is actively disavowed in the name of national progress."[76]

More recent Asian Americanist scholars have engaged with Native and settler colonial critique to enrich theorizations of temporality. Juliana Hu Pegues offers *space-time colonialism* to consider how settler logics of space and time function relationally to "disappear" the Asian

[75] Susan Koshy 315
[76] Vivian L. Huang, *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (Duke University Press, 2022), 30-1, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2z6qfff.

and the Native: the "hypervisible" Asian "affronts settler space," for which "banishment is the spatial solution, the ongoing social and juridical exclusion from national belonging, and the condition of settler time premised upon Native elimination within the present and future.[77] Resonating with Pegues's formulation, Quynh Nhu Le conceptualizes in *Unsettled Solidarities: Asian and Indigenous Cross-Representations in the Américas* what she calls *settler racial tense*—tense as in grammar *and* as in affect—to limn how Asian and Indigenous communities have been "spatially and temporally configured in diametrically opposing ways:" Asians either "outside" of normative national time because of their status as "aliens" or otherwise deferred to the future conditional as technologically advanced; and Native peoples to the long past. As an analytic, settler racial tense makes visible the ways in which Asian and Indigenous politics are "incorporated within settler liberal tenets of individualism, civil progress, liberal multiculturalism, and race as private property" and allows for an attentiveness to "affective ruptures of settler racial hegemonies through the concomitant ruptures of literary form."[78] Erin Suzuki draws from Pacific Islander conceptualizations of time and space as well as from the space of the transpacific itself to present *oceanic temporalities* that rejects the "progressive temporality that aspires to increasing security, accumulation, and profit" associated with the settler military occupation of the islands.[79]

That being said, I move on to review each of the chapters. Chapter One, "Hiding in Plain Sight: Recognition, Representation, and Confessional Form in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*" explores the fraught politics of representation for racialized and colonized subjects through the novel's exploration of the memorialization of the Vietnam War. I read the novel's critique of representation through its strategic transformations in narrative form, primarily

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[77] Pegues, *Space-Time Colonialism*, 13-4.
[78] Quynh Nhu Le, *Unsettled Solidarities*, 13, 15, 17.
[79] Suzuki, *Ocean Passages*, 21.

through the confessional, as shaped by colonial denials of subjectivity and truth to the colonized. I precede my analysis of the novel with a consideration on the boundaries of settler colonialism versus "other" colonialisms, and argue that through the case of Vietnam, the novel demands an attention to the ways in which the myriad forms of colonialism are not discrete but co-constitutive. The narrator struggles—and, multiple times, fails—to represent himself in all of his racial fragmentation, ideological duplicity, and irreconcilable contradiction; rather than offer a corrective for these representative failures, the novel takes on and disidentifies with those very forms of misrepresentation. *The Sympathizer* engages these forms not just thematically but narratively as well, exposing its own constructed-ness by calling the reader's attention to the conditions under which they were constructed, the limitations those conditions impose, and the traces of narratives suppressed or forgotten. The novel explores how confession operates as both a mechanism of surveillance and a strategy for self-representation, calling as much attention to the conditions under which a "proper" confession is extracted—via footnotes, redactions, and addenda—as to the confession's propriety itself. As the narrator approaches the truth of that which he has been unable to confess—the violence that has been hiding in plain sight—the narrative splits open, transforming itself and the narrator's sense of himself.

The second chapter, "Jam Session: Karen Tei Yamashita's Cacophonous Cartography of the Here and Now" looks to the politics of liberal multiculturalism and free trade during the mid- to late 1990s as narrativized in *Tropic of Orange* (1997). Through the seven characters narrating across seven (deceptively linear) days, Yamashita's novel forces readers to attempt to navigate the infrastructure of Los Angeles on the brink of apocalyptic collapse, heralded by the eponymous orange that travels northward bringing with it the millennia of histories, populations of peoples, and expanse of the hemispheric Americas that overlap and collide as the violence of

colonialism surface. I use Jodi Byrd's concept of the "cacophony" of empire to read the novel's progressively chaotic narrative form as producing an alternative cartography of Los Angeles that makes visible the malleability of space and time under settler colonial violence and decolonial resistance. Focusing specifically on the characters of Buzzworm and Manzanar Murakami, I examine how their unique attentiveness to the space, time, and sounds of the city as well as their physical, racial, and socioeconomic positionalities allows them to map the city against settler colonial logics that privilege capitalist expansion over the lives of the marginalized peoples. The novel's cacophonous form and the cacophonous climax along the Los Angeles freeway system resists and refuses the liberal multiculturalist desire to consume and recognize racialized minorities while simultaneously obscuring the violence that marginalized them. I argue that this climax hinges on a redefinition of movement, away from logics of efficiency, capital, and empire, and towards mutual care, affective connections, and coalitions that turn to self-recognition to enact refusal of the settler state.

In the third and final chapter, "How Does it Feel to be a Solution? Questioning Plural Narrators in Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* and Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao*," I examine the deployment of collective narrators a formal method of wrestling with questions of racialized ontology and the possibility of futurity under systems of settler colonial capitalism. I read the collective "we" narrator of *On Such a Full Sea* as simultaneously performing and critiquing the conception of Asian America as a monolithic model minority, programmed to quietly and unprotestingly perform the labor that sustains existing hierarchies of power. The introspective voice of Lee's novel reveals the cracks in the appearance of the collective, stemming from an immense and increasing anxiety about the racial identity it has come to inhabit as well as its participation in the violent system that created it. I argue that the seemingly

individual narrator of *The Immortal King Rao* can be read as plural through her neural link to her father and the Internet. Through the narrator's multiple and non-chronological tracing of the histories that have led to her present moment, and through the collision of her consciousness with so many others, *The Immortal King Rao* interrogates the cyclical manner by which systems of capitalism and colonialism sustain their dominance through the distortion and disruption of the individual, the interpersonal, and the global. Where Vara's novel is ultimately a cautionary tale of the catastrophe of remaining within these cycles, Lee's remains patiently optimistic that with enough collective self-interrogation over enough time, change is possible.

Chapter One
Hiding in Plain Sight: Recognition, Representation, and Confessional Form in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*

> Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same. More than one person, doubtless like me, writes in order to have no face.
>
> Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?"

> "[W]ith me things take on a *new* face. I'm not given a second chance. I am overdetermined from the outside."
>
> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

In one of many metafictional moments in *The Sympathizer*, the Vietnamese reeducation camp commandant reprimands the novel's unnamed narrator for his failure to properly narrate his transgressions. "Confessions," the commandant chides, "are as much about style as content."[1] This pithy editorial feedback directed at the narrator doubles as a reminder to the reader to pay as much attention to the novel's narrative form as the plot itself; complete truth, the quote suggests, is revealed not just through the story itself but through the form of its representation. *The Sympathizer* rises to the occasion, its intricacy aptly described by critics as a "multiplex of dazzling mirrors and ironic reversals" laden with "literary pyrotechnics"[2] and "brilliant narrative coups"[3] as it pulls its reader through shifts in narrative form, time, and point of view. It bursts at the seams with allusive and intertextual references to culture, politics, and history that span centuries and hemispheres and transcend the temporal setting of the novel itself. A critical and popular darling, there is no shortage of scholarship on Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel, with a great deal of attention given to its foregrounding of the figure of the refugee, the legacy of the Vietnam War in the American public memory, and the meaning the novel acquires in the context of

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[1] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (Grove Press, 2015), 312. This very neatly echoes the classic Marxist dialectic of content and form, and also calls to mind Said's directions on how to read Orientalist representations. "The things to look at," he writes, "are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, not the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original." Said, *Orientalism*, 21.

[2] Sunny Xiang, "The Ethnic Author Represents the Body Count," *PMLA* 133, no. 2 (March 2018), 421.

[3] Anjali Prabhu, "*The Sympathizer*: A Dialectical Reading," *PMLA* 133, no. 2 (March 2018): 389.

Nguyen's body of academic work. A particularly significant feature of the novel's criticism and Nguyen's own celebrity as a public intellectual centers on the construction of the unnamed narrator, the *Invisible Man*-esque spy on the verge of being torn asunder by an irreconcilable internal duality that is the root of his inability to take control of and responsibility for his titular sympathies.[4]

The Sympathizer, like its simultaneously anonymous and eponymous protagonist, defies easy categorization. Accounts of the novel's multitudinous nature border on rhapsody, with one critic extolling the various ways it can be read as "a spy novel, a war novel, an immigrant novel, a novel of ideas, a political novel, a campus novel, a novel about the movies, and a novel, yes, about other novels."[5] In this chapter, I focus on the novel's primary narrative mode: the confession. I argue that *The Sympathizer* deploys confession as a form of disidentification—not only exposing how subjects are produced through surveillance, state power, and normative ideals of subjectivity, but also reworks it from within to open space for a critique of historical erasure, recognition, and representation. Within the temporal arc of this dissertation, this chapter considers how what Frantz Fanon calls a "plunge into the chasm of the past" might provide a way forward from the material, epistemological, and spatiotemporal constraints imposed by systems of power.[6] The novel refuses the contradictory temporal logic of settler colonialism in which Indigenous peoples are either presumed already disappeared as a prior condition of

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[4] In fact, Nguyen is so popularly identified with the narrator of *The Sympathizer* that he titled his memoir *A Man of Two Faces: A Memoir, A History, A Memorial* (2023), and the novel's opening line was featured as a clue on *Jeopardy!* Regarding the novel's intertextual conversation with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, see Yogita Goyal, "Un-American: Refugees and the Vietnam War," *PMLA* 133, no. 2 (March 2018): 378–83; Caroline Rody, "Between 'I' and 'We': Viet Thanh Nguyen's Interethnic Multitudes," *PMLA* 133, no. 2 (March 2018): 396–405; Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, "Citizens of the Imagination: Refugee Memory in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 66, no. 2 (2020): 281–300.
[5] Randy Boyagoda, "*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen Review – a Bold, Artful Debut," *The Guardian*, March 12, 2016, sec. Books, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/12/the-sympathizer-viet-thanh-nguyen-review-debut.
[6] Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (Grove Press, 1994), 43.

nationhood, or they are expected to "move on" from historical violence and injury; in both cases, the past is presumed to be stable and sealed off from the present, and the future is nonexistent. *The Sympathizer*, however, resists this temporal foreclosure, insisting on revisiting the past through relentless interrogation, compelling what has been rendered absent to reveal its presence not through revision or assimilation, but through a thorough examination of the erasures of the past as themselves positive (that is, not defined by negation, lack, or a singular "nothingness") and unsettled spaces.

I begin by considering the stakes of confession—first, its contemporary history in U.S. culture, and second, the ways that power engenders a condition of confession that produces the subject. Drawing on Michel Foucault, I review how confession functions as a mechanism of subject formation in Western modernity. I then turn to Frantz Fanon, whose work critiques how colonialism denies the colonized full subjectivity and access to truth. In particular, I read *Black Skin, White Masks* for its exploration of the racial and colonial asymmetries of recognition, as well as Fanon's psychiatric writings from North Africa for their insights into the misrecognition enacted by colonized subjects of the colonial system through the form of the criminal confession. I subsequently situate these theories and the novel within the geopolitical context of Vietnam, shaped multiple overlapping colonial and imperial powers. I bring this into conversation with U.S. settler colonialism, emphasizing that distinguishing the many types of colonialism too sharply from one another obscures their continuities—continuities that *The Sympathizer* brings into view. Following this, I extend the consideration of representation in relation to claims of literature's capacity (or incapacity) to represent totality, as well as the suspicion such claims engender within colonial contexts.

I then return more fully to *The Sympathizer*, arguing that the novel's use—and transformation—of the confessional form allows us to more carefully reevaluate the ways in which what has been erased or forgotten from hegemonic narratives of truth or history might in fact be found hiding in plain sight. In particular, I analyze the novel's climactic interrogation scene, in which dramatic formal and narrative shifts turn the confessional form inside out—not by rejecting it outright, but by forcing the reader and narrator to find the truth through its absence, invoking a totality that accounts for erasure and elision through dialectical relation. What emerges is a confession defined less by straightforward disclosure and truth-telling than by the practice of its extraction. In this way, the novel disidentifies with the confession, taking on its form to expose its limits, asymmetries, and complicity in regimes of domination and misrepresentation. Finally, I read the novel's conclusion as a gesture towards futurity as emerging not through a break from the past, but through its painful and necessary re-experiencing.

Confessional Crises

The Sympathizer announces itself as a confession from its opening paragraph, the narrator directly addressing the "dear Commandant" overseeing his reeducation and remarking on the "isolation cell" from which he writes.[7] With this declaration comes a spate of narrative and formal expectations—of tone, structure, reliability—that ostensibly guide both the reader and the narrator toward potential freedom; everything is mediated through the confession. In this section, I review the prominence of confession in American politics and culture and the anxieties about truth that confession inherently unsettles. I then trace the ontoepistemological dynamics of confession through the work of Foucault, and subsequently examine how Fanon elucidates the ways that colonialism denies truth, power, and subjectivity to colonized and racialized peoples. I

[7] Nguyen, *Sympathizer,* 1-2.

consider these alongside Glen S. Coulthard's examinations of Fanon's refusal and resentment as "anti-colonial agency and empowerment prefigure a means of evading the politics of recognition's tendency to produce Indigenous subjects of empire."[8]

Confession remains one of the most polemical cultural forms in postwar 20th- and 21st-century America, a status that has been consistently renewed during moments of public crisis.[9] In the wake of the dissolution of the US-Soviet Alliance and renewed paranoia of Communist infiltration, the political sphere became dominated by the "spectacle of forced confessions."[10] Executive orders signed by Presidents Truman and Eisenhower authorized federal agencies to investigate employees and terminate their employment if they were found to be "disloyal" or a "national security" risk, forcing employees to appear before the government and account exhaustively in intimate detail for their political views, relationships, and personal habits.[11] The House Un-American Activities Committee infamously dragged artists and professionals from across the entertainment industry before panels to confess to Communist Party membership or sympathies—or to inform on others—on penalty of prison and/or professional blacklist.

In the cultural mainstream, the rise of psychiatry and Freudian psychoanalysis brought the "talking cure" to the midcentury masses, compelling patients to lay bare every thought and unearth every memory to cure their neuroses in what Jack Kerouac sardonically described as "the

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[8] Glen S. Coulthard, "Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the 'Politics of Recognition' in Canada," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6, no. 4 (November 2007): 439.

[9] While an exhaustive review of the religious, legal, and philosophical history of confession is beyond the scope of this chapter, one could reasonably argue that the "Confession Era of the United States" stretches back to the early Puritan settlers and the conversion narrative, which required written self-reflection and public confession of sin to prove dedication to one's salvation. See Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* and Chapter 2 of Bauer, *The Art of the Public Grovel*. Confession in the American judicial context can be traced to early English law; see George C. Thomas III and Richard A. Leo, *Confessions of Guilt*.

[10] Robert Genter, "Cold War Confessions and the Trauma of McCarthyism: Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess* and *The Wrong Man*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 29, no. 2 (2012): 129.

[11] Executive Order 9835, signed by President Truman in 1947, established Loyalty Review Board to determine if federal employees had "disloyal" political affiliations or views. Executive Order 10450, signed by President Eisenhower in 1953, dissolved the Loyalty Review Board program but expanded the criteria for termination beyond the strictly political (for example, mental illness, substance addiction, and "sexual perversion").

Talking Class trying to rationalize itself."[12] Confessions drive many a pop culture controversy, from Lance Armstrong's 90-minute admission of performance-enhancing drug use[13] to OJ Simpson's attempt to publish *If I Did It: Confessions of the Killer* a decade after his notorious acquittal in the murder of his wife.[14] Confessional culture has profoundly shaped mass media, facilitating the voyeuristic allure of watching celebrities and ordinary people alike disclose in detail their most lurid and ridiculous secrets, fueling the rise of daytime talk shows, reality television, and tell-all Internet culture.

Confession is everywhere—even when it isn't. As Dave Tell demonstrates in *Confessional Crises and Cultural Politics*, all manner of public figures across the 20th century "claimed dozens of texts as confessions in order to bring the political cachet of authenticity to both important causes and trivial pursuits." The public debate incited by the strategic reframing of explicitly non-confessional texts as confessions "concretely shaped the public understanding of…intractable issues [such as] sexuality, class, race, violence, religion, and democracy." So deeply ingrained in the American cultural character is the confessional form that Tell argues, "confessional hermeneutics—the act of determining precisely *which texts count as confessions*—has been one of the most powerful, and most overlooked, forms of intervening into American cultural politics," resulting in a culture defined by "confessional anxiety."[15]

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[12] Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans* (Grove Press, 1958): 46.
[13] Armstrong's confession was overwhelmingly seen as lacking and he was never quite able to redeem himself in the eyes of the public; see Dorie Clark, "The Flawed Art of Lance Armstrong's Confession."
[14] The invocation of confession by Simpson is particularly inflammatory given the discrepancy between the ruling of Simpson's trial and prevailing public acceptance in subsequent years of his guilt. Simpson's lawyer himself maintained that the chapter in which Simpson "speculates" how he would have murdered his wife is "complete fiction;" others involved in the process insisted otherwise, the publisher affirming that "I consider this his confession" and his ghostwriter describing the experience of communicating with "a man I knew to be a murderer." The controversy generated by the clash amongst the confession's putative function to reveal truth in exchange for absolution, the public's existing belief of Simpson's guilt, and the move to profit off such a macabre "confession" was enough to have the book's release canceled. See Noah, "O.J. Confesses. Really." and Associated Press, "Publisher on O.J."
[15] David Tell, *Confessional Crises and Cultural Politics in Twentieth-Century America* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 1-3, 5, 9 (emphasis mine).

Despite its ubiquity (or perhaps because of it), the study of confessional culture itself is marked by its own kind of anxiety. "The fact remains that our sense of what confession is and does," muses Peter Brooks in his aptly titled *Troubling Confessions*, "hovers in a zone of uncertainty that has much to do with the multiform nature of confession and its uses for cleansing, amelioration, conversion, the counseling, as well as conviction."[16] This sentiment is evident across the body of confessional scholarship, critics wrestling with the "radically ambiguous nature of confession"[17] as a form "on the edge,"[18] generating a "widespread uncertainty about the forms and functions of confession in Western culture and literature."[19] This uncertainty is rooted in the confession's central claim, which can be summarized as threefold: first, that there exists an essential truth within a person to be revealed; second, that confession is necessary to reveal this essential truth; and third, that the disclosure of this essential truth through confession is inherently transformative. As Tell demonstrates, if the boundaries of what constitutes confession can be revised, so too can the boundaries of what constitutes truth—thus destabilizing what we know, what we do not know, and what we do not know we do not know. Indeed, the narrator's anguished revelation of his own confessional shortcoming hinges on his failure to understand the fundamentally contingent nature of truth: "How could I forget that every truth meant at least two things?"[20]

The Sympathizer begins as a political confession but reveals itself to be much more: it is a copy of the original textual confession, transcribed by the narrator himself, and appended by the narrator's recounting of and reflections on his reeducation. Even when the narrator's written

[16] Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 87.
[17] Susannah Radstone, "Cultures of Confession/Cultures of Testimony: Turning the Subject Inside Out," in *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, ed. Jo Gill (Routledge, 2005), 174.
[18] Padma Rangarajan, "Thug Life: Confession, Subjectivity, Sovereignty," *ELH* 84, no. 4 (2017): 1022.
[19] Sonja Pyykkö, "Disclosing Structures: Scenes of Confession in *Pale Fire*," *Nabokov Studies* 19, no. 1 (2023): 23.
[20] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 371.

confession ends—in what I refer to as the "post-confessional" portion of the novel—the narrative engagement with confession does not.[21] Abruptly wrenched from the confession into a different narrative time and place, the reader is forced to reorient themself to everything recounted and everything yet to be told. Here, the narrator's failure to represent his transgressions magnifies the confessional pressure. This culminates in an explosive interrogation that tears the narrator from his very body, exhuming that which he failed to represent: his complicity in the rape of a fellow female agent. Taken as a complete whole, the novel offers a meta-commentary on confession, turning the confessional form itself inside-out along with the narrator.

The narrator's various struggles with failed self-representation are, at their core, struggles to recognize himself amidst systems of colonialism that have prescribed racial, gendered, sexual, and political notions upon him. These notions overwhelmingly rely on the construction of binary opposites that require "picking a side," a dilemma that leaves the narrator in a state of ongoing contradiction and indeterminacy. This struggle for recognition is ontoepistemological, facilitated by systems that create truth to exercise power (and vice versa). To illuminate Nguyen's articulations of confession and the subject-making capacities of the form, I turn briefly to Michel Foucault and more extensively to Frantz Fanon's triangulations of truth, power, and the self. Between these two thinkers emerges a fascinating and complex conversation about truth and the self as the result of historically and socio-politically contingent practices rather than objective givens. Guided by the Foucauldian emphasis on discursive processes of power and truth-telling and Fanon's crucial interventions into the deep psychological violences of colonialism and racism, I argue that *The Sympathizer*'s strategically fragmented and reassembled confessional form (through which other forms such as film and textbooks are mediated) is essential to the

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[21] The *post-* in "post-confessional" is not the *post-* in postcolonial, nor in postmodernism for that matter; I use the prefix simply to distinguish the transcribed primary written confession (chapters 1-18) from the materials added by the narrator after his interrogation (chapters 19-23).

novel's critique of representation, recuperation of the past, and its suggestion of other possibilities.[22]

"Where there is power…there must be truth," pronounced Michel Foucault in a 1980 lecture. "And where there is no truth…it is because there is no power."[23] Across his extensive body of work, Foucault explores the desire to know truth as concomitant with the development of modern technologies of domination; crucial to this argument is the practice of confession as essential to the elaboration and exercise of modern power in the West. The primary subject of much of Foucault's analyses are the "sciences of man"—"psychology, psychiatry, pedagogy, criminology, and so many other strange sciences"—that boast insight into universal truths of human nature.[24] Rather than ground analysis in the quantifiable biology or physiology of the human body, these disciplines scrutinized the myriad minute ways the human as a subject is "directly involved in a political field; [how] power relations have an immediate hold upon it; [how] they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."[25] The result, Foucault contends, is not the development of an objective knowledge, but the establishment of norms (and aberrations) of human behavior that circulate under the guise of objective knowledge in service of dominant moral and political values. Knowledge and power, Foucault writes, endlessly produce and perpetuate each other.

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[22] It should be noted that while Foucault and Fanon were Francophone contemporaries who both dealt extensively with the institutionalization and practices of psychiatry, they did not (to my knowledge) publicly respond to or engage with each other's work.

[23] Michel Foucault, *On The Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980*, ed. Michael Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 9. This review of Foucault's theorization of confession and knowledge-power is necessarily brief given its prominence across his work—as early as his lectures at the College de France from 1970-71 through to his final book, published posthumously as *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality Volume 4*. Fascinatingly, he went on to revise his thesis on confession in his later years, exploring the ancient Greek practice of *parrhesia* as a "technology of the self," seeing this particular confessional style as distinct from the Christian tradition in its liberatory potential. For a comprehensive review of Foucault's examinations of confession, see Graham Burchell, "Confession, Resistance, Subjectivity," *Journal for Cultural Research* 13, no. 2 (April 2009): 159–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/14797580902786481.

[24] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, 1995), 226 (emphasis mine).

[25] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 26.

The so-called universal truths espoused by these strange sciences were not methodologically rooted in large-scale inquiry, but rather in "new procedures of individualization" that created a distinct "knowable man" who, in knowing, was possible "to qualify, to classify and to punish."[26] Essential to the individualizing processes of power-knowledge, Foucault argues, is the practice of confession. He traces modern confession to a transformation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Christian practice in which confession became "much more concerned with *thought* than with action."[27] The "institutional incitement" by the Church to endlessly confess one's innermost thoughts traversed the boundaries of religious practice into "public interest," just as the emerging fields of psychiatry, criminology, and pedagogy sought to develop a theory of sexuality defined by rationality rather than morality, constructing something to be "managed, inserted into systems of utility" through "useful and public discourses."[28]

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault refers specifically to sex as the point of application, but makes similar analyses in the context of penal theory. Early 19th-century penal theory shifted its focus from "what individuals *did*" to "what they *might do*." The delinquent thus became defined not by the concreteness of their crime but by the abstractions gleaned from their compulsory biography, creating a knowledge "that substitutes *the origin of crime for its surface effects*."[29] The confessional biographies extracted from the criminal function as a means of

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[26] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 313, 184.
[27] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 45.
[28] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978), 24-5.
[29] Dave Tell, "Rhetoric and Power: An Inquiry into Foucault's Critique of Confession," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 43, no. 2 (2010): 110 (emphasis mine). In the early criminal system that involved a complex and often inconsistent "penal arithmetic" to judge a case, a properly obtained confession "transcended all other evidence" because it implied the willing participation on the part of the accused. By confessing, the accused accepted the truth of the charge and their own guilt, and thereby "transformed an investigation carried out without him into voluntary affirmation." In doing so, confession transformed not just the investigative procedure, but also the "responsible and

control, making possible the "fixing, at once ritual and 'scientific,' of individual differences" into a body of knowledge. The details of the individual's life, memories, behaviors, and desires were now "measurements" and "marks" by which they could be made a knowable "case;"[30] as a knowable case, the individual could be controlled and maintained through "punishment that is a correction, a therapy, a normalization, the division of the act of judgement" in order to "measure, assess, diagnose, cure, transform individuals."[31]

Foucault's oft-quoted thesis that "Western man has become a confessing animal," elucidates the degree to which the narrativization of the individual has permeated Western culture:

> Whence a metamorphosis in literature: we have passed from a pleasure…centering on the heroic or marvelous narration of "trials" of bravery or sainthood, to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage.[32]

This power-knowledge developed through the institutionalization of such disciplinary methods only entrenched itself deeper into Western life over time, stewarded by the "technicians of indiscipline have founded a family" in the expansion of "auxiliary services…[such as] hospitals, schools, public administrations and private enterprises."[33] The insidious effect, Foucault argues, is the individual internalization of the "ruse of confession:" that it now "seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because…the violence of a power weighs it down…. Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence."[34]

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speaking subject" of the accused: "Within the crime reconstituted by writing, the criminal who confessed came to play *the role of living truth*." Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 37-8 (emphasis mine).
[30] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 192.
[31] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 227.
[32] Foucault, *HSV1*, 59.
[33] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 296.
[34] Foucault, *HSV1*, 60.

Given his extensive interrogation of the elaboration and exercise of modern power and its necessary processes of subjectification and objectification, it is striking that Foucault makes little to no mention of colonial power across his work.[35] *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* famously opens by invoking the image of the sexually repressed Victorian against whom he constructs a history of the transformation of sex into discourse. Curiously, he refers to this figure so "emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality" as "the *imperial* prude," which necessarily signals a relationship to a world beyond Europe; indeed, the reference to the Victorian Era itself is borderline synonymous with the British Empire's dominance over nearly one quarter of the world's population.[36] Even more curiously, there are no further references to imperialism or colonialism of any kind in the volume, referring to his subject of focus with the much more geopolitically-delimited "Western man" and "Western societies." Foucault's Eurocentric tunnel vision is especially perplexing given his protracted engagement with the history of knowledge and truth in the West, one that is indelibly marked by centuries of European exploration, expansion, and encounters with myriad Others—Moorish and Ottoman Muslims, Jews, Amerindians, and Black Africans, to name just a few—from which European ideals of subjectivity, science, and governance were hewn.[37] And of course, the rise in decolonial movements across formerly French colonies in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia—and the concurrent brutalization of colonial migrants within France's borders—were contemporaneous with Foucault's lifetime.

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[35] For incisive critical analyses of Foucault as related to colonialism and race, see Marnia Lazreg, *Foucault's Orient: The Conundrum of Cultural Difference, from Tunisia to Japan* (Berghahn Books, 2017); Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Duke University Press, 1995); and Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Duke University Press, 2014).

[36] Foucault, *HSV1*, 3 (emphasis mine). There is but one errant (and Orientalist) reference to "China, Japan, India, Rome, the Arabo-Moslem societies" as those which "endowed themselves with an *ars erotica*," the procedure for producing the truth of sex that the West replaced with *scientia sexualis*. (57)

[37] See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

I note this absence in Foucault's work not to dismiss it entirely. As my consideration of *The Sympathizer* centers on its strategic deployment and fragmentation of the confessional form as key to its critique of representation within colonial structures of power, Foucault's theses and his blind spots regarding the recognition of the self and the desire for truth are themselves illustrative of the form's limits—something that I contend the novel intentionally engages with. In this vein Frantz Fanon's powerful evaluation of the affective, psychological, and ontological violence that colonization inflicts upon the colonized is particularly illuminating. Foucault's individual subject emerges through the internalization of the notion that there is an essential truth hidden within that one should strive to uncover; even though the individual becomes vulnerable to control and domination through this process, they still retain a belief in a valuable inner truth that must be externalized in order to achieve self-transformation. As Fanon demonstrates, however, the colonial and racial context critically problematizes the notion of individual truth and the function of confession beyond Foucault's characterization.[38]

"Running the risk of angering my black brothers," Fanon declares in the opening of *Black Skin, White Masks*, "I shall say that a Black is not a man."[39] Over the following pages, Fanon vigorously develops a "prognosis" for the "massive psycho-existential complex" wrought by colonialism and racism, exploring the identity crisis of the colonized subject (specifically, Black

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[38] Of course, Fanon's arguments are not offered as universal, but as anchored in specific colonial circumstances: *Black Skin, White Masks* is borne from his experience as an Antillean man "on his home territory." He notes, for example, that the racial neuroses of the Black Antillean does not apply to the Black American, who has a profoundly different experience of struggle and liberation. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, his analysis shifts to North Africa. My intention is not to suggest that Fanon's conclusions can be wholly and seamlessly transferred amongst colonial contexts, but to demonstrate the ways in which colonialism and racism form and foreclose ways of being and truth to colonized subjects, which colonized subjects go on to internalize.

[39] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2008), xii. A note on orthography: when quoting Fanon directly, I adhere to his deployment of "black" (with a lowercase "b") versus "Black." I otherwise follow the general convention of capitalizing "Black" when referring to the racial identity.

men) who has internalized racist and colonial assumptions to the point of neurosis that manifests as "humiliating insecurity to self accusation and even despair."[40]

Fanon argues that colonial enterprise requires a doubly racialized "fixing:" a fixing of the Black man as Black, and of the white man as white. Blackness is fixed by the white gaze not based on Black interiority but its very denial: the Black man is "overdetermined from the outside," his very skin made to signal an artificial and dehumanizing past of "cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, [and] slave traders."[41] Fanon refers to this deeply embodied racial and colonial schema as "epidermal," transcending history and behavior, suffused into the very skin. This is in direct contrast to the Foucauldian subject's presumed interior "describability:" the Foucauldian subject is *asked* to speak—to turn into discourse—that which will become their truth.[42]

Colonial relations of power, however, reverse this injunction. The truth of the colonial context is not the inner truth of the colonized individual, but one imposed by the colonizers upon the "savage" masses—it is that of the "civilizing colonizer, the white man who brings truth to the savages, a lily-white truth."[43] The truth of the colonized subject is produced via the "fixing" function of the colonial gaze rather than self-expression or representation, an example of which Fanon viscerally describes in the oft-cited chapter, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man." At the call, "Look! A Negro!" from a white child, Fanon experiences "the Other [fixing] me with his gaze…the same way you fix a preparation with a dye." As the call is repeated, Fanon feels his very being deteriorate beyond his control, the epidermal racial interpellation "peeling, stripping

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[40] Fanon, *BSWM*, xvi, 42.
[41] Fanon, *BSWM*, 95, 91.
[42] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 191. "And this new *describability* is all the more marked in that the disciplinary framework is a strict one: the child, the patient, the madman, the prisoner, were to become…object[s] of individual descriptions and biographical accounts. This turning of real lives into writing…functions as *a procedure of objectification and subjection*" (emphasis mine).
[43] Fanon, *BSWM*, 126.

my skin, causing a hemorrhage that left congealed black blood all over my body" culminating in "the white gaze…dissecting me…objectively [cutting] sections of my reality" until it produces "a new type of man, a new species. A Negro, in fact!"[44] So absolute is the colonial truth that even as it mutilates his very being and reality, it does so "objectively."

This scene is central to Fanon's critique of Hegelian dialectics and its logic of recognition, which he argues is not only insufficient to address the being of the racialized and colonized subject but underwrites its very negation. The Hegelian master/slave dialectic is inherently relational, positing that "self-consciousness…*is* only by being acknowledged or recognized."[45] Without absolute reciprocity of mutual recognition, neither one in the dialectic can achieve the "transformation of subjective certainty (*Gewissheit*) into objective truth (*Wahrheit*)." Fanon demonstrates that this does not hold in the colonial context, because the colonizer does not seek the recognition of the colonized as per Hegel but "scorns the consciousness of the slave…[wanting] from the slave not recognition but work," thereby thwarting any possibility of the colonized subject attaining "objective truth."[46] As illustrated in

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[44] Fanon, *BSWM*, 89, 92-5. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon concisely describes how this works ontologically and materially for the colonizer: "The colonist and the colonized are old acquaintances. And consequently, the colonist is right when he says he 'knows' them. It is the colonist who *fabricated* and *continues to fabricate* the colonized subject." Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2005), 2 (emphasis original).

[45] Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, qtd in Fanon, *BSWM*, 191 (emphasis original).

[46] Fanon, *BSWM*, 195n10. The nature of Fanon's appropriation of Hegel's dialectics in *BSWM* has spawned its own body of scholarship. Some scholars read Fanon as rejecting Hegel as insufficient, complicit, or dangerous when considered in the context of colonialism. See, for example, Glen S. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2014); Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 240–70; Adebayo A. Ogungbure, "Dialectics of Oppression: Fanon's Anticolonial Critique of Hegelian Dialectics," *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 12, no. 7 (December 2018): 216–30. Others interpret Fanon as extending or enacting his own version of Hegelian dialectics for the colonial context. See, for example, Daniel Badenhorst, "Fanon, Hegel, and the Problem of Reciprocity," *Hegel Bulletin* 44, no. 2 (2022): 321–44; Deivison Mendes Faustino, "Frantz Fanon and the Creolization of Hegel: Colonialism, the Interdiction of Dialectics and Emancipation in Debate," *The CLR James Journal* 27, no. 1/2 (2021): 189–212; Brandon Hogan, "Frantz Fanon's Engagement with Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic," *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 11, no. 8 (June 2018): 16–32. I am more persuaded by the former interpretation than the latter, as Fanon notes quite explicitly in *BSWM*: "We hope we have shown that the master here is basically different from the one described by Hegel…. For Hegel, the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object."

the moment of being hailed by the white child, there is no mutual recognition to be had in the colonial context—only the fundamentally asymmetrical power imbalance that facilitates the oppression of the colonized. Because colonialism is predicated on the construction of a racially exclusive and normative category of man superior to all those it does not recognize, Fanon argues that "ontology is made impossible in a colonized and acculturated society."[47]

In the face of this ontoepistemological failure, Fanon demands not reparative recognition by the colonizer but its outright refusal. In his critique of the politics of recognition and reconciliation in the settler context of Canada, Glen S. Coulthard argues that Fanon provides a framework with which to understand how Indigenous claims to recognition result not in sovereignty or self-determination, but in "rights and identities…defined more in relation to the colonial state and its legal apparatus" rather than to themselves and the land.[48] In other words, to be recognized on the colonizer's terms does not free the colonized from the yoke of colonialism. With the reciprocity of recognition foreclosed by the conditions of colonialism, Coulthard emphasizes the importance of Fanon's exhortation for a "simultaneous turn inward and away from the master" as a first step towards personal and collective decolonization.[49]

Fanon's contention in *Black Skin, White Masks* that "the black man has no ontological resistance"—and no inner truth—"in the eyes of the white man" resurfaces with a twist in his

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[47] Fanon, *BSWM*, 189.
[48] Glen S. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2014), 42. In *BSWM,* Fanon describes the truth of recognition of the colonized ("you") by the colonizer ("we"): "[F]rom time to time when we are tired of all that concrete [of "civilization"], we will turn to you as our children, our naive, ingenuous, and spontaneous children. We will turn to you as the childhood of the world…. Let us…bend down over those heads, those adorable expressive faces. In a sense, you reconcile us with ourselves" (111). Here, recognition by the colonizer simply perpetuates colonial oppression, maintaining the subordination of the colonized to the colonizer's sense of self ("you reconcile us with ourselves"); while the colonized may feel relief that "at last" they are "no longer a nonentity," such recognition is "granted" so the colonizer might extract from the colonized "a little human sustenance" (108). On a structural level, this is also the idea that sustains the enduring and pernicious settler logic in which Indigenous peoples are conceived incapable "wards" of the state and therefore requiring the state's "care."
[49] Coulthard, 43.

later psychiatric studies of confession in North Africa.[50] The prevailing attitude towards the colonized Muslim, non-French subject developed by Algiers School of French psychiatry was the "collective diagnosis of the North African mind as primitive, criminally impulsive, and feebleminded."[51] While in Algeria, Fanon was often summoned by the courts in his capacity as a psychiatrist to serve as a state expert witness, tasked with the evaluation of the criminal responsibility of accused Algerians—that is, to extract from the accused colonized subject the truth of the crime. What he encountered was a staggering number of confessions previously shared with investigators—"the motives, the unfolding of the act, a concurring reconstruction of the facts" explained in detail—totally recanted by the accused. Suddenly, Fanon finds himself "in the presence of a lucid, coherent man who professes his innocence. Responsibility for the act is not taken but totally lacking, as is thus any subjective assent to the sanction, any embracing of the sentence or even any guilt." Without the "diagnostic value of the confession" that would render coherent the crime and "give [the accused's] life meaning" by accepting judgement, the psychiatric expert "cannot discover the truth of the criminal" as required by the court.[52]

The native denies their confession and insists upon their innocence, but takes no steps to actively prove it. To the colonial authorities, this is consistent with the diagnosis of "North African syndrome," proof that North African people are pathological liars and criminals. Fanon, however, identifies this not as a psychiatric problem but an epistemological and political one. As truth and objectivity within the colonial situation are, by default, constructed on the colonizer's terms, they are inherently suspect to the colonized; therefore, Fanon notes, "[e]very contact

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[50] Fanon, *BSWM*, 90.
[51] Richard C. Keller, *Colonial Madness: Psychiatry in French North Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 57.
[52] Frantz Fanon and Raymond Lacaton, "Conducts of Confession in North Africa (1)," in *Alienation and Freedom: Frantz Fanon*, ed. Jean Khalfa and Robert J. C. Young, trans. Steven Corcoran (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 410-1; Frantz Fanon, "Conducts of Confession in North Africa (2)," in *Alienation and Freedom: Frantz Fanon*, ed. Jean Khalfa and Robert J. C. Young, trans. Steven Corcoran (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 415.

between the occupied and the occupier is a falsehood."[53] To tell the "truth" on such terms, then, would be equivalent to the acceptance of one's own colonial domination. In the context of the accused Algerian recanting their confession, the colonial binary of truth and falsehood collapses; by denying the truth of the crime, the colonized exposes the lie of the colonial situation.[54]

In a juridical context, confession purports to reintegrate the accused into society through acceptance of the truth of one's criminal wrongdoing in front of a judge. Fanon notes, however, that the colonized subject cannot be granted this "favourable dénouement" because there never existed a "prior reciprocal recognition of the group by the individual and of the individual by the group."[55] The full subjectivity essential to confession—"I confess *as a man* and I am sincere[,] I also confess *as a citizen* and I validate the social contract"—has already been negated by colonial rule.[56] The social contract is voided by the colonized native's imposed "ontological deficit."[57] Fanon uncovers in this categorical denial of confession a complex act of resistance: "We might be able to approach this ontological system that escapes us by inquiring whether indigenous Muslims really think of themselves as engaged in contractual agreements with the social group that now exerts power over them…. What significance would the crime, trial, and sentence have if they did not?"[58]

By refusing to authenticate the previously provided confession, the accused not only exposes the lack of recognition inherent in the colonial situation but also enacts a misrecognition of their own. The materiality and actuality of the crime committed without an individual

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[53] Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (Grove Press, 1994), 65.
[54] Matthieu Renault, "A Decolonizing Alethurgy: Fanon after Foucault," in *Foucault and the History of Our Present*, ed. Sophie Fuggle, Yari Lanci, and Martina Tazzioli, 2015, 213.
[55] Fanon and Lacaton, "Conducts of Confession (1)," 410-1.
[56] Fanon, "Conducts of Confession (2)," 415.
[57] David Marriott, "Without Truth: Fanon's Concept of Confession," *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, November 2024, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-024-00488-8.
[58] Fanon and Lacaton quoted in Nigel C. Gibson and Roberto Beneduce, *Frantz Fanon, Psychiatry, and Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 167 (translation Gibson and Beneduce's).

claiming responsibility for it leaves the colonial authorities with “acts without perpetrators, and confessions without a subject.” David Mariott contends that in this denial, “the very notion of culpability is put into crisis by this act that confesses itself without a subject, that professes its innocence,” consequently revealing that “there is no assent to the sanction, no embracing of the sentence or ‘even of any guilt.’”[59] Therefore Fanon finds in the primary confession not “an acceptance of [the] power [of the colonial judiciary],” but rather an engagement with “an aporia in the cognitive and performative dimensions of truth” wrought by racism and colonialism.[60] “In answer to the lie of the colonial situation,” Fanon so elegantly and succinctly articulates in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “the colonized subject responds with a lie.”[61]

The “regime of truth that is at stake in the mechanisms of power/knowledge” in the colonial context is therefore predicated on a “detachment from the… discourse of truth produced by the individual.”[62] The colonized subject pathologized as deceitful, defective, and subhuman is “always presumed guilty,” predetermined by a fundamental negation of truth—and by extension, a negation of being—on the part of the colonizer. Fanon’s analyses on the manifold ways that “in the colonial context there is no truthful behavior,”[63] productively unsettles Foucault’s explication of the subject who indicates interiority by speaking, produces truth by speaking interiority, and *becomes* truthful in the external validation of said interiority. In the power asymmetry constitutive of racism and colonialism, the confession is “deeply altered in its own structure, to the point of losing its function of ‘digging out’ the inner truth of the subject,” instead creating a “confession which ‘does not postulate any hidden thought to unfold but, rather, posits an already-

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[59] Mariott, “Without Truth,” 17.
[60] Fanon and Lacaton, “Conducts of confession in North Africa (1),” 412; Marriott, “Without Truth,” 8.
[61] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 14.
[62] Daniele Lorenzini and Martina Tazzioli, “Confessional Subjects and Conducts of Non-Truth: Foucault, Fanon, and the Making of the Subject,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, no. 1 (2018): 76.
[63] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 14-6.

there reality'…of diagnostic categories that…serve the purpose of defining [the colonized] and pathologizing his or her conduct."[64] Where the permeation of confessional practices—and by extension, of techniques of power, surveillance, and domination—into the everyday life of the individual is central to Foucault's thesis on truth and power-knowledge, for Fanon "the retraction [of confession by the accused Algerians] in fact represented a real truth, in that it expressed the 'total separation' between the two social groups—European and North African."[65]

However, I do not wish to position Fanon and Foucault as diametric opposites in their ontological and confessional postulations; indeed, as mentioned earlier, the latter is clear and specific in his reference to Western man and Western society. My intention is not to demand of Foucault answers beyond his stated project, but to consider how placing his work alongside Fanon's accounts of colonial truth and confession brings into sharper relief the particular entanglements and contradictions of power, knowledge, and subject formation in the colonial context. Anthony C. Alessandrini's provocatively asserts that there is more to be understood in their shared endeavor of "refusing the blackmail of the Enlightenment" of absolute knowledge, nostalgia for shared origins, and humanism in their work to get closer to what Foucault calls a "critical ontology of ourselves."[66] This critical ontology of ourselves is not "a theory, a doctrine, [or] a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating," but "an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them."[67] If we read Fanon's pronouncement of ontological impossibility not as itself fixed but contingent—that "any ontology is *made* impossible in a colonized and acculturated society"—we

[64] Lorenzini and Tazzioli, "Confessional Subjects and Conducts of Non-Truth," 12.
[65] Gibson and Beneduce, *Frantz Fanon, Psychiatry, and Politics*, 167.
[66] Anthony C. Alessandrini, *Frantz Fanon and the Future of Cultural Politics: Finding Something Different* (Lexington Books, 2014), 84.
[67] Foucault quoted in Alessandrini, 85.

allow space for the possibility to make a critical ontology of ourselves. In *The Sympathizer*, this is a generative line of thought to pursue not only because the novel deliberately problematizes the binary opposition of the West and the East, but also because it dramatizes through the narrator's repeated confession the role that historical "truths" play in producing the colonized subject, and how they must be scrutinizes for their limitations and elisions.

Between the Foucauldian and Fanonian analyses of confession, we see "the injunction for the subject to tell the truth about [themself] is an open *battlefield*, in which practices of disavowal as well as refusals to accept the truth of the colonizer and to bind to the truth produced by the legal-medical discourse, or by the subject about [themself], force the diagnostic power to reassess its strategies of capture."[68] More to the point, both Foucault and Fanon allow us to return to *The Sympathizer* understanding the clash of truth, power, and self-recognition as intrinsic to confession, which itself is a contingent and unstable representational cultural form. Attending to the ways that *The Sympathizer* follows, subverts, and shatters conventions of the confession allows for a keener understanding of the stakes and possibilities of self-representation for the "fixed" racialized and colonialized subject.

Colonial Continuities

Here I would like to offer a clarification regarding my project's goals of elucidating a relationality between settler colonialism and Asian American racial formation. Between the obvious history of the French colonial occupation of Vietnam (then "French Indochina) referenced by *The Sympathizer* and Fanon's invocation of various sites of colonialism (such as Martinique, Algeria, and Kenya, among others), it is not unreasonable to wonder not only where U.S. settler colonialism specifically comes into play, but also more broadly what qualifies as settler colonialism—particularly in relation to the myriad "other" colonialisms such as franchise

[68] Lorenzini and Tazzioli, "Confessional Subjects and Conducts of Non-Truth," 17 (emphasis original).

or extractive colonialism, plantation colonialism, neocolonialism, et cetera.[69] Following Shona N. Jackson's argument in *Beyond Constraint: Middle/Passages of Blackness and Indigeneity in the Radical Tradition*, I am interested in the ways that we *cannot* hold the many manifestations of colonialism in absolute distinction from one another. "Not only are former franchise colonies not free from settler colonial habits, laws, or structures of governance," contends Jackson, "but the deployment of these mechanisms of rule inside the settler colonial state reflects an adaptation and redeployment of the settler-master position."[70] The processes of settler colonialism, extractive colonialism, and even "post"-colonialism (as explored by Jackson in the case of Guyana) are all structured by similar logics and work to sustain one other. A territory need not be territorially occupied nor endure the genocidal elimination of its people to experience the violence of settler colonialism; the entwined legacies of French colonialism, American settler violence, and Western military intervention in Vietnam exemplify this dynamic—a connection that *The Sympathizer* makes visible.

The narrator is called to serve as a cultural consultant for a forthcoming film called *The Hamlet*, an unambiguous reference to the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*. Tasked with evaluating the screenplay for the "authenticity" of its representation of Vietnam, the Vietnamese people, and the situation of war, the narrator answers to the Auteur, a thinly veiled fictionalization of Francis

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[69] There is no singular authoritative guide to the many types of colonialism and their exact definitions. For one explication of the topic, see Nancy Shoemaker, "A Typology of Colonialism," *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Organization*, October 1, 2015, https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/a-typology-of-colonialism-october-2015/.

[70] Shona N. Jackson, *Beyond Constraint: Middle/Passages of Blackness and Indigeneity in the Radical Tradition* (Duke University Press, 2024), 35. Udo Krautwurst draws from Fanon to posit that traditional distinctions between colonialism and settler colonialism diminish the degree to which "[e]very European colony was founded on the principle that it would be part of a Reich that would last a thousand years." Fanon's attention to the "settler" not simply as an identity category but as "representative of the structural permanence necessary to colonial desire," Krautwurst argues, leads us to the conclusion that "*[a]ll colonialism is settler colonialism*." While I am hesitant of the absolutism of Krautwurst's thesis, I appreciate the essay's careful attention to Fanon's explication of the structure of colonialism, as well as Krautwurst's commitment to scrutinizing the contemporaneous methodological approaches to settler colonialism within the discipline of anthropology. Udo Krautwurst, "What Is Settler Colonialism? An Anthropological Meditation on Frantz Fanon's 'Concerning Violence,'" *History & Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (March 2003): 58 (emphasis original).

Ford Coppola.[71] At the beginning of their meeting, the Auteur gruffly admits that, despite his displeasure at the narrator's presence, "authenticity's important" and "it doesn't hurt to get the details right." As the Auteur proceeds to ridicule the narrator's commentary, he reveals the all-consuming nature of colonial truth, rejecting the narrator's edits—which are based on his lived experience—and instead boasting that a consulting Green Beret had "hardly any corrections to make." His pompous claim to authenticity is bolstered by the body of Orientalist scholarship that confers him with mastery over Vietnam: "I researched…your little part of the world," he sneers at the narrator. "I think I know something about you people."[72]

The narrator is particularly baffled by the Auteur's outright disdain at the suggestion to replace the identifier "Montagnard"—a French umbrella term for various indigenous peoples of Vietnam's Central Highlands—with more ethnically specific nomenclature.

> What if, I said to him, I wrote a screenplay about the American West and simply called all the natives Indians? You'd want to know whether the cavalry was fighting the Navajo or Apache or Comanche, right? Likewise, I would want to know, when you say these people are Montagnards, whether we speak of the Bru or the Nung or the Tay.

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[71] Though beyond the scope of this chapter, the novel's allusion to Shakespeare's Hamlet—a character so trapped in his internal anxiety that he is unable to act—is particularly rich. For a thorough examination of the novel's exploration of refugee subject formation as shaped by the Western literary canon—including a reading of the narrator's dialectical relationship with not only with Shakespeare's iconic Prince of Denmark, but also Prospero and Caliban of *The Tempest*, characters who feature prominently in Jodi Byrd's explication of the *cacophony* of colonialism (explored in detail in the following chapter)—see Hilda Hue Ma, "Reeducating *The Sympathizer*: Refugee Aesthetics and Intertextuality Recode the Western Canon," *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 35, no. 2 (2024): 1–17.

[72] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 129-30. The Auteur's arrogance—in this scene and overall—is a clear reference to Coppola's infamous characterization of *Apocalypse Now* after its premiere at 1979 Cannes Film Festival: "My film is not a movie. My film is not *about* Vietnam. It *is* Vietnam. *It's what it was really like, it was crazy.* And the way we made it was very much like the way the Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle, there were too many of us, we had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little we went insane." Coppola's vainglorious description of *Apocalypse Now* can be read several ways: in one sense, that the film "is" Vietnam in that the content of the film—plot, themes, characters, et cetera—is equated to the actual events of the Vietnam War; that is, it is a true and realistic representation of the war as it happened in another, it reads as comparing the film's legendarily catastrophic production to the "production" of the Vietnam War by the U.S. government—as an endeavor far from home, plagued by hubris—and yet enabled by a system willing to fund it regardless. Nguyen has written extensively about *Apocalypse Now* and the American film industry's complicity in the Vietnam War in his theoretical work, and has put it into practice in his role as an executive producer in the 2024 HBO adaptation of *The Sympathizer*. See Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Harvard University Press, 2016). *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, directed by George Hickenlooper, Fax Bahr, and Eleanor Coppola (Triton Pictures, 1991).

> Let me tell you a secret, the Auteur said. You ready. Here it is. No one gives a shit.[73]

In spite of his otherwise superlative grasp on American culture, the narrator naively assumes that the disconnect on this topic is an errant oversight on the part of the Auteur, perhaps indicating a lack of comparative context. Instead, the Auteur's response—"No one gives a shit"—reveals a deeper continuity between the settler violence perpetrated against Native peoples in the U.S. and Cold War imperialism beyond the nation's borders. The narrator's appeal relies on the hope that invoking the U.S. settler context will provoke recognition and ethical responsibility in the Auteur—that drawing a parallel between the misrepresentation of Vietnamese peoples and the homogenization of Indigenous peoples in Hollywood films will lead to a correction of the screenplay.[74] However, this hope is misplaced. "I pitied the French for their naïveté in believing they had to visit a country in order to exploit it," the narrator bitterly thinks, "Hollywood was much more efficient, imagining the countries it wanted to exploit."[75] The Auteur's dismissal is not simply personal arrogance, but is symptomatic of the ways in which settler colonialism sustains itself not through visibility, but disavowal; in the case of the U.S., this manifests as the erasure and misrepresentation of Native people and histories, the erosion of sovereignty, and the expropriation of land and labor.

This disavowal is repeated during the Vietnam War, in which American GIs related to the Vietnamese landscape through the mnemonic of the mythic American frontier.[76] The Vietnamese

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[73] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 133-4.
[74] Many scholars and artists have explored the cinematic misrepresentation of Native peoples of the U.S. as a condition of settler colonialism. See Laurel R. Davis-Delano et al., "Representations of Native Americans in U.S. Culture? A Case of Omissions and Commissions," *The Social Science Journal*, 2021, 1–16; *Reel Injun*, directed by Neil Diamond, Catherine Bainbridge, and Jeremiah Hayes (Domino Film, 2009); Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (U of Nebraska Press, 2011).
[75] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 133.
[76] Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, "Together with Bloody Knife in South Vietnam: Old West Metaphors and the Kit Carson Scouts during the Vietnam War," *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 16, no. 3 (July 3, 2023): 354–71.

jungle became the "wilderness" of the Old West, hostile territory was "Indian Country," and the guerilla tactics used by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF, popularly colloquialized as "Viet Cong" or "VC"), were made analogous to the Plains Indian style of warfare—thus the war is framed as yet another chapter in the narrative of the American conquest of "savage" territory, the natural successor to the 17th- and 18th-century Indian Wars; in this scenario, the GIs imagine themselves as "cowboys" and cast the Vietnamese natives as "Indians," a logic that gives license to indiscriminate violence. As Jodi Byrd argues, the U.S. settler state relies on the production of a paradigmatic "Indianness" that can be strategically imposed upon various peoples—domestically and abroad—to justify military intervention or domination. The Indian, Byrd posits, is the nation's "original enemy combatant;"[77] in the Vietnam War, this identity is transferred to the Vietnamese people, rendering them killable within the familiar settler script; within the Auteur's script, this is represented by the generic colonial catch-all of "Montagnard." The oft-repeated GI phrase "the only good dink is a dead dink" (the slur "dink" variously replaced with "gook," "Commie," and "VC") revises the earlier genocidal refrain that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," revealing how settler colonial discourses and logics travel across colonial and imperial contexts.[78] Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi astutely notes that as this scene "maps historical linkages between American westward expansion across North America…and American imperial reach across the Pacific Islands…into

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[77] Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xviii. This transferrable Indianness is deployed to authorize U.S. colonial dominance across space and time; Byrd writes: "From the Pacific with the illegal overthrow of the kingdom of Hawai'i to the Caribbean with Guantánamo Bay as a torture center for 'enemy combatants,' I argue throughout this book that U.S. cultural and political preoccupations with indigeneity and the reproduction of Indianness serve to facilitate, justify, and maintain Anglo-American hegemonic mastery over the significations of justice, democracy, law, and terror" (xx). This paradigmatic Indianness—and the specific figure of the enemy combatant—notably reemerges in the wake of 9/11 and the War on Terror. See Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 225-7, 243n71; Philip H. Melling, "King Philip's Shadow: Vietnam, Iraq and the Indian Wars," in *The United States and the Legacy of the Vietnam War*, ed. Jon Roper (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), 121–42; Natsu Taylor Saito, "Colonial Presumptions: The War on Terror and the Roots of American Exceptionalism," *Georgetown Journal of Law & Modern Critical Race Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009): 67–114.

[78] Charles E. Martin, "'A Good One Is a Dead One:' The Combat Soldiers' View of Vietnam and the Indian Wars," *Kentucky Folklore Record* 26, no. 3 (July 1, 1980): 127.

Southeast Asia," it reciprocally emphasizes that "Asian American political subjectivity… has always had to grapple with its situatedness within the settler colonial United States."[79] The Vietnam War becomes a site upon which settler colonial logics are not merely exported but actively recycled, where the violence foundational to the U.S. nation-state is reinscribed onto other geographies and peoples within and beyond the national borders; thus, to hold settler colonialism and other forms of colonialism in absolute distinction impedes our ability to apprehend the ways they converge and mutually reinforce one another.

Representation in the Balance

With the burden of representation comes the anxiety of misrepresentation, and *The Sympathizer's* repeated reference to Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* reminds the reader of the plight of the marginalized: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented." This line has been taken up extensively by postcolonial theorists and is indicative of the field's general mistrust towards any representation that claims to represent reality; indeed, the idea of a singular objective reality itself is suspect as both an instrument and legacy of colonialism. Because of its putative foundational investment in representing a kind of truth or reality, realism in particular has held a contentious status within postcolonial and U.S. ethnic literary study. At the core of realist analysis is the principle of totality, that there is a complete "reality [that] exists independently of our knowledge of it, that reality is not exhausted by our knowledge of it."[80] Where Edward Said (in the vein of Fanon) problematizes truth as "itself a representation" wrought by colonialism, passionate realist Georg Lukács accepts literature as "a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected," taking as a given that an "objective reality"

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[79] Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, "Historicizing the Transpacific Settler Colonial Condition: Asian–Indigenous Relations in Shawn Wong's *Homebase* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 49–50.
[80] Radha D'Souza, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Postcolonialism, Realism, and Critical Realism," *Journal of Critical Realism* 9, no. 3 (2010): 268.

exists and can be represented in its totality in the novel form.[81] For Said (here in a Foucauldian line of thought), such claims to reality can be made only inasmuch as discursive representations are understood as historically situated constructs that shape reality when given authority; the "language, thought, and vision" of Orientalism constitutes "*a kind of radical realism* [by which] anyone employing Orientalism…will designate, name, point to, fix what he is talking or thinking about *with a word or phrase*, which then is considered either to have acquired, *or more simply to be, reality*."[82]

In her study of 20th century Indian novels, Ulka Anjaria argues that in Lukács's work there is a thoughtful struggle "between faithful representation and meaningful artistic distortion" [83]—or in other words, in the dialectic of form and content, of appearance and essence. This dialectic is of utmost importance to Lukács, writing that "the more firmly [the dialectic] grasps hold of the living contradictions of life and society, then the greater and the more profound the realism will be."[84] The realism of Lukács is not stagnant, but constantly in motion, for if "there is

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[81] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Vintage, 1994). Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, by Theodor W. Adorno et al., trans. Rodney Livingstone (Verso, 1977), 43. There is perhaps no greater proponent of realism than Georg Lukács, who writes emphatically in favor of "any attempt to mirror objective reality…to shape the highly complex mediations in all their unity and diversity, and to synthesize them as characters in a work of literature."

[82] Said, *Orientalism*, 72, emphasis mine. The proposed violence of realism is not limited to its association with the historical moment of colonial enterprise. Kwame Anthony Appiah's essay "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" famously declares that "realism naturalizes," reading early African realist literature as complicit in the legitimation of postcolonial nationalist governments that failed to liberate their people and maintained power through theft and violence. Realism is not only suspect in its misrepresentation of the Other that legitimates ongoing projects of colonialism, but also in the continued oppression of the masses by the political elite in the wake of colonialism. Susan Andrade argues that much of the resistance to realism in postcolonial literary study comes from a conflation of form with content, that deployment of or reading for the realist form forecloses the possibility of radical or subversive political commentary. This relates to the (flawed) tendency to equate realism with mimesis, and the realist with the realist*ic*. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonialism?," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 349; Susan Z. Andrade, "The Problem of Realism and African Fiction," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 185.

[83] Ulka Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 10. Anjaria offers a framework of "realism in the colony," a mode of "deliberate metafictionality, in which realism represents *both the world and the limits of its own referentiality*…realism's metafictionality does not refuse the totality of the sign altogether but allows realism *to contest the self-evident meaning* of a set of identifiable modern values." (5)

[84] Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," 39.

no state of inertia in reality" then realist literature must represent it accordingly.[85] It is here that Lukács offers space for creative license in the representation of reality and the totality of relations therein, and Anjaria proposes that "even unrealistic elements of a text might reflect some kind of extra-literary reality…[This includes] even fissures or gaps in realism itself…that do not quite fit together or *constitute a complete whole*."[86]

The philosophical and material legacy of colonialism is one of exclusion, subjugation, and misrepresentation of the racialized Other, the profound violence of which calls into question the nature of reality and the Other's position within it. Suggesting that these epistemological ruptures and contradictions are constitutive of realism rather than antithetical, Anjaria locates the emergence of a new kind of realism borne specifically from the experience of colonialism, a realism marked by a "self-consciousness and an awareness of its own secondary status within colonial discourse."[87]

My interest here is not necessarily to position *The Sympathizer as* a realist novel. Rather, I want to consider realism's investment in representing totality alongside the novel's narrative and thematic commitment to erasure, revision, forgetting, and, most importantly, (dialectical) contradiction. In doing so, I hope to make visible the ways in which the novel's deliberate putative incompleteness and ambiguity in fact create narrative force not to represent the unrepresentable, but to bring into focus and critically dissect the systems that render them so. The narrator's famous introduction that opens the novel is a useful outline of these formal and representational concerns. Instead of providing his name, age, or other information traditionally needed to authenticate a political confession, he announces, "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces." He continues, "Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds." The

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[85] Lukacs, "Realism in the Balance," 39.
[86] Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel*, 11, emphasis mine.
[87] Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel*, 4.

two faces and two minds refer to the narrator's mix-raced Vietnamese and French heritage, a living embodiment of France's colonial imposition upon Vietnam that places him at the margins of society, treated from childhood by others as "some misunderstood mutant from a comic book or horror movie."[88] Ironically, it is also what allows him to "see any issue from both sides," an ability that makes him an exceptional spy, able to blend in wherever necessary: as a mole in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), as an apparently grateful refugee in the United States, and as a covert member of the North Vietnamese cause in the reeducation camp. However, he reflects upon this ability with ambivalence—he can never truly belong in any of the places he infiltrates, unsure if his lack of control over it makes it a "talent" or a "hazard." The capacity of the narrator's sympathy to both do good and cause harm highlights contradiction as constitutive of binary logics. The narrator's dizzying list of competing binaries—East versus West, communism versus capitalism, talent versus hazard, conspicuousness versus camouflage, truth versus lie—produce what Sarah Chihaya calls a "basic arithmetic problem: What do you get when you add up a lot of doubles?"[89] I ask, what do you get when doubles clearly aren't enough?

The dialectical struggle that animates the plot and the narrator's characterization also shapes the novel's formal commentary on representation and the self. The opening of *The Sympathizer* calls attention to form in the narrator's rejection of comic books and horror movies as forms in which to place him, as others have done—to do so, he implies, is to misread him. In this way the novel emphasizes a critical reading practice, one that accounts for the slippages of language and the mutability of form as inseparable from the material conditions of the text's production. Roberta Wolfson writes that the narrator is an "embodiment of metatextuality"

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[88] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 1.
[89] Sarah Chihaya, "Slips and Slides," *PMLA* 133, no. 2 (March 2018): 364.

because his racial and political liminality constantly reminds him of "his status as an ambiguous signifier who can be variably deciphered depending on context."[90] The novel itself requires such a reading practice as it progressively recontextualizes itself for the reader: first presenting as a straightforward confession; then suddenly launching the reader into an unknown narrative form and mode that switches between textbook and screenplay; subsequently returning to seemingly stable narrative ground until the narrator reveals his new unified multitudinous identity signaled by a shift to a narrative "we."

Published more than forty years after the emergence of Asian American discourse, *The Sympathizer* rapidly became ubiquitous as *the* contemporary Asian American novel to read.[91] Despite this categorization by institutions and the public, the novel's direct engagement with Asian American-ness skews critical and resistant. The narrator brushes with Asian American identity when the Chair of the Department of Oriental Studies regales the him with a monologue lamenting the "confusion" of the Amerasian, torn between the East and the West and accepted wholly by neither, and extolling the potential of the Amerasian to become the "goodwill ambassador to bring opposing nations to peace" if allowed to flourish under American

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[90] Roberta Wolfson, "'A Man of Two Faces and Two Minds': Just Memory and Metatextuality in *The Sympathizer's* Rewriting of the Vietnam War," *College Literature* 50, no. 1 (Winter 2023): 64-5.

[91] *The Sympathizer* has been a fixture on countless recommendation lists of Asian American literature; for just a few examples, see: "A reading guide on the Asian American experience from Viet Thanh Nguyen, Charles Yu and more," *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-03-25/best-asian-american-books-memoirs-fiction-aapi-authors; Katie Heaney, "18 Books Our Favorite AAPI Writers Love," *The Cut*, May 18, 2022, https://www.thecut.com/2022/05/book-recommendations-aapi-month-2022.html; Anne Mai Yee Jansen, "Some of the Most Influential Asian American Literature of All Time," *BOOK RIOT* (blog), May 6, 2022, https://bookriot.com/influential-asian-american-literature/; R. O. Kwon, "The Asian American Literature That Got Me Through 2016," *VICE* (blog), December 20, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en/article/the-asian-american-literature-that-got-me-through-2016/; Jarry Lee, "32 Essential Asian-American Writers You Need To Be Reading," *BuzzFeed*, May 7, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/jarrylee/essential-asian-american-writers-you-need-to-be-reading; Joe Milan Jr., "8 Novels Exploring the Experiences of Asian American Men," *Electric Literature*, July 28, 2023; Clara Wang, "15 Novels By Asian American Authors That Everyone Should Read," *BuzzFeed*, May 5, 2021, https://www.buzzfeed.com/claratsacwang/seminal-novels-by-asian-american-authors; Adrienne Westenfeld and Sirena He, "25 Essential Books About the Asian American Experience," *Esquire* (blog), May 16, 2024, https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/g35885208/asian-american-books/.

democracy.[92] When the Chair waves away the narrator's correction that he is *Eur*asian as irrelevant, he subsumes and dilutes the specificity of his identity and his struggles, placing the United States at the center of the identity regardless of the narrator's ancestry and the colonial and political machinations that have brought him to the U.S. The narrator is not Asian American in the literal sense, born in Vietnam to a Vietnamese mother and French father, and encounters America for the first time as a young man on assignment for the Communist-affiliated PAVN. The difficulties that the narrator experiences about his racial identity are more profoundly informed by his alienation in Vietnam—where his difference was marked by the specific colonially-wrought dynamics of race and class, as well as the stigma of being the illegitimate child of an unwed woman and a Catholic priest—than by his position in the United States, where he as read as generally and generically Asian when he is read at all.

The narrator's unique identity allows the novel to play with typical narrative, character, and thematic expectations of canonical Asian American literature. Rather than a linear narrative immigration leading to assimilation and the American Dream, the narrator's journeys to and from the U.S. are circuitous and complicated, and ultimately more focused on the political struggle within Vietnam—between the communist Northern Vietnamese forces and the capitalist Southern forces now scattered across the U.S. as refugees—and the narrator's corresponding internal turmoil than it is about America itself. Unlike Asian American literature from the early twentieth century that predominantly struggles with integrating the Asian *into* the American (or at least allowing them to coexist without hostility) the narrator of *The Sympathizer* must earnestly demonstrate that his essential revolutionary Vietnamese identity has not been tarnished by exposure to the excesses of the capitalist West. Therefore, any recounted performance of Americanness can be justified as advancing the PAVN cause, and any admission of admiration

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[92] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 65.

for or assimilation into US society and culture is an admission of guilt offered for forgiveness; it is this dynamic that torments the narrator for much of the novel as he struggles to produce a suitable confession for the Commandant.

We learn that the narrator is a spy infiltrating the U.S.-allied southern Vietnamese military police on behalf of the northern PAVN forces, against whom he has committed an unknown crime landing him in a guarded isolation cell, writing a confession to earn forgiveness. The positioning of the narrator as a spy produces significant tension within and beyond the text: first, in the contrasting representations of the Western spy as synonymous with upholding the nation and of Asians in the West as perpetually alien and duplicitous; and second, diegetically in the seeming incompatibility between the figure of the spy, whose goal is to evade and camouflage, and the confessor, who must bare all.

On the first point, the spy is a figure of national importance; as James Kyung-Jin Lee pithily remarks: "Individuals hire detectives; states hire spies."[93] The spy genre was born at the turn of nineteenth century into the twentieth, a moment of rapidly changing constructions of nationhood and belonging that fostered a popular fascination with international intrigue. Michael Denning argues that the development of rival imperialist states within a global system of capitalism made it increasingly difficult to envision "the totality of social relations as embodied in a single 'knowable community,'" thereby establishing the spy novel as the "border" between nations and the spy the "defender" of the nation in the face of the unknowable alien, much in the tradition of the narratives of the imperial explorer that came before.[94] As the political power of Western nations increased dramatically, so did the anxieties related to the accumulation of that

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[93] James Kyung-Jin Lee, "Where the Talented Tenth Meets the Model Minority: The Price of Privilege in Wideman's 'Philadelphia Fire' and Lee's 'Native Speaker,'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 35, no. 2/3 (2002): 257, https://doi.org/10.2307/1346185.
[94] Michael Denning, *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (Routledge, 2015), 13-4.

power, both internationally and domestically; this desire to clearly delineate the boundaries of nation and identity based on xenophobia made space for the spy novel to "thrive as a useful propaganda machine to feed paranoia about foreignness…but also gave a valuable mechanism for an exploration of the new powers of state control" over its own people.[95] Though the quintessential protagonist spy is never necessarily "good," his morally and ethically questionable methods are never as egregious as his racially marked enemies, and he almost always emerges the patriotic hero of his narrative.

Casting then, as *The Sympathizer* does, a North Vietnamese Communist with Eurasian parentage as the literary spy protagonist marks a clear departure from the conventional attitudes regarding Western political formation. In fact, Western nation building is hardly of primary interest to the novel. The narrator's mission of ridding Vietnam of Western political dominance in favor of a Vietnamese Communist government renders the West, particularly the United States, as merely incidental; his target as a spy is not the Americans themselves, but the Southern Vietnamese who collude with them. Though dominant histories cast the Vietnam War as a clash between the Western-backed South and the Soviet- and China-supported North, *The Sympathizer* argues that the magnitude and legacy of the violence cannot be recuperated by such a binary characterization of the conflict. Though the entanglement of the United States—and the coloniality of its Cold War interventions—is certainly crucial to the narrative, the novel's attention to a North Vietnamese infiltration of South Vietnamese officers displaced to the US demands a more nuanced take. South Vietnam is not just a proxy for American foreign political interests, as it is often represented, but a player in and of itself. The narrator's uncontainable and contradictory sympathies and complicity in the harming of his "own" people throw into relief the

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[95] Clive Bloom, "The Spy Thriller: A Genre Under Cover?" in *Spy Thrillers: From Buchan to Le Carré*, ed. Clive Bloom (MacMillan, 1990), 2.

degree to which the war has been dramatically oversimplified in its lasting representations. Rather than succumb to the binary that represents Vietnam as monolithically victimized by the U.S. or mindlessly puppeteered by the Soviets and Chinese, through the narrator's failed confession and ultimate interrogation the novel dwells on the painful contradictions and slippery double meanings that such binaries obscure—which, in turn, perpetuate the legacy of its violence.

The spy narrator also plays self-consciously into hegemonic narratives of Asian American foreignness. The questions of the burden of representation that animate this essay are ones that have also long plagued writers and scholars of ethnic and minority literature, and these tensions of disciplinary representation are also evident in *The Sympathizer*. The stereotype of the villainous Asian spy is ubiquitous in American history, tracing its lineage to the construction of the "Yellow Peril" in the nineteenth century after predominantly Chinese laborers were brought to the United States as a cheap labor force to build the nation's infrastructure. When the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 banned further Chinese migration to the U.S. amidst widespread racial panic, scrutiny shifted to the growing population of Japanese migrants on the West Coast, who were cast en masse as "un-American" and potential traitors during World War II, leading to their wartime incarceration. The stereotype of the treasonous Asian with unwavering foreign allegiance, still festers in the contemporary U.S. cultural imaginary, with high-profile instances ranging from the federal charges and public controversy endured by scientist Wen Ho Lee at the turn of the millennium to the exponential increase in violence and racist rhetoric against Asian Americans amidst the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic.[96]

[96] For legal and sociological analyses of racialization pertaining to the Wen Ho Lee case, see Neil Gotanda, "Comparative Racialization: Racial Profiling and the Case of Wen Ho Lee Symposium: Race and the Law at the Turn of the Century," *UCLA Law Review* 47, no. 6 (August 2000): 1689–1704; Brant T. Lee, "Liars, Traitors, and Spies: Wen Ho Lee and the Racial Construction of Disloyalty," *Asian American Policy Review* 10 (2002): 1–16.

Homi Bhabha asserts that the stereotype is colonialism's "major discursive strategy," "a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation" that "demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself" by "construct[ing the stereotype's] regime of truth, not...subject[ing] its representations to normalizing judgment."[97] As Tina Chen contends, "recognizing the stereotype's ability to be ideologically ambivalent in its formation...is critical as Asian Americans seek to counter the representational legacy of stereotypes that have been produced about them by non-Asians."[98] The prevalence of this stereotype has led to a body of Asian American literary and scholarly works that takes up espionage and surveillance in myriad ways. Studies such as Chen's *Double Agency* and Monica Chiu's *Scrutinized! Surveillance in Asian North American Literature* explore the limits and contradictions of Asian American subjectivity under scrutiny and implications of betrayal. There are novels that, like *The Sympathizer*, feature a spy protagonist, such as *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee (1995) and *Country of Origin* by Don Lee (2004); novels that engage with the hypervisibility of being accused of espionage, such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (2007), *A Person of Interest* by Susan Choi (2008), and *From the Memoirs of a Non Enemy Combatant* by Alex Gilvarry (2014); and in the place of literal spies, some novels extensively feature espionage as metaphor, such as *Mona in the Promised Land* by Gish Jen (1996).

Literary analyses include Colleen Lye, "The Literary Case of Wen Ho Lee," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 14, no. 2 (2011): 249–82; Chapter 5 of Crystal Parikh, *An Ethics of Betrayal: The Politics of Otherness in Emergent U.S. Literatures and Culture* (Fordham University Press, 2009), 129-59. For studies of Asian American xenophobia and COVID-19, see Matthew Costello et al., "COVID-19: A Pandemic of Anti-Asian Cyberhate," *Journal of Hate Studies* 17, no. 1 (2021): 108–18; V. Jo Hsu, "Containment and Interdependence: Epidemic Logics in Asian American Racialization," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 7, no. 3 (2020): 125–34.

[97] Homi K. Bhaba, "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 18, 22-5.

[98] Tina Chen, *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 36.

Positioning the narrator of *The Sympathizer* within the stereotype of the suspicious Asian, rather than against, highlights the stereotype's intrinsic ambivalence; indeed, the narrator's profession as a spy allows him to not only demonstrate the representational limits of the stereotype, but use those very limits to productively subvert the stereotype itself. Many of the works mentioned above make use of espionage as a trope or metaphor for the immigrant experience, based on the idea that "observation, scrutiny, and mimetic duplication, with the goal of successfully performing the host culture, are tools shared by the immigrant and the spy."[99] However, this does not necessarily apply to the narrator of *The Sympathizer*, who is not a typical or expected Asian American subject; he is unquestionably Vietnamese, born and raised in Vietnam, with Communist allegiances and an explicit interest in undermining the United States' international dominance. He can neither be accurately described as an immigrant, nor a typical refugee in that it was his desired regime that expelled the Americans and their Vietnamese allies from Vietnam, and it was under the orders of that regime that he left. He studies, masters, and performs American-ness not like an immigrant attempting to make their home in the US, but as an intentional act of subversion. Indeed, his confessions—textual and otherwise—are not extracted under interrogation by an American agent but a fellow Vietnamese officer, further straying from narratives that would center the U.S. and depict the conflict as neatly binary. *The Sympathizer* mobilizes espionage not as a metaphor for an Asian American desire for or alienation from national belonging, but as a deliberate exploration of what lies between and beyond the limiting frameworks of the Asian and the American. As the narrator's eponymous talent (or hazard) for sympathy—and its literal manifestation, that monstrous formaldehyde-pickled two-headed baby he is forced to behold—demonstrates, maintaining two distinct faces

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[99] Hyungji Park, "The Immigrant as Spy," *American Book Review* 31, no. 1 (2009): 9.

and two distinct minds is ultimately insufficient and detrimental to full self-recognition and representation.

Since My Last Confession

As I have emphasized throughout this chapter so far, the confessional form is of primary importance in *The Sympathizer*. As I hope my discussion of Foucault and Fanon's analyses has clearly established, the problem of confessional practice is the problem of truth and recognition—both of which are made contingent within the dynamics of colonialism. Who can produce truth, who is excluded by or from truth, and what systems are propped up by this extraction, consolidation, and representation of truth are all questions of central importance, as my review of postcolonial theorists demonstrates.

Important to my analysis of *The Sympathizer* is the reading practice that it demands. On a primary level, the narrator's incarceration and direct address to the Commandant encourages the reader to be suspicious of the narrative, to look for moments where the hand of the editing Commandant is visible or the narrator's memory betrays him. These moments (some of which I read in this section) neatly support the novel's overarching thematic concern with systems of power making true representation beyond reach. At the same time, the confession fosters a sense of intimacy with and sympathy for the narrator, as his apparent crime of being insufficiently revolutionary feels absurd next to the hardships he has been made to endure since birth and in the reeducation camp. However, the diegetic break from the confession into the narratively metamorphic recollections that follow throws this all into chaos. The Commissar's interrogation magnifies the narrator's internal fragmentation—the form follows suit, hurtling from third-person perspective to the ambiguously narrated textbook question-and-answer format and screenplay to excavate the female agent from the narrator's memory, to put her on the record from which she has not been forgotten, but erased. "Do you think her fate is the thing you have

forgotten that you have forgotten?" Man presses. "Don't you see how everything in need of confession is already known?"[100]

In his early revolutionary days, Man announces that the narrator's calling is to be a mole, a term whose multiple meanings perplexes the narrator. "A spy's task is to hide where everyone can see him," Man explains, "and where he can see everything." Put another way, the spy must hide in plain sight. The narrator is perturbed by another definition he encounters, of the "subterranean, worm-eating mammal" that was "surely ugly to all except its own mother, and nearly blind."[101] The contradictory imperative to see all as a spy versus the innate blindness of the animal manifests in the narrator's passing references to the female agent (Man counts four such instances), the sin for which he endures the pain of torture that has been hiding in plain sight all along. When Man insists that confession is the acceptance of the known and not the revelation of the unknown, he gestures towards a reading practice that attends to a text (or a history) *as a whole*. Only then can truth be found. In the case of *The Sympathizer*, this entails following the narrator's return to the initial confession after his interrogation by Man. *The Sympathizer* is not a corrective representation of the Vietnam War or the broad violence perpetuated by racism and colonialism, but an exercise in how we might critically read these (his)stories in a way that allows for contradiction and the necessary pain that it engenders. Returning to the confession after learning what is "already known" gives it new nuance. Though the text itself is the same (in that it still fails to account for the rape of the female agent) the boundaries of truth are thrown into much sharper relief, and the complex processes by which truth has been erased or manipulated are pulled into focus—it was always there, hiding in plain sight. The novel is profoundly shaped by its demand to be revisited—that painful histories be

[100] Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, 336-7.
[101] Nguyen, *The Sympathizer,* Kindle, chap. 11.

revisited—a demand it makes through its complex narrative, formal maneuvers, and meticulous attention to detail. In this sense, the confession forces the narrator to enact Fanon's declaration to the First Congress of Negro Writers in 1956—that the "plunge into the chasm of the past is the condition and source of freedom."[102]

The frankness with which the narrator addresses his incarceration contrasts with several stylistic and formal ambiguities in the confession. For all the details the narrator offers about himself—biographical, psychological, existential, sexual—he never names himself. This indeterminacy contradictorily manifests in his life as the extensive catalogue of epithets directed at his out-of-wedlock birth and mixed-race identity: "bastard," "mongrel," "half-breed," "metis," "Eurasian," "Amerasian," "the dust of life," "natural child," "illegitimate son," and "love child." This multiplicity contrasts with the primal (mis)recognition by his father. "In the end, my father had it right," the narrator writes. "He called me nothing at all."[103] This refusal, like many choices in the novel, can be read in contradictory ways. If recognition is the process by which the individual becomes vulnerable to domination, then remaining anonymous is an intentional act of defiance; rather than become fixed in the discourses of Foucault's strange sciences or Fanon's colonial case files, the narrator denies the confessional power imposed upon him even while he is forced to submit. At the same time, by refusing to name himself the narrator extends his father's negation and demonstrates the depth of his crisis of being. If to be named is to be recognized, and if to be recognized is to become a full being, we can read the narrator's choice to remain unnamed as evidencing his inability to recognize his fragmented inner self or be recognized by

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[102] Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, 43. Coulthard engages extensively with this statement in *Red Skin, White Masks*, using it as a foundation for his development of Indigenous *resentment*—the "bitter indignation and persistent anger at being treated unjustly by the colonial state both historically and in the present"—against the settler national characterization of such feelings as *ressentiment*, or a pathological incapacity to "get over" or "move on" from the concluded colonial past (126).

[103] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 21.

the reader as a unified being under a single name. In a world dictated by rigid binaries and "pick a side" imperatives, how can a man with two faces and two minds be recognized? And without recognition, how can one be represented? The crime for which the unnamed female agent is arrested is the possession of a list of Special Branch officers who collaborate with the CIA, including the narrator himself. Attempting to dispose of the evidence she tries to swallow the list, their "sour names literally on the tip of her tongue" when the narrator breaks down her door; even upon the pain of sexual violence and incarceration, she never reveals the names of her communist co-conspirators.[104]

As a narrative representation of the narrator's life, the confession is similarly marked by indeterminacy. The narrator recounts his life in the confession in episodic, non-chronological order, the effect simultaneously fragmented and whole—reassembled, evoking the narrator's sense of self. It also bolsters the novel's critique of hegemonic historiography of the Vietnam War, conjuring the rending violence of the war and forcing the reader to understand it beyond its neatly delineated temporal boundaries. Dialogue is neither signaled by quotation marks nor by paragraph breaks, making it difficult to follow who is speaking at a given moment. It has the effect of collapsing every character into the narrator, their words absorbed into his without distinguishing punctuation, further emphasizing the narrator's understanding of himself as irreparably fragmented beyond recognition.

The rape of the female agent hides in plain sight not just in the direct references to her, but in the hypersexualized language and imagery of the confession. Amidst the bombs and gunfire of his evacuation from Saigon, the narrator expresses his pride and conviction that Vietnam was being "born again," describing the "amniotic water" of the coming rain, the "vaginal darkness" from which drunk marines stumble with their grenades resembling "a spare

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[104] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 80.

pair of testicles," and a lit parachute flare "sputtering into spermatic existence, its bright head of light trailing a long, wiggling tail of smoke."[105] Upon his return to Vietnam, he beholds the landscape as a "naked body exposed" and his weapons as "short, metallic dildos."[106] Before his interrogation by Man, he describes his thirst as "priapic…against the back of my throat."[107]

Almost all the women characters—named or anonymous, prominent or passingly mentioned—are referenced in relation to their sexual attractiveness (or pitiful lack thereof) at some point by the narrator. Meeting a model-turned-actress on the set of *The Hamlet*, the narrator, "like every man on the set…was convinced that he had the magic wand that would convert her back to heterosexuality."[108] A prolonged look at Lana's breasts transforms into a meditation in which he projects his own bifurcated sense of self upon her body, considering the "double and contradictory meaning" of "cleavage."[109] While the reference to the female communist agent appears at first relatively minor to the reader before the narrator's interrogation—intentionally so—it is hard to ignore the hypermasculine sexuality that permeates the confession even on the first read. Once the narrator remembers the female agent, however, the primary confession cannot be read as anything *but* evidence of the multiple layers of sexual violence that have been buried by governments, the press, the arts, public memory—and complicit individuals. Even though he refuses to look back at the rape and his role in it, he cannot suppress it entirely, his language betraying his truth in his repeated references to sex in proximity to violence or disruption.

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[105] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 13, 17, 24.
[106] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 299, 296.
[107] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 314.
[108] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 160.
[109] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 241. These moments are, of course, in addition to the numerous direct depictions of or references to sex in the confession, such as the rape scene of Mai in *The Hamlet*, the "Original Sin" story of his mother's impregnation by his father, his affair with Ms. Mori, and his (very) vividly described youthful masturbatory dalliance with the dead squid.

Since My Last Confession: Redux

At every invocation of Marx's dictum that "they cannot represent themselves," the narrator has understood *himself* as the "they" who cannot represent themselves and is therefore consequently condemned to perpetual misrepresentation. His two faces, two minds, and too many sympathies render him simultaneously peripheral and central, hiding in plain sight, unable to intervene in the exercise of power and consigned to witness it. As he slips into delirium from thirst and sleep deprivation, he frantically attempts to make sense of Man's insistence that he take responsibility for what he did to the female agent:

> Somebody must have something done to him! Was I that somebody? No! That cannot be true, or so I wanted to tell him, but my tongue refused to obey me. I was only mistaken to be that somebody, because I was, I told him, or thought I did, a nobody. I am a lie, a keeper, a book. No! I am a fly, a creeper, a gook. No! I am—I am—I am—[110]

This revision of the confession's opening lines demands that the narrator must, quite literally, go back to the beginning. In the rhyming slippage of "a spy, a sleeper, a spook" into "a lie, a keeper, a book," the narrator collapses his sense of self with his textual confession, suggesting that the crisis of representation that plagues him is indeed a crisis of form. To truly understand his representational failure, the narrator himself must identify what hides in plain sight within his confession. To demonstrate the necessity of the confession despite the multiple revisions and ensuing interrogation that evince its failure, the novel makes some of its most jarring and fascinating formal transmutations. Eschewing a literal recapitulation of the textual confession, the novel instead adopts the very forms within it that rendered him "representationally dead" to facilitate this return.[111] At first, the refusal to abandon confession, textbook, and screenplay appears quite strange. Why continue to engage these forms that have been so thoroughly proven to buttress systems of racist, colonialist, and capitalist domination? Why invest so much into

[110] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 337-8.
[111] Xiang, "The Ethnic Author Represents," 420.

forms that invest in the exterior overdetermination of marginalized subjects? We can begin to limn an answer in the novel's formal and thematic commitment to dialectical thinking.

Throughout this chapter I have emphasized indeterminacy, discontinuity, and erasure as defining features of the narrator's characterization, the contingent nature of truth and the self for the colonial subject, and the novel's formal structure; I have repeatedly explicated the narrator's inability to recognize and represent himself in terms of fragmentation and contradiction. While these terms might be seen as signaling a cynical and fatalistic resignation to the inevitability of representational incompleteness and inertia, a dialectical approach to the novel suggests otherwise. Dialectical thinking considers the "whole world, natural, historical, intellectual, [as] represented as a *process*, i.e., as in constant motion, change transformation, development," writes Friedrich Engels, "and the attempt is made to trace out the internal connection that makes *a continuous whole* of all this movement and development."[112] Contradiction does not impede this motion but is constitutive of it: "Motion itself is a contradiction: even simple mechanical change of position can only come about through a body being at one and the same moment of time both in one place and in another place, being in one and the same place and also not in it. And the continuous origination and simultaneous solution of this contradiction is precisely what motion is."[113] Contradiction must be understood not as two discrete opposing entities or processes, but as a moving unity comprised of parts "as inseparable as they are opposed."[114]

I return to Lukács' postulation of contradiction and totality as essential to the novel form. For all the narrator's despair at his fragmented identity, opposing sympathies, and cleaved nation,

[112] Friedrich Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science,* (Progress Publishers, 1947), Accessed February 15, 2025, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/preface.htm#c3. Here Engels' analysis of the dialectics of nature draws on Marx's materialist inversion of Hegel's idealist dialectics.
[113] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*.
[114] Engels, *Anti-Dühring*. Engels calls this the Law of the Interpenetration of Opposites, but it is more commonly referred to by Lenin's term, The Unity of Opposites.

the post-confessional portion of the novel insists on a recuperation and resolution of these parts upon pain of torture. The dialectical method as deployed by Marx aims to understand society as a whole—a totality of relations and processes—rather than isolated parts. The contradiction of the novel form is that it "still thinks in terms of totality" despite its place in the capitalist "age in which extensive totality of life is no longer directly given."[115] To "uncover and construct the concealed totality of life," Lukács argues, the novel must enact "a strict compositional and architectural significance" that demonstrates a "paradoxical fusion of heterogenous and discrete components."[116] The completeness of the novel is not, then, drawn from the world it seeks to represent, but from its literary composition: of "structural categories…[that] constitutively coincide with the world as it is today;"[117] of a "central figure in whose life all the important extremes in the world of the novel converge;" and of a vision of "the world in its contradictory dynamics."[118]

Given the religious reverberations across *The Sympathizer*—such as Catholicism as a tool of colonial domination, the double significance of confessional practice, the "original sin" of his mother's impregnation by his priest father, as well as the blind faith of the Communists who have come to power in Vietnam— Lukács's vivid declaration that "[t]he novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" feels particularly apt when considered alongside the

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[115] Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostok (Merlin Press, 1971), 56. There is a body of criticism that finds *Theory of the Novel* too nostalgically preoccupied with a bygone utopian past (in the form of the Greek epic), and too interested in posing questions of theory rather than answering them. I find both aspects of Lukacs' work generative.
[116] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 60, 76.
[117] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 60.
[118] Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?," in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (Merlin Press, 1970), 142. As Fredric Jameson explains: "Thus the novel, as an attempt to give meaning to the outside world and to human experience, is always the result of subjective will, subjective willfulness. *It is not the world from which such unity springs*, as in the epic, but rather *the mind of the novelist which attempts to impose it*, by fiat." Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 173, emphasis mine.

plight of the narrator.[119] His internal indeterminacy, fragmentation, and contradictions are not a manifestation of independent personal shortcomings, but of a "complete world with all its vital contradictions" organizing itself around him.[120] And yet! The true brilliance of *The Sympathizer* is not simply in the mere description of these contradictions, but in its meticulous narration of the formal shifts enacted by the reveal of the textual confession as an object within the novel, as well as the narrator's return to that confession after he recognizes his participation in the erasure of the female agent. Lukács identifies temporality as the dialectical opposite of irony that "together form[s] a totality" in the composition of "a sequence of events that are already interpreted as being somehow related to one another."[121] In the many layers of the narrator's forced recounting of the past, *The Sympathizer* is able to construct that very "strict compositional and architectural significance" via the narration that Lukács argues is necessary to represent totality in all its motion and contradiction: "Description contemporizes everything. *Narration recounts the past*. […] With the loss of the art of narration, details cease to be transmitters of concrete aspects of the action…. Any artistic relationship to the composition as a whole is lost. The false contemporaneity in description brings a disintegration of the composition into disconnected and autonomous details… [which] has varied effects, all deleterious, on the representation of men's lives.[122]

The reading practice I have argued as essential to *The Sympathizer*—of finding that which hides in plain sight—is facilitated by the temporality of the confession, which demands a return to the past as an active, unsettled site; this shapes the novel's strategic formal shifts. Returning to the original confession after learning in horrifying detail the narrator's memory of

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[119] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 88.
[120] Lukács, "Narrate or Describe," 142.
[121] Eli Park Sorensen, "Novelistic Interpretation: The Traveling Theory of Lukács's Theory of the Novel," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 39, no. 1 (2009): 66.
[122] Lukács, "Narrate or Describe," 131-2.

female agent's rape illuminates it anew, the shifts in time "rub[bing] the sharp edges off each heterogenous fragment and establish[ing] a relationship—albeit an irrational and inexpressible one—between them."[123] Repeated metaphors, images, and allusive and intertextual references from the confession prove to be more than literary ornamentation, resurfacing and colliding in the narrator's recollection, producing from shattering fragmentation an arduously constructed totality. I particularly attend to the integration of the textbook and screenplay forms into the interrogation, as well as the reversal of the narrator's recognition of himself as irreconcilably victim to the two faces imposed upon him. In this reading of the final portion of the novel, I also analyze how *The Sympathizer* incorporates the dialectical process not only in the way it formally "incarnates the structure of thought that spawned it," but in the development of the narrator's sense of self and concluding adoption of an enigmatic and exuberant collective "we" identity.[124]

After a year of writing and revision under the watchful eye and blue pencil of the commandant, the narrator is summoned by the mysterious commissar to enter the "last stage of [his] reeducation," an "oral examination" to follow the "written examination" of his confession.[125] The commandant registers his unchanged dissatisfaction with the textual confession, particularly in the narrator's refusal to conform to his standards in form and content together. Where other prisoners readily "confessed to being a puppet soldier, an imperialist lackey, a brainwashed stooge, a colonized comprador, or a treacherous henchman," the narrator resists such an uncomplicated confession.[126] Though his confession is marked with ruminations on the contradictions of Western political ideology and admissions of its appeal to his sympathies, he does so in a style the commandant disdains as "not clear, not succinct, not direct

[123] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 125.
[124] Prabhu, 390.
[125] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 310, 312.
[126] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 311.

not simple" in its condemnation of the West. In the narrator's refusal to quote from appropriately revolutionary Vietnamese poets and leaders and commitment to the verbose style of "bourgeois intellectuals," the commandant declares, "[Y]our language betrays you."[127]

The commandant's contemptuous appraisal of the narrator's *language* as traitorous (rather than his thoughts or actions) blurs the boundary between the narrator himself and his confession, suggesting that the narrator and his self-representation are ultimately interchangeable. The inseparability of the literary and the material is magnified hundredfold during the climactic interrogation, Man informing the narrator the reason for his confessional failure: "[Y]our story betrays you, or rather, you betray yourself."[128] In Man's insistence to go back to what is already known, it is the narrator's body rather than the narrative body of the textual confession that must be laid bare and read for the truth. The process of interrogation is further articulated in the language of reading practice and literary analysis, the camp doctor explaining that the lack of sleep will allow the narrator to "observe himself as someone else" in a way similar to "press[ing] [our noses] up against the pages of a book, the words right in front of us but which we cannot read."[129] As Roberta Wolfson so succinctly summarizes: "[T]orture is rendered textual."[130]

As the narrator grasps for a sense of self, babbling, "No! I am—I am—I am—", the narrative voice abruptly shifts from first-person panicked desperation to a third-person perspective. Even in the third-person narrative voice the narrator is a figure of indeterminacy, slipping and sliding among the monikers "the prisoner," "the pupil," and "the patient."[131] The

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[127] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 319.
[128] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 332.
[129] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 342.
[130] Wolfson, 82.
[131] I continue to refer to the protagonist as "the narrator" for the sake of consistency and clarity, even though he is not directly narrating his torture in the same way he does the rest of his confession (that is, through the first-person).

interrogation begins with a series of direct questions, presented in the text in the question-and-answer form of catechism that recalls his violent experiences of Sunday school with his father. "Correct" answers are presented within the catechetical form corresponding to its question, whereas "incorrect" answers are relegated to the following paragraph, leaving the question unanswered in the text. For example, the interrogation's opening three questions all directly ask the narrator to identify himself in one way or another:

> Q. What is your name?
>
> Had he forgotten his name? No, impossible! He had given himself his American name. As for his native name, his mother, the only one who understood him, had given it to him, his father no help, his father who never called him son or by his name, even in class simply calling him *you*. No, he could never forget his name, and when at last it came to him, he freed his tongue from its gummy bed and said it aloud.[132]

Only able to produce the semblance of an answer, the narrator's name is once again withheld from the reader. Though the narrator cannot recognize himself, he successfully recognizes the *KUBARK* manual brandished by Man. It is not just any copy of the manual, but is in fact, the narrator's own, full of his marginal annotations. In spite of how "good" a student he was in Claude's CIA interrogation course, the narrator's dutiful "memoriz[ation] [of the manual's] plot, characters, and devices" is not enough to prepare him to be on the receiving end of its methods; the narrator recalls that even Claude remarked that the techniques "work even if you know what is being done to you."[133] The use of the CIA's methods on the narrator—methods the narrator used on his own countrymen while maintaining his cover—suggests that the sympathy he believes so powerful as to simultaneously alienate him from society and teach him everything about it has its limits. The suffering of the female agent cannot be fully accounted for by sympathy alone; sympathy facilitates no acceptance of responsibility, produces no counternarratives to misrepresentation or erasure, and effects no material change. To confront a

[132] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 341-2.
[133] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 345.

past in which one has caused pain in others is a necessarily agonizing process, that when endured reveals the various overlapping conditions that produced and obfuscated that painful past. "Suffering *for* the people is what we chose," Man reminds the narrator, "because we sympathized so much *with* their suffering."[134] The pain of the interrogation is, in a peculiar way, a kind of recognition that the narrator has heretofore been denied. Man has not organized the interrogation solely based on the *KUBARK* manual—that is, the exact instructions as written by the CIA—but specifically on the narrator's *own* annotations of that text. From their encoded letters, to the textual confession, to the *KUBARK* marginalia, Man has been the narrator's most consistent and critical reader in a world full of people, institutions, and nations that insist upon misreading and misrepresenting him. In this sense, we can see another dimension of Fanon and Coulthard's emphasis on the turn towards the self in order to find liberaton. Is there a better dialectical pair than the two-faced man and the faceless man? Who better to enact mutual recognition?

While the narrator endures the implementation of schedule irregularities, electric shocks, and sleep deprivation, his mind churns in search of the memory of his first taste of his mother's breast milk as a baby. As he contemplates the lack of a memory corresponding to the event he knows to have happened, Man resumes his questioning and the narrator begins responding "correctly," his answers now represented within the question-and-answer form of his CIA textbooks and Catholic catechism:

> Q. I said, how are you feeling?
> A. I can't feel my body.
> Q. But can you feel your mind.
> A. My mind feels everything.
> Q. Now do you remember?
> A. What?
> Q. Do you remember what you have forgotten?

[134] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 337.

Weeping and begging for sleep, it is the taste of his own tears that produces the "slight saline change to the liquid constitution of his amnesia" and forces the suppressed memory of the female agent to the surface: "An obelisk slowly emerged from his ocean of disremembering, the resurrection of what he did not even know was dead since it had been buried at sea."[135] The memory arises not from mere sympathy, but from the bodily experience wrought by the "architectural" changes to his textual form. It dawns on him that he has not *forgotten* the female agent but *disremembered* her, an act of intention and purpose.

Mediation is one of the major strategies deployed by the novel to highlight the processes by which historical narratives are produced, manipulated, and erased. Just as the textual confession is mediated through the revisionary direction of the commandant and the implementation of the *KUBARK* manual is mediated through Man's reading of the narrator's marginalia, the narrator's recollection of the rape of the female agent is mediated in the text through an audio recording of his verbal confession, listened to and transcribed "later, sometime in the bright future."[136] The narrator's first-person perspective resumes in the recorded recollection, signaling for the first time an acceptance of his personal role in her violent fate.

The narrator's brief representation of the arrest of the female agent in his primary confession narratively configures the encounter as one between two performers playing out their respective roles to maintain the secrecy of the revolutionary cause: his as "the agent of an oppressive regime" and hers as the pitiful civilian insisting, "Please, sirs! [...] I'm innocent! I swear!"[137] By articulating their interaction in these terms, the narrator presumes a shared equal lack of agency as actors playing out their assigned roles, thereby divesting himself of the memory of her brutal torture and his part in it. Exposed by Man's interrogation, the narrator's

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[135] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 347.
[136] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 349.
[137] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 10.

recollection of the female agent's rape is thoroughly cinematic not just in its vivid imagery, but in its very setting; the reader learns that when not selling celluloid spectacle to foreign dignitaries, the local movie theatre is repurposed by the CIA and collaborating Southern military police to produce its own spectacle of pain.

The rape of the female agent is rendered in graphic detail. Unlike the Auteur's painterly aestheticization of Mai's rape onscreen in *The Hamlet*, the violence of the female agent's torture is bereft of the artistic flair that encourages the reader to keep watching in spite of the violence.[138] Through the narrator's eyes, the police officers, "average specimens of national manhood," are depicted in repulsive detail: the way they laughingly argue the order in which they will violate the agent, "pumping [themselves] furiously;" the "sunken cheeks of [their] naked buttocks" as they close in on the bound, stripped, and weeping agent; and multiple moments where in full view is the "stubby length of the ugliest part of most adult male bodies" and "three engorged members [that] differed in length, one pointing up, another down, the third bent to the side." Unlike the Viet Cong agents of *The Hamlet* whose brutality is sensationalized through a series of strategic close ups, long shots, and cutaways, the narrator recounts the unfolding gang rape in agonizing moment-to-moment narration, complete with the officers "climbing awkwardly onto the table," "grunting and pounding," and "shuffling around the table with their pants around their ankles." Unlike Mai, fully visible to her cinematic spectators (aside

[138] So brutal is the cinematic rape of Mai in *The Hamlet* that the narrator notices in the movie theatre (a real one, in Thailand—not the site of the female agent's rape) that the "mothers who had not bothered to turn away their children's faces from the gutting, shooting, hacking, and decapitation now clapped their hands over the eyes of their babes" (289). The perversely artful long shots alternate with leering close-ups, showing in full gruesome detail Mai's "battered face with its howling mouth and bloody nose, one eye so swollen it had closed completely" (287). The lurid detail with which the narrator recounts the scene, complete with Mai's desperate screams and the jeers of the rapists, contrasts with its narrative mise en abyme: the rape of the female communist agent, which fails to feature in the body of the confession and is only revealed during interrogation by Man.

for a few deliberate limb placements), the female agent is almost completely out of the narrator's line of sight once the officers begin "jostl[ing] one another and obstruct[ing] my view."[139]

The scene, described over nearly three full pages, is difficult to read, not just in content but in style. Through the indirect and figurative language of the narrator's confession, the violence of memory is in some ways "muted" and "out of focus," forcing the reader to pull the exact nature of the vicious events into focus.[140] A reference to an "eleventh finger," for example, might be easily passed over in its metaphorical obfuscation of the sexual nature of what is about to transpire; the reader must slow down enough to understand the reference to the policeman's penis. Multiple times during the rape the female agent is "silenced" by an officer standing near the table where she is bound; it is up to the reader look long enough (that is, read closely enough) to decipher the sickening truth of the scene: the standing officer is orally raping the female agent in addition to the officer on top of her. By obstructing literal and explicit actions through figurative language, the novel paradoxically forces the reader to work harder to make sense of the senseless violence in front of them. Of course, might wrestle with the desire to look away as the crapulent major does, "clapping his hands over his eyes" and crying "I can't look!"[141] However, to do so would be to participate in the very erasure and denial for which the narrator is being interrogated. The spectator is a part of the whole of the scene, the novel argues, not a discrete and disconnected observer. Looking—and looking away—is an act of participation. In his textual confession the narrator looks away from the horrific movie theatre gang rape and his role in it; the fate of the female agent is misrepresented in the narrator's vague self-affirmation that they "both" knew what her fate would be. The novel's critical attention to the material

[139] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 350-1.
[140] Amanda R. Gradisek, "Refocusing on Women and the Obscene in Viet Nguyen's The Sympathizer," *WLA* 32 (2020): 19.
[141] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 351.

dimensions of representation in all its forms applies to the incongruity between the truth of what the narrator witnessed versus what he represented in his confession as truth, furthering his complicity in the violation of the female agent.

Every man present in the movie theatre divests himself of accountability. When the narrator pleads with Claude to intervene in the impending rape, Claude simply replies, "Talk to the major. *He's* in charge. I'm *just* the advisor." To this the crapulent major sputters, "There's *nothing* I can do about it. Nothing!"[142] The powerlessness pretended by the crapulent major before and during the rape is thrown into ugly relief after its completion, making sure everyone knows that he "ordered" the policemen to mop up after themselves despite their irritated grumbling. As they clean, the police officers taunt the narrator's shock at the proceedings, shrugging, "Somebody else would do it. So why not us?"[143] In a particularly revolting violation, one of the policemen snatches the untouched Coca-Cola bottle from the narrator's hands and shakes it vigorously, forcibly penetrating the female agent and cackling as the liquid sprays in and outside of her. As the policemen "played doctor" with the bottle, still penetrating the female agent, Claude once again assures the narrator of their innocence in the depravity: "Just so you know? I didn't teach them that. The bottle, I mean."[144] This fits in perfectly with the reassurances the narrator recounts in the confession in which Claude validates his complicity in the deaths of his countrymen: first in the suicide of the detained PAVN agent known as "the Watchman," interrogated by the narrator in one of Claude's CIA courses and triggered by the narrator's threats to produce a false confession of homosexuality in the Watchman's name—to which Claude responds, "Even I didn't think of this;" and second in the narrator's assassination of romantic rival and outspokenly critical journalist Sonny—to which Claude comforts the anguished

[142] Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, 349, emphasis mine.
[143] Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, 352.
[144] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 353.

narrator that it is not murder because "[i]t's in the book." Whether the violence is in the textbook or not, the very existence of the textbook and the truth it teaches putatively absolves the teacher and student—here Claude and the narrator—of personal responsibility. "They came up with it all on their own," Claude remarks, signaling his success as their teacher of the perverse and simultaneously distancing himself from the direct consequences.[145]

And yet! There is another key contradiction. The narrator's recovery of the rape of the female agent from the "sea of disremembering" might indeed be read as merely perpetuating the female agent's marginalization within the narrative, as it centers the narrator's actions for the purpose of his own reeducation. I argue, however, that such an analysis neglects what is revealed to be hiding in plain sight in the narrator's initial confession—which can only be made visible by the act of *dis*remembering. As I have discussed, the significance of indeterminacy and naming are deeply entrenched in the narrator's confession and his endlessly fragmented sense of self: because he cannot recognize or represent himself according to a single name or category, he has two faces and two minds; because he has two faces and two minds, he is alienated by everyone on both sides; because he is alienated by everyone, he cannot recognize or represent himself. He is thoroughly alone and without peer. However, returning to the moments the female agent is mentioned in the confession after the narrator remembers her fate enacts a key narrative reveal: the two faces of the female agent.

Early in his written confession, the narrator remembers the General's order to produce a list of Special Branch officers who would escape Saigon with the Americans, a task that he acknowledges creates by extension a list of those who would be left behind at the mercy of the encroaching communist forces; it is in the midst of this task the female agent is first represented. The narrator keeps on his desk the female agent's file which includes two photographs: one from

[145] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 353.

the time of her arrest and one from three years later, "her eyes faded and her hair thinning." For the reader who has witnessed true fate through the interrogation, the narrator's assessment that Special Branch "prison cells were time machines," aging the detainees "much faster than they usually would" rings especially hollow;[146] it is not just the time detained that has depleted the life from her appearance, but the torture that the narrator refuses to name—gang rape—that has torn her apart, generating her two faces. Her two faces, captured in full visibility in her prisoner file, are material and embodied, borne of a series of violations (indeed, the reader can reasonably assume that the rape the narrator witnessed was not the only torture she endured).

The female agent is in fact a woman of two faces, unnamed, unrecognized, and misrepresented in the "truth" of the narrator's confession. In this context, the narrator's refusal to name himself, to insist upon being "nobody," reveals a desire to deny his complicity: "Somebody must have something done to him! Was I that somebody? No! […] I was only mistaken to be that somebody, because I was, I told him, or thought I did, a nobody."[147] The narrator tries evade responsibility for everything that happened to the female agent by reasserting his narrative anonymity and appropriating his negation by his father; if he truly is "nobody" (the absence of a person) then all he has done "nothing" (the absence of an action). The female agent, also nameless in the narrative, makes a different stand during her torture. As the three policemen converge around her, penises exposed, they taunt her. "Let's start easy," one says as he climbs on top of her, "what's your name?" She first says "nothing," but then the narrator observes "something primitive [awaken] in her," and she looks directly at the policeman and declares, "My surname is Viet and my given name is Nam."[148]

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[146] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 10.
[147] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 337-8.
[148] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 350.

Her assertion directly references Trinh T. Minh-ha's 1989 film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*; much like *The Sympathizer*, Minh-ha's film deliberately defies easy categorization, self-reflexively playing with the boundaries between documentary and fiction filmmaking, performance and lived experience, and truth and history. The first half of the film is comprised of a series of ostensible interviews with women in Vietnam, dressed in the simple and somber attire favored by communist revolutionaries, who share details of their lives and families before, after, and during the Vietnam War. However, as the film progresses, the interviewees behave in an increasingly bizarre manner: one woman, for example, paces back and forth beyond the frame of the camera while speaking; another turns away from the camera altogether, speaking with her back to the viewer. The second half of the film reveals that the women presented as interviewees are in fact amateur actresses of the Vietnamese diaspora, performing the words of Vietnamese women interviewed in the 1970s by Mai Thu Vân. The viewer watches as Trinh asks them how they would like to be represented in the film, and the rest of the film follows as they go about their daily lives in their preferred attire.

Rather than attempt to produce a film that claims to "correctly" or "accurately" represent the objectified and silenced Vietnamese women, Trinh's film explores the stakes of such representation and what possibilities might arise. By interviewing the actresses about their own lives, the film asks viewers to understand them not just as performers part of a filmmaking process, but also the filmmaking process as part of a larger cultural project of discursive production of truth. The juxtaposition of the actresses playing the interviewees and then "playing" themselves demonstrates how "whether we act or whether we tell our own stories, speech and self-presentation are always in some way 'staged' and imbued with fictional

elements."[149] The stories performed by the women are mediated several times over through translation: the English lines interpreted by the actresses are translated by Trinh from French; the French was translated from Vietnamese by Mai Thu Vân, who conducted the original interviews. Lan Duong writes that at the very level of language, "the film alludes to there being neither an original text that bears originary meaning for the film nor an originary bearer—a woman who is unproblematically given voice—to whom meaning can be affixed."[150]

Invoking *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* as a key intertext, *The Sympathizer* directly addresses the boundaries of form and narration that it cannot transcend or trespass. The narrator cannot speak for the female agent, because to do so would not just be disingenuous, but also "tantamount to an epistemological act of colonization" that actually silences and misrepresents the Other by "regulating what the Other is allowed to mouth" under the guise of "giving voice." By embracing the paradox that representation simultaneously "empowers and liberates [the subject], and, conversely, coerce[s] or [is] used to oppress that same subject," Katherine Gracki argues that the film "challenges ideologies that legitimize the appropriation of words and images by the powerful at the expense of the powerless…expos[ing] not only the limits of power in ethnographic and cinematographic traditions in general, but also the limits of its own power."[151] In the case of *The Sympathizer*, the representational potential is limited by the narrator's gender and sexual identity that shapes how he moves through and experiences the world. He has been privileged by the "heteropatriarchal nationalism" that favors "masculinist narratives…of wartime soldiering and postwar suffering;" this heteropatriarchal system, Duong argues, inherently

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[149] Katherine Gracki, "True Lies: Staging the Ethnographic Interview in Trinh T. Minh-Ha's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989)," *Pacific Coast Philology* 36 (2001): 51, https://doi.org/10.2307/3595469.
[150] Lan Duong, "Traitors and Translators: Reframing Trinh T. Minh-Ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*," *Discourse* 31, no. 3 (2009): 196.
[151] Gracki, 51, 57.

"censures Vietnamese American women for speaking out against such narratives,"[152] creating the representational lacuna that *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* explores and critiques—and that *The Sympathizer* addresses from an alternate perspective.

Next to the female agent's defiant assertion of her connection to the nation and refusal to be recognized by the policemen, even when faced with the immanent reality of gang rape that will lead to her two faces, the narrator's "disremembering" and insistence that he is "nobody" rings especially cowardly and shameful. She has been detained and repeatedly attacked in the pursuit of names: first in the names of the Special Branch officers to be delivered to Man, second in the torture to extract the names of her revolutionary comrades, and finally in the rapist police officer's mocking inquiry of her name and the subsequent rage with which he violates her upon hearing her unflinching response. By entwining naming in every step of her torture, the novel "underscores how representation depends on recognition,"[153] and the narrator is forced to confront his double failure in this regard: "While I chose to live two lives and be a man of two minds…given how people had always called me a bastard. Our country itself was cursed, bastardized, partitioned into north and south."[154]

Conclusion: The Final Cut

The narrator recalls the female agent's face as she lay strapped to the table, silent and brutalized: "She was staring directly at me… [but] I had the feeling she did not see me at all."[155]

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[152] Duong, "Traitors and Translators," 197. It is also worth noting that Trinh takes the film's title from the Vietnamese anticolonial resistance leader, Phan Bội Châu, who said that a single woman must respond to any young man's inquiry about her family and marital status with, "My surname is Viet, given name is Nam." Duong argues that in her appropriation of this charge that women "proclaim her union with the nation when responding to heterosexual courtship," Trinh exposes "how the Vietnamese female subject is not only caught in the heteronormative binds of the familial and the national but also holds no singular identity" (198). In this way, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*—like *The Sympathizer*—extends its indictment beyond the objectifying Western discourses, also naming Vietnamese nationalism as perpetuating the silencing of and presuming to speak for Vietnamese women.

[153] Debra Shostak, *Fictive Fathers in the Contemporary American Novel* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2020), 224.

[154] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 361.

[155] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 351.

Under the eyes of the female agent the narrator is hypervisible and invisible, recognized and unrecognized, made and unmade—and the narrative voice crumbles. What follows is a nearly two-page run-on sentence, a list hurtling through events of time and history as the narrator begs for the release of sleep:

> "[I]f you could see that I have nothing left to confess…if my own people did not suspect me, if they saw me as one of them…if the Americans hadn't come to save us from ourselves, if we had not bought what they sold…if the French had never sought to civilize us…if the British had defeated the rebels of the new world, if the natives had simply said, Hell no, on first seeing the white man…if Adam and Eve still frolicked in the Garden of Eden, if the dragon lord and the fairy queen had not given birth to us…if history had never happened, neither as farce nor as tragedy, if the serpent of language had not bitten me, if I had never been born, if my mother was never cleft, if you needed no more revisions, and if I saw no more of these visions, please, could you please just let me sleep?[156]

In this rambling plea, the narrator for the first time beholds himself within the totality of the past, all of its historical processes and relations. The cleaving of his mother that resulted in his conception, the colonization of the Americas, the fall from Eden, his social and familial alienation as a child, and the domination of Vietnam by the Chinese, the French, and the Americans are not discrete historical events, but parts of the same ultimately related whole. Forced by Man's interrogation to reckon with his participation in the rape of the female agent, the previously "concealed totality of life" is "uncover[ed] and reconstruct[ed]" by the narrator's feverish, unbroken, and non-chronological what-ifs of countless moments ranging in scale from the intimately personal to the mythic and Biblical.[157]

Beholding this new totality, the narrator is pulled from his body and watches the continuing interrogation from above, a higher plane: above himself, above his interrogators, and even above the ghosts of the crapulent major and Sonny who have followed him from the US. The narrative, too, changes form. The scene is now rendered as a screenplay, the characters listed

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[156] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 353-4.
[157] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 60, 76.

accordingly as "THE COMMANDANT," "THE COMMISSAR," and "THE DOCTOR." However, this is no traditional screenplay. Gone is the third-person narrative voice of the earlier interrogation that clinically observed "the prisoner"/"the pupil"/"the patient;" the narrator's first-person voice has returned, rendering himself as "I" in the scene text and "MYSELF" in the dialogue. The adoption of the first-person breaks basic conventions of screenwriting in terms of audience: who is the *screenplay* for, versus who is the *film* for? Screenplays are written to facilitate the making of a film, providing scene text with setting information, action notes, character cues, and scene transitions in addition to dialogue to enable the director, producers, actors, and other filmmaking staff to properly stage each scene; for this reason, "the relative frequencies of first-person singular and second-person pronouns are almost non-existent in scene text," as the story "from a personal perspective or in terms of the verbal interaction of characters" does not serve the filmmakers' practical needs.[158] Furthermore, the audience of the film "will always be...watching from the fourth wall—all of whom will be thinking in terms of 'he' and 'she,'" making it "nearly impossible" (and functionally pointless) to write a story for the screen in the first person.[159] The first-person truth required by the confession collides with the formal dictates of the screenplay, further emphasizing the instability of truth and its representations.

The commitment to the first-person is key to the novel's enactment of the narrator's dialectical progress. The depth of the narrator's bifurcation is vividly illustrated; he is at once the "divided, tormented body below" and the "placid consciousness floating high above" as a result of Man and the doctor's interrogative "vivisection." However, this is unlike the fragmented

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[158] Warren Buckland, "The Motion Picture Screenplay as Data: Quantifying the Stylistic Differences Between Dialogue and Scene Text," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies*, ed. Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo, and Claus Tieber (Springer International Publishing, 2023), 161–2, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20769-3_8.
[159] Asher Garfinkel, *Screenplay Story Analysis* (Simon and Schuster, 2010), 44.

narrator from the beginning of the confession who was susceptible to the judgement of the world as articulated by the Commandant: "You would be better off if you only saw things from one side. The only cure for being a bastard is to take a side."[160] In the screenplay form, we see a burgeoning unity between these cleaved parts of himself in their textual coexistence: the corporeal speaking of "MYSELF" in the dialogue and the incorporeal "I" watching "clairvoyant and clairaudient" from above in the scene text. The narrator, "simultaneously subjugated and elevated," experiences both beings of himself in all his unified contradiction.[161]

Pushed by Man, the Commandant, and the doctor, the narrator realizes in horror the true nature of his crime:

> THE COMMANDANT
> You can sleep when I'm satisfied with your confession.
> MYSELF
> But I've done nothing!
> THE COMMANDANT
> Exactly.[162]

Given the novel's emphasis on the imbrication of the literary and the material, it is fitting that the truth with which the narrator must come to terms is formal and rhetorical. Before remembering of the brutalization of the female agent, the narrator incorrectly answered, "nothing," to Man's repeated question, Ho Chih Min's slogan for Vietnamese revolution: "What is more precious than freedom and independence?" No longer able to suppress the memory of the female agent's torture and his true complicity in doing "nothing," the narrator understands why his previous answer was incorrect: "How could I forget that *every truth meant at least two things*, that slogans were empty suits draped on the corpse of an idea? The suits depended on how one wore them,

[160] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 314.
[161] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 355.
[162] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 356.

and this suit was now worn out."[163] Answering "nothing" without truly understanding the action therein—of doing *no thing*—is the reason the narrator failed Man's examination over and over again; when the narrator truly understands through the pain of torture that he is "not being punished or reeducated for the things I had done, but for the thing I had *not done*," his answer takes on a new meaning.[164] Confession, as the Commandant quipped to the narrator, is as much about style as it is about content; it is not merely the words delivered that matters, but the meaning and truth that forms and informs them.

The narrator's comprehension of the "paradoxical fact that nothing is, indeed, something" depended on his memory of the female agent. The examination, however, does not end with that or the narrator himself; Man, made faceless by a US napalm strike, is the two-faced narrator's dialectical opposite and is therefore as much impacted by the struggle and conflict of contradiction as the narrator—each one requires the other to act upon him. Man's realization that "[w]hile nothing is more precious than independence and freedom, *nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom!*" undermines the very cause for which he has sacrificed his life, his face, and his family.[165] The addition of "also" to the double meaning of "nothing" gives Ho Chi Minh's political slogan a grim new meaning: rather than independence and freedom being most precious because there is nothing—an absence of anything—above it, independence and freedom are in fact worthless because nothing—the positive presence of nothing—is more precious. Such is the painful "joke" of the communist regime as witnessed by Man, led by those "who say nothing with great piousness" and who perform ideological purity by parroting Marx, Lenin, and Mao while also "ask[ing] everyone else to die for nothing." The revolution's promise of national uplift, agency, and self-determination free from the influence of France, the U.S., and

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[163] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 371.
[164] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 357.
[165] Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, 375, emphasis original.

other would-be imperial nations has gone unfulfilled. In reality, the newly-powerful government officials were only too happy to take over the systems evacuated by the outsiders, to stay the course of domination and control over the people regardless of their shared national identity.

The reeducation camp is a key site where these dynamics play out. "I will tell you what cannot be found in any book," Man weeps. "[T]he committees and the commissars do not care about remaking these prisoners. Everyone knows this and no one will say it aloud."[166] While revising the confessional text, the narrator shares his observation that the revolutionaries in the camp seemed to fear each other despite their shared affiliation, asking the Commandant: "Aren't we all comrades?" The Commandant responds, "Yes…but not all comrades have the same level of ideological consciousness," exposing that the supposedly egalitarian ethos of communism exists in the camp in theory (in the forced reeducation of the prisoners) but not in practice (the hierarchies of power as maintained by the "reeducators").[167] The narrator's passing reference to a case of syphilis contracted by one of his camp guards reveals another gruesome power structure that has remained standing despite the promises of the new regime: wives of detained prisoners, unable to bribe guards with food or money, are forced to trade sex to visit their husbands. The very guards that participated in the narrator's torture over his time in the camp supposedly in the name of justice for the female agent themselves actively participate in the sexual coercion and abuse of their own countrywomen.

This violence of these abuses is perpetuated by the binary nature of the enduring representations of the Vietnam War: the US and Western representations that render the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao communists as barbarians and their casualties invisible or inevitable in the righteous fight against communism; versus the revolutionary Vietnamese

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[166] Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, 364.
[167] Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, 321.

representations of uncomplicated, ideologically pure collective liberation from French and American interference and cruelty. These binary logics obfuscate the painful truths that the novel forces us to "disremember:" of the complex and often contradictory dynamics of power that make one at once victimizer and victimized; of the pain that one inflicts upon their own, as the narrator did to the female agent, as Vietnamese society did to the narrator, as Northern and Southern forces alike did to each other; and of the reality that the native overthrow of an oppressive colonial regime is rarely followed by a dismantlement of its structures of power. "Now that we are powerful," Man bitterly remarks to the narrator, echoing a statement made by Bon in the textual confession, "we don't need the French or the Americans to fuck us over. We can fuck ourselves just fine."[168]

The realization of the "nothing" for which the revolution was waged pierces the narrator to his very core, recalling his first and most profound negation by his father—"He called me nothing"—that split him into his hazardous two faces and two minds. Man's body- and consciousness-splitting "final examination" forces the narrator to find unity in opposites through the double meaning of "nothing;" in this revelation the narrator is forcefully born anew, returning to the scene of his own birth in this transformation:

> I could see the invasion of my mother's womb by my father's dumb, masculine horde, a howling gang of helmeted, hellbent nomads intent on piercing the great wall of my mother's egg. From this invasion, the nothing that I was became the somebody that I am…. My cell divided, and divided, and divided again, until I was a million cells and more, until I was multitudes and multitudes, my own country, my own nation, the emperor and dictator of the masses of myself, commanding my mother's undivided attention.[169]

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[168] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 364. Bon's statement is: "You know what makes us human? … What makes us human is that we're the only creatures on this planet that can fuck ourselves" (245).

[169] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 367. The imagery of multiplying cells greatly resembles Engels' argument for the evidence of the laws of dialectics as they appear in nature: "[I]f such a grain of barley meets with conditions which are normal for it, if it falls on suitable soil, then under the influence of heat and moisture it undergoes a specific change, it germinates; the grain as such ceases to exist, it is negated, and in its place appears the plant which has arisen from it, the negation of the grain. But what is the normal life-process of this plant? It grows, flowers, is fertilised and finally once more produces grains of barley, and as soon as these have ripened the stalk dies, is in its turn negated. As a

In vivid and dense language echoing Engels' own writing on the laws of dialectics, the novel is propelled towards a new way of being; up until this moment of revelation, it has been marked by irreconcilable contradictions: the narrator in his warring sympathies and failed representations, the novel's form in its constant "incorporat[ion] of other narrative spaces," and the plethora of images and plot movements that "already contain its opposite," made visible "at any time through the narrator's irony or through a sudden reversal or revelation."[170] Through his interrogation, the body of the confession and the narrator's body collapse into each other, and the formal transformations (that is, qualitative transformations) undergone by the text—in narrative perspective, as textbook, as screenplay—are undergone by the narrator himself, preparing him for the final, crucial step: the negation of the negation. By understanding "*nothing is also more precious than independence and freedom*," the narrator is able to come to terms with "the inescapable, paradoxical doubleness of meaning" that he had heretofore rejected.[171] This newly embraced duplicity does not bifurcate but sublates—after this revelation, the narrator manually copies his original confession and adds the details of the interrogation, which altogether comprise the whole text of the novel.

In the novel's final act, the narrator textually enacts his revelation through a crucial narrative shift away from the singular "I" pronoun. In his original confession, the narrator ruminates on his alienation within Vietnamese and American society alike, directly addressing the Commandant's editorial comments:

> You have asked me what I mean when I say "we" or "us," as in those moments when I identify with the southern soldiers and evacuees on whom I was sent to spy. Should I not refer to those people, my enemies, as "them"? I confess that after having spent almost my

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result of this negation of the negation we have once again the original grain of barley, but not as a single unit, but ten-, twenty- or thirtyfold." Engels, *Anti-Duhring*.

[170] Prabhu, 394.

[171] Shostak, *Fictive Fathers*, 227.

> whole life in their company I cannot help but sympathize with them, as I do with many others. My weakness for sympathizing with others has much to do with my status as a bastard…. I credit my gentle mother with teaching me the idea that blurring the lines between us and them can be a worthy behavior. After all, if she had not blurred the lines between maid and priest…I would not exist.

In his pre-revelatory experience, the diametrical opposition between "us"/"we" and "them" is yet axis along which the narrator is excluded: as an undercover spy, he cannot identify with the communists for fear of being discovered, but if he identifies with the Special Branch forces he infiltrates, he fails his revolutionary reeducation; he cannot belong to the colonizing class of his French father because of the hypocrisy and scandal of his religious position, but his mixed-race parentage and bastardy bar him from the recognition of Vietnamese society; on the set of *The* Hamlet, he is neither a full member of the filmmaking crew nor one of the refugees working as extras; and as the Watchman so shrewdly points out, no matter expertly he demonstrates his understanding of "baseball standings, the awfulness of Jane Fonda, or the merits of the Rolling Stones versus the Beatles" and "mastery of [the English] language," or how successfully he interrogates Vietnamese prisoners on behalf of the CIA, he cannot fully belong to the quintessentially American "we" because of his race.[172] As binary logics demand, there is no space between the two option in front of him; language follows suit, with no way for him to identify his vacillating in-between-ness and two faces except for the solitary, unattached "I."

Transcribing his original confession, the narrator perceives himself in his disparate parts: the "I" who "develops a growing sympathy" as "I absorbed my own words," and "the man in these pages…with two minds" who thought he could represent "himself…and his own recalcitrant people."[173] As the narrator begins to truly recognize himself for the first time through his confession, he also recognizes Man as "my interrogator but also my only confidant," and "the

[172] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 7.
[173] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 373.

fiend that tortured me but also my friend." Sitting across from Man "still bisected into myself and another," the narrator "detect[s] a similar division in him, in the horrible void where a face had been;" in this moment, a mutual recognition is completed, a shared understanding of "the meaning of nothing" in all its presence and absence. The narrator abruptly adopts a collective "we" to encompass "me and myself," a totality only made possible by viewing every contradictory process and relation from above. This "we" is not homogenous but multitudinous, because "the true optical illusion was in seeing others and oneself as undivided and whole, as if being in focus was more real than being out of focus." This "we" embraces indeterminacy as a contradictory fact of life, accepting that "how we saw ourselves and how others saw us was often not the same" and the belief that "our reflection in the mirror was who we truly were" is a fundamental act of misrecognition.[174]

The third-person "we" is maintained through to the end of the novel. Each representational form appears once more, now under the enlightened eye of the narrator. The sympathy he develops for the two-minded part of himself that wrote his confession who could not understand that "such a [two-minded] man best belonged in a low-budget movie" directly revises the confession's opening lines that asserted his double-mindedness's place in life outside of film.[175] Forced by local cadres to produce endless confessions as they await their opportunity to leave Vietnam, the narrator mischievously ends each absurd "exercise in fiction" by writing "nothing was more precious than independence and freedom."[176] Gone is the grave weight of representation and truth from the narrator's initial confession, replaced by the knowledge that "every truth means two things." Before leaving the camp with Bon, Man presses into the narrator's hands his copy of Richard Hedd's *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of*

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[174] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 374.
[175] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 373.
[176] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 380.

Destruction, split down the spine into two halves and bound together by a rubber band. Though Dr. Hedd's text will still be the cipher for the letters between Man and the narrator, functioning as the key to unlocking the truth hidden in their communications, it is eclipsed by a far more complex and meaningful encoding text. The texts that comprise the novel that the narrator takes with him—the post-confessional transcription of the original confession and the added account of the interrogation and subsequent release—demand a reading practice that accounts for totality in all its contradictions without the foolish and unrealistic impulse to represent everything and everyone. Taken together as a complete whole, the full text of the novel both obscures the truth and contains the cipher to uncover it. That is, by reading the narrator's confession, followed by the interrogation, and then returning to the original confession, truth is formally and narratively revealed in its absence and its presence—hiding in plain sight.

The novel ends where we might typically expect such a narrative to begin—indeed, it ends on a revision of where the narrator's confession actually did begin, with an impending departure from Saigon with Bon. However, the enlightened and sublated multitudinous "we" narrator departs from the narrative temporality to which it was previously bound by the limits of form; unlike the confession that frames the narrative that requires a constant looking backwards, a reflecting on what is already known, and endless revisions of that knowledge, the narrator turns and ventures into the narratively uncharted territory of the future: "Tomorrow we *will find* ourselves among strangers, reluctant mariners of whom a tentative manifest can be written. Among us *will be* infants and children, as well as adults and parents…. Among us *will be* men and women." In looping anaphora, the narrator beholds the future not as the absence of a past, but as the presence of something yet to come; not the absence of recognition and representation, but the presence of a knowledge yet to be known. In the face of nothing, the multitudinous

narrator insists on the manifestation of a collective *some*thing, of "[t]housands more…like us, gripped by scandalous thoughts, extravagant hopes, and forbidden plots." Untethered from the ideas of truth, representation, and recognition—determined by the overlapping systems of racism and colonialism—that would fix him in place and time, the narrator can proclaim that no matter the form, "*We will live!*"[177]

[177] Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 382, emphasis original.

Chapter Two
Jam Session: Karen Tei Yamashita's Cacophonous Cartography of the Here and Now in *Tropic of Orange*

> By the time the apocalypse began, the world had already
> ended. It ended every day for a century or two. It ended, and another ending
> world spun in its place. It ended, and we woke up and ordered Greek coffees,
> drew the hot liquid through our teeth, as everywhere, the apocalypse rumbled,
> the apocalypse remembered, our dear, beloved apocalypse—it drifted
> slowly from the trees all around us, so loud we stopped hearing it.
> Franny Choi, "The World Keeps Ending, and the World Goes On"

"Before the apocalypse, there was the apocalypse of boats," writes poet Franny Choi, "boats of prisoners, boats cracking under sky-iron, boats making corpses / bloom like algae on the shore."[1] In the lines that follow, Choi catalogs a seemingly endless list of apocalypses, each alluding to instances of colonial or racial violence across space and time: "the apocalypse of pipelines legislating their way through sacred water" references the development of resource infrastructure that violates Indigenous sovereignty and endangers Indigenous life in its proliferation across Indigenous lands and extraction of resources; "the apocalypse of the dogs and the hoses" invokes the state-sanctioned and extralegal brutality inflicted upon Black activists to extinguish the Civil Rights movement; and the apocalypse of "the bombed mosque" conjures the eruption of Islamophobic hate crimes following the September 11 attacks and the War on Terror. Many if not all of the apocalypses are layered with multiple histories. The aforementioned apocalypse of "boats making corpses" could reasonably allude to a number of instances: the transatlantic slave trade; the trafficking of Asian indentured labor in the wake of abolition; the use of ships as floating political detention and torture centers, such as under the Pinochet regime of Chile or the Bush Administration of the US; or the waves of refugees—from

[1] Franny Choi, "The World Keeps Ending, and the World Goes On," *The Poetry Foundation*, December 2019, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/151513/the-world-keeps-ending-and-the-world-goes-on.

Vietnam, Cambodia, Haiti, Cuba, Syria, and countless more—who risk the open ocean to escape poverty, war, persecution, or genocide. The list, much like the poem itself, goes on.

Apocalypse is typically understood in the singular, as *the* end of the world; Choi's poem insists otherwise. It is dense with colonized, racialized, and gendered violences, the alternating anaphora of "before the apocalypse" and "there was the apocalypse " dizzying in the scope of ending worlds it unleashes. The world "*keeps*" ending, not just one apocalypse at a time as one might extrapolate from the seemingly singular invocation of "*the* apocalypse," but all at once and everywhere—and yet "the world goes on," bearing the innumerable apocalypses of the past alongside and within and overlapping with the ever-unfolding new ones. Historical violence and oppression are inescapable not because we constantly turn to look back upon it, but because it is from these thick, overlapping layers that the present is sculpted. Choi's apocalyptic repetition casts the present as a site of accumulation and pressure, where histories of violence do not recede but actively structure what it means to endure, relate, and make meaning. Rather than dwell on possible redemption or an immanent final collapse, the poem addresses it in the density of *now*—a present tense already crowded with endings.

Like Choi's poem, Karen Tei Yamashita's 1997 novel *Tropic of Orange* presents a world of constantly unfolding apocalypses, many of which are inaugurated by "boats making corpses." Declaiming to the peoples across Latin America, the enigmatic Arcangel attempts to predict the arrival of the next apocalypse by calculating a series of fifty-two-year cycles from the first apocalypse. After declaring Christopher Columbus's 1492 arrival to the Americas as "that last greatest doom that marked / the end of the world as we know it," he pauses to qualify the definitiveness of that date. "However…it was possible to judge the first doom…as having occurred in 1494 when Columbus discovered Jamaica," he amends, "or in 1498 when he

discovered Trinidad and Venezuela." He continues, and the list of apocalypses unfurls like a litany, each additional entry adding to the unholy archive of conquest:

> In 1524, Giovanni da Verazano discovered North Carolina and the New York harbor, and later, in 1528, he discovered the site of the Panama Canal. In 1534, Jacques Cartier discovered Canada, the Saint Lawrence River, and Quebec. In 1513, Vasco Nunez de Balboa discovered the Pacific Ocean. In 1542, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo discovered the islands of California, Santa Catalina, and San Clemente and the bays of San Diego and Santa Monica and the Bay of Smoke of San Pedro. In 1602, Sebastian Vizcaino discovered the Bay of Monterey. In 1610, Henry Hudson discovered the Hudson Bay. In 1621, the Pilgrims discovered Plymouth Rock. There was no escape!

As the past apocalypses accumulate, so too do the potential dates for the ultimate doomsday he prophesizes. If "[e]very year / there has been a historic discovery of our lands" that ends the world, then every year of the future carries that same apocalyptic potential.[2] For the Indigenous peoples of the Americas—as well as the peoples trafficked across the seas as exploited labor or displaced refugees (more apocalypses)—the so-called Age of Discovery is not the dawn of a new era of progress, but the beginning of a series of overlapping and repetitive ends: the end of sovereignty, of traditional kinship ties, of relation to the land, of cultural continuity, of memory, and of life itself. Conquest is not a singular act confined to a distant past or place—it is number of all-encompassing cycles of catastrophe whose relentless repetition, as Patrick Wolfe reminds us, establishes settler colonialism as a structure rather than an event.

Arcangel accordingly implores us to "[l]ook to the past and know the doom that awaits you!"[3] In many ways, Arcangel's insistence upon the past resonates with the previous chapter's discussion of *The Sympathizer*, which demands within and beyond its diegesis that we exhume the past in order to truly understand ourselves and governing structures of power in all their essential contradictions. Within the narrative, the narrator is forced on pain of torture (twice) to plumb the depths of his memory to produce a confession, the form that structures the novel and

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[2] Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1997), 45-6.
[3] Yamashita, 46.

inherently necessitates a reexamination of the past for resolution—exemplified by Man's pointed question to the narrator: "Don't you see how everything in need of confession is already known?" One might interpret this question as directed at the reader as well—a prompt from Viet Thanh Nguyen to critically examine why a novel published in 2015 turns entirely to the 1970s to consider the not just the misrepresentations of the Vietnam War, but what is elided by its representations altogether.

However, *Tropic of Orange* takes a different tack, refusing both historical hindsight and speculative futurity in favor of immersing the reader in the rhythms and textures of its own time and place: Los Angeles in the mid-1990s, that (in)famously postmodern metropolis at the height of North American Free Trade Agreement-era (NAFTA) globalization and liberal multiculturalist ideologies that obfuscate settler and racial violences in its celebration of a "successfully" diverse and global United States.[4] The Los Angeles of the novel is indeed multiracial—each of the seven narrating characters is a different age, gender, and ethnic identity—but it is far from the glossy "United Colors of Benetton"-style projection of an effortlessly curated multicultural global coexistence. Instead, the novel charts multiple alternative terrains, from the local streets of South Central LA and an overpass above the freeway to a crowded public LA-bound bus from Mazatlán and the transnational shipping lanes of commerce and empire.[5]

Though the novel is certainly shaped by Arcangel's aforementioned warning to look to the past, I argue that the novel foregrounds a spatiotemporality more aligned with Doreen Massey's playful formulation of a *simultaneity of stories-so-far*—multiple concurrent trajectories

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[4] For considerations of LA's emblematic postmodernity, see Jameson, Soja, Baudrillard, Davis.
[5] These routes are traced by Buzzworm, Manzanar Murakami, Arcangel and Rafaela (and Sol), and the eponymous orange, respectively.

that are always in the making, never complete, and inextricably bound up in the *here* and *now*.[6] The "contemporaneous heterogeneities" signaled by the stories-so-far resonate with what Jodi Byrd calls *cacophony*: the irreducible and often discordant multiplicity of subjectivities, experiences, and discourses produced by settler colonialism that perpetuates the "competitions [of race, gender, sexuality, class, et cetera] upon which colonialism relies."[7] The novel enacts what we might call a cacophony of stories-so-far in multiple ways: in terms of character, in the range of subject positions of the characters, no two the same; in terms of narrative, in the commitment to distinctly and distinctively voicing each character to embody different genres, histories, and technologies, as well as wordplay (for what is a pun but a single word holding a multiple simultaneity of meaning?); in terms of setting, each terrain is imbued with its own significance even as it collapses; and in terms of form, with the presentation of paratextual materials and the seemingly random rotation of narrating characters that evokes a lively and chaotic simultaneity rather than a rigidly progressing linear time that begins at the beginning and ends at the end. History in *Tropic of Orange* (however riddled with apocalypses it may be) is neither a dead end that forecloses the future, nor a fixed set of coordinates that wholly determines it—it is an ongoing interaction with the present, a set of ever-changing forces that inform but do not confine us.

In this vein, this chapter examines how *Tropic of Orange* formally and narratively maps a cacophony that limns "geographies where there are multiple interactions among different colonialisms, arrivals, and displacements at work," and in so doing, allow us to apprehend the

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[6] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005), 130, emphasis mine. Massey articulates this in the form of three "propositions" as to how we should recognize space: first, as a "product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny;" second, as the "sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality;" and third, as "always under construction…. It is never finished; never closed" (9).
[7] Massey, 5; Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011): 53.

"justifying narratives of colonialism" that produce and sustain ideologies of liberal multiculturalism.[8] First, I expound in more detail Byrd's concept of cacophony, considering not just in the ways that the novel depicts such cacophony, but also in the cacophony of scholarly discourse that *Tropic of Orange* has produced as itself a useful way to think through the novel. I review the abundance of scholarship that the novel has spawned to situate my argument on the novel's depiction of the overlapping logics of settler colonialism and racial formation in the liberal multicultural moment. I focus particularly on the novel's polyphonous and palimpsestic form to foreground a reading of the novel as thoroughly anchored in its own present time.

I then read the HyperContexts, a paratextual chart that precedes the narrative and performs and subverts both the expectations and limitations of conventional cartography; to this end, I review the colonial legacy of mapmaking and its material and ideological power to colonize and racialize—to displace, dispossess, or disappear—those it depicts (or erases). As the HyperContexts signal a cartographic frame through which to read the novel, I then proceed to read three of the novel's (numerous) cartographic and spatiotemporal negotiations: first, the eponymous orange that connects the deep-rooted trade of colonial commodities to the neoliberal networks and flows of multinational companies and free trade; and second and third, the characters Buzzworm and Manzanar Murakami, whose embodied, relational, and aural engagements with LA's infrastructure chart spatiotemporal maps that disrupt the city's linear colonial and capitalist geographies. Through their distinct relationships with the people and infrastructure of Los Angeles—Buzzworm's hyperlocal street reporting in South Central L.A. and Manzanar's conducting of the freeway system that draws from the depth and expanse of the Earth itself—they illustrate a way of knowing space and time that foregrounds vibrant, affective, and communal experience.

[8] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 67.

In addition to Byrd and Massey, I draw from a constellation of Black, Native, and feminist interventions into temporality, spatiality, and mobility to consider the novel's complex rendering of the variously resonant and dissonant racialized and colonized lives that coexist in the shared space in the Los Angeles, both within the conventional city limits as well as beyond them, as the northward-traveling orange drags with it the physical land it traverses. A unifying thread throughout the elaborate (and often disorienting) plots is the Los Angeles freeway system, a sprawling network of overpasses and ramps that, in its alternatingly relentless flow of traffic and chronic congestion, has come to be emblematic of the city itself. As the novel attends to the characters' various spatial practices, it excavates a long durée of settler colonialism along the city's infrastructure, not merely as metaphor or symbolic gesture, but as a concrete site of and means by which settler violence continues to be enacted in the present. The novel places the apocalypse of infrastructure (to borrow from Choi) directly within the hemispheric and transhistorical catalog of apocalypses enumerated by Arcangel, further developing its spatiotemporal project that insists we tune in to the cacophony of the here and now in order to enact resistance through coalition.

I conclude with the novel's climactic traffic jam, an eruption in which crash sends the wealthy away, abandoning their cars, and an irruption of Los Angeles's unhoused and disenfranchised reclaiming the space of the freeway for their own use. Concomitant to its focus on spatiotemporality and infrastructure, the novel also interrogates movement in its various registers: in a physical sense, who is able to move across or between spaces, and who is not? Who has agency to control their movements, and who is made to move? Where can people move? With the intensification of globalization, the question is not simply *who* can move, but also *what* can (or cannot) move, and where? As digital networks rapidly proliferate, the question

of *where* is further complicated by the configuration of virtual space. Ideas of movement permeate temporality as well, begging consideration of how we move through the past and towards the future, a question that frames the broader project of my dissertation as well. Responding to neoliberal emphases on the efficient flow of people and goods, as well as critical racialized and feminist understandings of movement as a liberatory opposite to containment or confinement, I read the novel as insisting upon a reconceptualization of movement itself, upon a flight *into* stasis, in the standstill of a gridlock along the freeways, a defiant and joyous disruption of what Byrd calls the *transit of empire*: the motion by which settler colonialism transforms, reproduces, and relocates itself and its modes of domination across different historical and geopolitical contexts.

In contrast to the postmodern image of aesthetic *surface* as the "desperate Utopian compensation" for historical discontinuity and fragmentation,[9] as well as against the sanitized hitstory of liberal multiculturalism's tapestry of unity in diversity, I argue that Yamashita imagines a collective stasis as a site of cacophonous refusal and radical relation that emanates from the very *depths* of the earth, where formerly dispossessed and displaced people reclaim time and space. The novel's revolutionary impulse, then, emerges not from the ruins of the past or the promise of the future, but in its insistence on actively inhabiting the here and now. That the traffic jam is ultimately obliterated by the military is inconsequential—what matters more is its presence, the moments it was alive with the simultaneity of innumerable stores-so-far. Against the postmodern "nostalgia for nostalgia" and the perpetually-forward thrust of neoliberal capital,[10] the traffic jam instead marks a form of liberatory stasis—however fleeting its presence is—a moment in which the world keeps ending, and the world goes on.

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[9] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logics of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1992), 7.
[10] Jameson, 156.

To describe Karen Tei Yamashita's body of work as eclectic would be an understatement. Her oeuvre traverses continents and decades; formally interprets such varied forms and genres such as broadcast journalism, film, music, anthropological survey, and architecture; range in length from short stories to the encyclopedic novel, nonfiction to drama; and often features a broad cast of primary narrating characters who span demographics of age, gender, class, sexuality, and race. Her first novel, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), turns to the Brazilian television *novela* form and dark comedy to explore the discovery of a mysterious substance in the Brazilian rainforest and the ensuing global feeding frenzy to consider transnational capitalism and environmental exploitation. A work of historical fiction, *Brazil-Maru* (1992) locates the quintessentially American ideology of seeking opportunity at the frontier in the wilderness in a group of Japanese immigrants in Brazil in the aftermath of World War II. The socio-politically turbulent decade after 1968 serves as the temporal setting for *I-Hotel*, a massive tome containing ten novellas that explore the various players and events in the rise of ethnic rights activism around the International Hotel in the Bay Area. In the experimental memoir *Letters to Memory* (2017) Yamashita explores her own family's history, using her family's records as well as imagined conversations with various academic disciplines to explore and encounter the legacies of internment anew.[11]

While Yamashita's work confounds simple categorization, her interest in manipulating borders of every kind remains consistent: the borders of form, genre, time, space, identity, and nation. *Tropic of Orange* intersects and builds on various literary movements, from postmodernism to magical realism to surrealism. The novel distributes narration amongst seven variously connected main characters, each with their own distinctive narrative voice. The novel

[11] Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of her work (*Sansei and Sensibility*, *Anime Wong*, *Circle K Cycles*, and more). I have selected the few that I think sufficiently represent her oeuvre as well as put *Tropic of Orange* into a clear intellectual and formal context for Yamashita as a writer.

begins with Rafaela, an Afro-Indigenous Mexican American woman who flees Mexico to Los Angeles to protect her son from a mysterious organ trafficker, inadvertently following the path of the orange. She races towards her husband Bobby, a fast-talking and constantly working "Chinese from Singapore with a Vietnam name speaking Mexican living in Koreatown," who presents both a chaotic subversion of the typical Vietnamese refugee narrative and a humorous embodiment of—bordering on parody, even—of the figure of pan-Asian American ethnicity.[12]

At home on the streets of L.A. is Buzzworm, a Black Vietnam War veteran who serves as a de facto Social Services resource for the city's marginalized communities. Surveying Los Angeles from above is Manzanar Murakami, an eccentric, unhoused, sexagenarian sansei and former surgeon who has taken to "conducting" the Los Angeles traffic from atop a freeway overpass. In touch with everything happening on the ground, Buzzworm feeds potential story ideas such as Murakami's presence to Gabriel, a Chicano journalist who employs Rafaela to maintain his property in Mexico and has the novel's only first-person narration. Often appearing with Gabriel is his girlfriend Emi, a brash and iconoclastic Japanese American news producer who relishes every opportunity to openly defy Orientalist feminine stereotypes and the hypocrisy of the melting-pot narratives of liberal multiculturalism. Embodying the land and timeless spirit of the Americas itself is Arcangel, a mythical figure modeled on activist-artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, who guides the titular orange north alongside Rafaela.

Given the kaleidoscopic quality of her body of work (as well as of each individual work), Yamashita has garnered significant attention within and beyond the academy: she has received

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[12] Yamashita, 14-5. Bobby Ngu, like the narrator of *The Sympathizer*, arrives in the U.S. by assuming the role of a refugee displaced by the Vietnam War. While Nguyen's narrator does so under the auspices of the Communist PAVN forces as a mole in the U.S.-allied ARVN forces, twelve-year-old Bobby infiltrates a Singaporean refugee camp with his brother pretending to be orphans, encouraged their father to "start a future all new" in America when faced with a dire economic situation. Each character's arc throughout the novel involves a kind of coming-to-consciousness: the unnamed narrator of *The Sympathizer* with his complicity in the violence against his own people, and Bobby with the lie of the overlapping assimilationist and neoliberal imperatives to remain politically detached and never stop working to attain stability.

numerous awards, including the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters; her work is the subject of an impressive four book-length studies;[13] and, owing to her fixture on university syllabi, countless undergraduate and graduate students encounter her texts in the classroom every year. Naturally, then, many of her works would lend themselves to rich interpretation within the reading practice I develop across this project. For example, though I do not read it here, *Brazil-Maru* offers an unexpected revision of the typical Asian migrant narrative by tracing five generations of Japanese migrants who construct home in the pseudo-utopian agricultural commune of Esperença in the forests of Brazil. The novel indeed resonates with many themes I explore across this dissertation: the colonial and nationalist histories of the Brazilian setting collide with the distinctly U.S. settler desire to conquer the "wilderness" in order to "become" native; questions of historical forgetting and the boundary of the self, as explored in Chapter One; a critical reorientation to space, racialized geographies, and multiple narrators in this chapter; and the possibilities and failures of idealized collectivity through assimilatory labor, which I examine in Chapter Three.[14] However, I focus here on *Tropic of Orange* for its presentist urgency and its formal and thematic investment in the here and now, which I see as a crucial frame through which the novel—within and beyond its diegesis—revises how Indigenous and Asian American subjects are often imagined as "outside" or excluded from the time of the present.

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[13] Ruth Y. Hsu and Pamela S. Thoma, eds., *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Karen Tei Yamashita* (Modern Language Association of America, 2022); A. Robert Lee, ed., *Karen Tei Yamashita: Fictions of Magic and Memory* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2018); Jinqi Ling, *Across Meridians: History and Figuration in Karen Tei Yamashita's Transnational Novels* (Stanford University Press, 2012); Jolie A. Sheffer, *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita*, Understanding Contemporary American Literature (University of South Carolina Press, 2020).

[14] For an incisive reading of *Brazil-Maru* and its transnational implications for Asian American literature and cultural study (as well as American and Brazilian studies), see Kandice Chuh, "Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres: Navigating Karen Tei Yamashita's Literary World," *American Literary History* 18, no. 3 (January 1, 2006): 618–37, https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajl002.

Almost every one of Yamashita's works has individually spawned its own dedicated body of scholarship—*Tropic of Orange* alone has given rise to an impressively vibrant and continuously expanding corpus of critical and creative texts over the nearly thirty years since its publication. The novel has inspired thoughtful considerations of topics as wide-ranging as (and certainly not limited to) environmental justice, genre, postmodernity, and the digital humanities.[15] As such, I am hardly the first or only person to foreground coloniality, spatiotemporality, cartography, infrastructure, movement, and multiculturalism in my reading of *Tropic of Orange*. Countless scholars have made valuable contributions interpreting these dimension of the novel, and while they are far too many to exhaustively discuss here, I draw on many of their insights throughout this chapter. In the following section, I outline the key scholarly conversations that have shaped my approach, highlighting how my reading builds upon and diverges from existing interpretations of the novel's spatial and temporal politics. In particular, I draw on Jodi Byrd's theorization of cacophony to frame the proliferation of scholarship surrounding the novel, as well as to trace how *Tropic of Orange* stages overlapping

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[15] For example, on the novel and ecocriticism, see John Blair Gamber, *Positive Pollutions and Cultural Toxins: Waste and Contamination in Contemporary U.S. Ethnic Literatures* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012); Lee Rozelle, *Zombiescapes and Phantom Zones: Ecocriticism and the Liminal from Invisible Man to The Walking Dead* (University of Alabama Press, 2016); Julie Sze, "'Not by Politics Alone': Gender and Environmental Justice in Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange," *Bucknell Review* 44, no. 1 (2000): 29. On genre, see Anne Mai Yee Jansen, "(Dis)Integrating Borders: Crossing Literal/Literary Boundaries in Tropic of Orange and The People of Paper," *MELUS* 42, no. 3 (2017): 102–28; Seonjoo Park, "Abandoning Imagination: The Genealogical Aberration in Magical/Realism and Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange," *Cross-Cultural Studies* 42 (March 2016): 285–311, https://doi.org/10.21049/ccs.2016.42..285; and Stephen Hong Sohn, "Defining and Exploring Asian American Speculative Fiction," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.870. On postmodernist critique and the novel, see Greg Bevan, "Performance Appraisal: Reinterpreting *Tropic of Orange*," *Literature* 3, no. 1 (March 2023): 19–29; Melissa Sexton, "Tropic of Orange, Los Angeles, and the Anthropocene Imagination," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 43, no. 1 (March 2017): 13–32; and Molly Wallace, "Tropics of Globalization: Reading the New North America," *Symplokē* 9, no. 1/2 (2001): 145–60. On the digital humanities—particularly as it intersects with cartography—see Parker Krieg and Matthew N. Hannah, "'Thick Mapping' for Environmental Justice: EJScreen, ArcGIS, and Contemporary Literature," in *Routledge Handbook of the Digital Environmental Humanities*, ed. Charles Travis et al. (Routledge, 2022); Anastasia Lin, "Mapping Multiethnic Texts in the Literary Classroom: GIS and Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange," in *Teaching Space, Place, and Literature* (Routledge, 2017).

and sometimes discordant spatiotemporal logics, which informs my broader argument about the novel's insistence on the political and imaginative stakes of the present.

The Cacophonies of Colonialism

The dynamic interaction of history, space, and experience in *Tropic of Orange* is emphasized by its many simultaneous soundscapes. *Tropic of Orange* is a loud novel. The narrative reverberates with noise of all kinds: the rush and rumble of midday traffic; the buzzing feedback of transistor radios, cell phones, and TV sets; the echoes of sirens and gunshots; the voice of street prophets declaiming their poetry; and the thunderous cheers of the crowds from across the hemisphere come to witness a mythical lucha libre grudge match for the ages. These textured aural layers function not just as atmospheric detail, but as a structuring principle of the text itself, alternating amongst the seven different narrative voices in quick succession each day, every day, across seven days. Each character's chapters are vividly rendered in a unique style that references a different literary tradition or mode of communication, making the abrupt movement from one chapter to the next—for example, from Arcangel's mystical and poetic incantations to the brusque staccato of Bobby Ngu—jarring for the reader. These movements are repetitive but not perfectly cyclical—there is no fixed order in which the narrator appears across the seven days. Caught in the crosshairs of multiple interconnected (and increasingly melodramatic) plots unfolding simultaneously and the constantly changing narrative voice, it becomes difficult to "distinguish relevant clues from background noise,"[16] to follow and make sense of what is happening.

I return again to Byrd's method of cacophony, which seeks to disaggregate the multiplicity of minority oppressions and experiences that are produced and concealed by the

[16] Rachel Adams, "The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism," *Twentieth Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (2007): 260.

colonizer/colonized binary. Examining the tradition of reading Caliban of *The Tempest* as the paradigmatic postcolonial subject—claimed variously to embody the violences of and resistances to colonial, racial, and enslaved violences—Byrd argues that the displacement of Ariel (whose presence on the island predates Caliban's) within the play and within critical discourse is exemplary of the process by which settler colonialism "detach[es] indigeneity from the…original inhabitants of the Americas and relocate[es] on settlers and arrivants themselves."[17] Rather than claim any singular identity for Caliban, Byrd proposes we read him as a "microcosm [of] the forces at work in settler colonialism, which are marked by colonization, racialization, and slavery that…occur *all at the same time*." That is, by understanding the cacophonous discourses ascribed to the textual figure of Caliban—that variously claim him as "Black, African, native, Amerindian, Irish, US settler, Latin American, Fidel Castro, *and, and, and*"—as coexisting rather than competing, as a series of openings rather than a foreclosing, and as necessarily contradictory, we gain a more dimensional understanding of the way in which settler colonialism sustains and conceals itself by producing conditions "that serve to other the other."[18]

Cacophony activates a "radical reimagining of how peoples exist relationally," challenging the system of liberal multiculturalism that forces variously marginalized populations to compete for state recognition and inclusion in ways that elide ongoing settler colonialism.[19] The Los Angeles of *Tropic of Orange* is saturated with the layered violences of colonialism, a palimpsest of histories of displacement, enslavement, rape, and genocide that resound in the novel's multiple narrators, their eddying movements across the Americas, and their experience of the land itself. Through the episodic and deceptively linear narrative form that constantly repositions the narrators in relation to each other and the space they occupy—and the

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[17] Byrd, *Transit of Empire,* 59.
[18] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 66, emphasis mine.
[19] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 122.

contingency of the space itself—I argue that the novel produces a cacophonous cartography of Los Angeles that demands the reader traverse the visible and invisible interlocking infrastructures of settler colonial violence as constitutive of the present.

Critical Constellations

Given the novel's distinctively diverse cast of variously interconnected characters and eclectic archive of references, the question of relationality—ethnic, disciplinary, (trans)national, and otherwise—is frequently invoked in critical considerations of *Tropic of Orange*. Caroline Rody reads the novel as exemplary of an emerging "interethnic paradigm" of Asian American literature, characterized by the centering of cross- or multiracial encounters, the increasing turn to extra-ethnic (that is, non-Asian American) artistic traditions to reference, adapt, and incorporate different formal and aesthetic styles, and a departure from the "stark, binary face-off between immigrant subjectivity and a generalized Americanness that long marked its literature."[20] Susan Thananopavarn asserts that *Tropic of Orange* maps Los Angeles as a "LatinAsian contact zone," tracing the increasing convergence of Latinx and Asian populations in American urban spaces and making visible the "darker circuits of transnationalism" traveled by the novel's interethnic families that relocate and redefine the US borders as sites of violence and of possibility.[21] Sue-Im Lee situates the novel within debates of universalism, arguing that its explicit rejection of "unidirectional [and] imperialist" visions of a "global village" forged by globalization should not be read as dismissing collectivity altogether. Accepting a global collective as inevitable, the novel offers what Lee calls a "romantic universalism," a political vision of global coalition that is able to be "all-inclusive, all-voluntary, and all-reciprocal" as it

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[20] Caroline Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination: Roots and Passages in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 20.
[21] Susan Thananopavarn, *LatinAsian Cartographies: History, Writing, and the National Imaginary* (Rutgers University Press, 2018), 115. It is worth clarifying that by "darker" circuits, Thananopavarn is referring to the illegal and violent trafficking of drugs and human organs.

deploys the “fantastic genre” to “[transform] individual protests (of Third World labor, of the homeless) into historical forces and into historical actors pursuing the ideal of human rights.”[22]

For Rachel Adams, *Tropic of Orange* raises questions about periodization, arguing that its untethering of geopolitical borders exemplifies a departure from the Cold War-inflected “paranoia” of literary postmodernism that produces aesthetics of “superficiality and relentless irony.[23] She instead offers the framework of *American literary globalism*, placing the novel alongside the largely multiracial cohort of authors emerging in the 1990s who expanded the historical and cultural archives of US literature, creating a “new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents” in order to “reflect multiple Americas…[that are] informed by a heightened awareness of how America is being transformed…by globalization.”[24] In contrast to Adams’s assertion that postmodernism cannot account for the novel’s attention to increasing global connectivity, many scholars continue to find postmodern critique useful when considering the novel. In the final chapter of *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet*, Elizabeth Ammons goes so far as to effusively declare that “Jameson wishes in *Postmodernism* for the book that *Tropic of Orange* is. He knows that the answers to globalization’s problems do not lie in a return to modernist values or premodern fantasies.”[25]

In *Repetition and Race: Asian American Literature After Multiculturalism*, Amy C. Tang offers a sustained effort to recuperate postmodernism, arguing against the essentializing impulse to conflate the aesthetic form of ethnic fiction with political meaning. Tang reads *Tropic of Orange* as postmodern pastiche, intervening into two prevailing understandings of that form:

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[22] Sue-Im Lee, “‘We Are Not the World’: Global Village, Universalism, and Karen Tei Yamashita’s Tropic of Orange,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 53, no. 3 (2007): 505, 521.
[23] Adams, 268, 261.
[24] Adams, 251, 268. To be clear, Adams does not frame the literary globalist approach to increased connectivity as unquestionably positive; rather, it is an approach that accepts this interconnectedness “for better or for worse.”
[25] Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (University Of Iowa Press, 2010), 155.

first, its dismissal (most notably by Frederic Jameson, and echoed by Terry Eagleton) as empty mimicry symptomatic of the waning of historicity and affect; and second, the tendency of Asian American literary criticism to prescriptively consider pastiche (and non-realist literary modes writ large) as inherently politicized by virtue of racial authorship, ultimately consigning Asian American literature to a "more complex mimeticism" rather than innovative technique.[26] Tang reads the novel's pastiche as neither formal solipsism nor direct representation of sociopolitical experience, but as "dramatiz[ing] a constant *oscillation*" between the two that stages rather than resolves the material crises of globalization and the narrative possibilities of representation.[27] Just as the movement of the Tropic of Cancer in the plot forces the characters to "struggle to map this new global space" in a world where once-stable signs become untethered from their referents, so too does the novel emphasize in its changing narrative style the "discrepancy between linguistic and social registers" for the reader. Thus, Tang argues, the novel offers a vision in which the incessant motion between the aesthetic and the sociopolitical produces a "refuge" from their perceived limitations of minority literature.[28]

Tang argues that this refusal of easy alignment not only allows for more capacious readings of Yamashita's novel, but also for the ethnic writer who "constantly shuttles between the realms of the social and the aesthetic."[29] Tang's insistence on the "oscillation" *between* the aesthetic and the social in *Tropic of Orange* models a reading practice that releases the Asian

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[26] Amy C. Tang, *Repetition and Race: Asian American Literature After Multiculturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 78. The former critique of pastiche referenced comes from Frederic Jameson's colorful dismissal of the genre in *Postmodernism*.
[27] Tang, 85, italics mine.
[28] Tang, 94-5. Tang takes the idea of the "refuge" of "Style" (that is, aesthetics) from D. A. Miller's *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*: "'Style,' writes Miller, is 'the utopia of those with almost no place to go.' He thus suggests that 'Style,' or the space of the aesthetic, might function not simply as a naive or apolitical disavowal of one's social determinations, but as a way to encode a utopian fantasy of such a freedom, so long as it remains unavailable in the world outside the text."
[29] Tang, 89.

American writer and text from the "material pressures" of racialization,[30] finding in its unresolved movement a "space in which to harbor a utopian longing for a form of subjectivity not wholly determined by one's social positioning, even as it always retains a trace of those determinations."[31] In my discussion of the novel, this becomes key to understanding how the novel resists settler colonial cartographies of space, time, and subjectivity. While distinct in formulation, Tang's "oscillation" resonates with Byrd's cacophony in its attention to the "horizontal movement between the discrete and opposing spaces of the aesthetic and the social" and the simultaneity of lived experiences under settler colonialism.[32] Rather than recuperate coherence or offer a redemptive multicultural parable of participatory democracy, *Tropic of Orange* insists on unresolvable tensions between aesthetic experimentation and political urgency. Tang's attention to oscillation thus becomes a way to think about how the novel offers its own form as a terrain of struggle—one in which pastiche signals neither vacuous mimicry or fragmentation nor presumptive political meaning, but rather a dynamic site where the conditions of history and belonging are themselves unsettled.

In one of the most provocative interpretations of the novel, Robin Blyn draws heavily from Hardt and Negri's *Empire* to argue that *Tropic Of Orange* cannot be read as a critique of colonialism. Rather, Blyn asserts, the novel dramatizes a reckoning with the *obsolescence* of colonialism—and, by extension, forms of decolonial resistance—in the face of neoliberalism. Blyn contends that characters understood to articulate anticolonial resistance through cartographic practices—such as Manzanar, Arcangel, and Buzzworm—are ultimately rendered impotent by the forces of neoliberalism, emerging as "false prophets and practitioners of

[30] Tang, 75-6. Tang develops this reading from Lisa Lowe's field-defining *Immigrant Acts*, which I review in the Introduction of this dissertation. Tang quotes the "material pressures" of the ethnic text from Rafael Pérez-Torres's of reading of *Beloved*, "Between Presence and Absence: *Beloved*, Postmodernism, and Blackness."
[31] Tang, 85.
[32] Tang, 90.

outdated models of resistance" who cannot meaningfully contest the power of global capital.[33] Instead, Blyn sees *Tropic of Orange* shifting focus to ontological transformation through networked collectivities—modeled on the Internet—that emerge from *within* the conditions of neoliberalism. According to Blyn, the novel exhibits a kind of postmodern skepticism of relationality itself, ultimately staging the failure of these networked resistances as they are destroyed, commodified, or absorbed by neoliberal powers—this argument, as I explain below, not only dramatically misses the optimism and sense of play that permeates the novel (especially in its climax and dénouement), but also reinforces a singular and linear movement of time that has no space for alternative configurations and practices.

On the level of form, Blyn argues that *Tropic of Orange* engages with various aesthetic forms to illustrate their inadequacy to respond effectively to neoliberal globalization. She describes Arcangel's magical realism as a "melancholic vestige of a colonial era that…between the Cold War and 9/11, no longer seemed to exist."[34] Similarly, Gabriel's first-person narrative, styled after classic film noir, exposes for Blyn the failures of that genre's critical capacity in a digitized, networked age. Once an investigative journalist, Gabriel becomes an "Internet zombie" when absorbed into the Web, his ability to make sense of the world around him transformed into a "solipsistic endeavor that produces nothing except its own perpetuation." By the end of the novel, he is "lost in cyberspace…good as dead."[35] The failure of these narrative forms (as well as the others deployed in the novel) to enable the "being-in-common" theorized by Hardt and Negri underscores the novel's broader doubt of the capacity of forms forged outside of neoliberalism's networks to effectively resist or subvert them. "[D]espite its foray into magical realism," asserts

[33] Robin Blyn, "Belonging to the Network: Neoliberalism and Postmodernism in Tropic of Orange," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no. 2 (2016): 192.
[34] Blyn, 194.
[35] Blyn, 199.

Blyn, "*Tropic of Orange* ultimately recognizes that in order to be effective at all, revolutionary subjectivity must be unequivocally immanent in the material historical conditions."[36] That is, unlike narrative styles materially linked to obsolete histories (such as magical realism and colonialism, or neo-noir and the Cold War), it is the novel's networked aesthetic—its multiple intersecting plotlines, characters who cross paths and borders, and media-saturated, digitally-connected world—that gestures toward what Blyn calls the "hope in the prospect of the not-yet."[37]

While Blyn's analysis of *Tropic of Orange* offers a compelling consideration of the possibilities and limitations of aesthetic imagination under neoliberalism, I contend that her reliance on Hardt and Negri's framework—treating neoliberalism as a clean break from, rather than a continuation of, colonialism—leads to a troubling reading that reproduces the very displacements that the novel actually contests. In her repeated assertion of neoliberalism's "unprecedented" material and ontological conditions, Blyn not only neglects the settler foundations of the U.S. nation-state (and the hemispheric Americas more broadly), but also entirely dismisses how settler colonial logics actively shape neoliberal governance.[38] For the

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[36] Blyn, 210.
[37] Blyn, 211.
[38] Blyn boldly claims that readings of *Tropic of Orange* that foreground decoloniality and material labor "ventriloquiz[e] a hackneyed Marxist discourse appropriate to a historical reality that the novel locates firmly in the past" (198). As this chapter (and this project) abundantly demonstrates, I disagree with her premise that *Tropic of Orange* leaves anything "firmly in the past" without consequences for the present or future; the preceding and following chapters of this dissertation also attest to this. Against the claim of the emergence of a truly "unprecedented" economic moment, there is a wealth of scholarship that rigorously accounts for the continuity of settler colonial logics in the neoliberal regime. Focusing on the Latin American context, Aníbal Quijano demonstrates that even where colonialism has formally ended, its underlying logics and structures continue to organize sociopolitical and economic power relations; a crucial axis of this *coloniality of power* is the persistence of Eurocentric racial hierarchies in the emergence of global capitalism. Acknowledging the differences between the "neoliberal world order" and the capitalisms that precede it, David Lloyd and Patrick Wolfe examine Israel's ongoing settlement of Palestine as a case study illustrative of how the globalization of capital and the logics of settler colonialism converge to provide contemporary settler states a "repertoire of both tropes and practices of social control" in the project of controlling "surplus" populations. Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," trans. Michael Ennis, *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80;" David Lloyd and Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonial Logics and the Neoliberal Regime," *Settler Colonial Studies* 6, no. 2 (2016): 109–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2015.1035361."

variously racialized and colonized characters of *Tropic of Orange*—and it is worth emphasizing that every narrating character inhabits a racialized subjectivity—there is no clean break from history, in the neoliberal moment or otherwise. From Emi's explicit declarations that "diversity is bullshit" to the allusion to Japanese American internment carried by Manzanar's very name; from Buzzworm's observations of persistent urban segregation to Arcangel's poetic lament of the transformation of the land of the Americas into property—each character's navigation of space, time, and identity is unambiguously structured by racial and colonial management. I note this not to flatten the political and aesthetic texture of the novel, nor to conflate racializing and colonizing processes (as Tang and Byrd caution against, respectively), but to underscore how Blyn sidelines the "material pressures" of race and coloniality to the detriment of her analysis.

By insisting that resistance must emerge immanently from within neoliberalism, Blyn centers abstract networks of governance, communication, and capital over the lived experiences, affective connections, and spatial practices of the novel's characters. Moreover, she overlooks the solidly material traffic of commodities (such as the eponymous orange) that are enabled by the expanding free trade agreements that underwrite neoliberalism's global project. This emphasis on abstraction and immaterial labor leads to a grim, dehumanized reading of *Tropic of Orange*—one that clashes with the novel's own sense of exuberance, play, and hope, particularly in its climax and falling action. These moments in the text do not signify escape from neoliberalism, but neither do they fully capitulate to it; rather, they open imaginative and affective possibilities for being and resisting otherwise in the present. Blyn's reading, however, forecloses these openings, flattening the novel's polyvocal and playful narrative energy into a

closed network of systemic inevitability in which resistance is deferred to the "prospect of the not-yet."[39]

The Time is Now

Though Blyn's argument against a decolonial reading of *Tropic of Orange* is relatively anomalous, her conclusion that the novel ultimately reserves hope and resistance for a yet-to-manifest future is not. An overwhelmingly popular interpretation of the novel focuses on Sol—Rafaela and Bobby Ngu's child—as the embodiment of its final hope for a hybrid, transnational future. Some foreground Sol's mixed-race heritage. Thananopavarn describes Sol as "the promise of a LatinAsian future." Aristides Dimitriou argues that in his Sol represents the novel's investment in borders, as "not fixed but rather changeable, not a truth but rather, like Sol, a 'true mixture' that may open up the way for a historical departure from the cycles of oppression… toward a qualitatively different future." Others consider the transnational implications of the Cortes-Ngu family through the novel. "The notion of a transnational family perfectly encapsulates Yamashita's vision of resilient nature," writes Rody, "triumphant over the national—and ethnic—borders that rise and fall in human history." Joseph P. Entin makes a similar observation emphasizing transnational circuits of labor, arguing that though "[t]he novel leaves the shape of the future unclear," the future "seems to belong to Rafaela, Bobby, and Sol…suggest[ing] that working people…will have a primary role in shaping it." Focusing on the possibility of political revolution, Anne Mai Yee Jansen notes that as Arcangel allows himself to disappear because Sol has "enacted the return to Aztlan… Sol remains in Los Angeles, where he will presumably continue Arcangel's revolutionary mission in a different context of contact

[39] Blyn, 211.

zones, borderlands, and colonization."[40] Across many of these analyses, the future is where transformation and revolution are possible; all the present can do is gesture towards it and wait.

In the understandable desire to look toward the future—toward repair, coalition, or liberation—the present can become a passageway rather than a destination, something to merely endure or bypass rather than actively inhabit. This tendency, I suggest, risks replicating the very temporal dislocations imposed by colonial and racial regimes that deny oppressed peoples full presence in the here and now. Jodi Byrd identifies Indigenous peoples as "past tense presences" in the spatiotemporality of the US settler state: either literally absent as "lamentable casualties of national progress,"[41] or, as Jean O'Brien argues, made to inhabit a static "ahistorical temporality" in which they must be perpetually "ancient" in order to be recognized at all.[42] Colonized Black people are told they have "no culture, no civilization, and no 'long historical past,'" fumes Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, while simultaneously marked in their very skin by "cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders"— Blackness is both tethered to a primitive past and devoid of legitimate history.[43] This loss of history is not just narrative but also material, exemplified by Saidiya Hartman's efforts to recuperate the life of Venus from archival silence and historical violence in "Venus in Two Acts."

While it is not my intention to disregard futurity altogether (indeed, the following chapter considers at length the imaginative power of the future), I would like to resist reading *Tropic of Orange* as deferring to the future. Rather, I would like to foreground the novel's insistence upon

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[40] Rody, *The Interethnic Imagination*, 143; Thananopavarn, 124; Aristedes Dimitriou, "Mapping the New World Border: Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and the Global Borderlands," *MELUS* 48, no. 2 (June 1, 2023): 44, https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlad033; Joseph B. Entin, *Living Labor: Fiction, Film, and Precarious Work* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), 13, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/166/oa_monograph/chapter/3334952; Anne Mai Yee Jansen, "(Dis)Integrating Borders: Crossing Literal/Literary Boundaries in Tropic of Orange and The People of Paper," *MELUS* 42, no. 3 (2017): 115.
[41] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, xx.
[42] Jean M. O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (University Of Minnesota Press, 2010), 105, xxii.
[43] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2008), 17, 92.

a reorientation towards the present as a site of possibility; here I am particularly influenced by Black theorizations of the present. In *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation*, Julius Fleming conceptualizes *Afro-presentism*, a “radical structure of racial time” that prioritizes the present over the “temporal demands of black patience” in which futurity is not a promise of freedom but yet another one of “the West’s wily attempts to quarantine black people’s access to the good life to an always arriving, and often unarrivable, black future.”[44] Where Jose Esteban Muñoz calls to “see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” for the “not yet here,” Jayna Brown argues in *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* that the “present is actually dimensional and the place of great improvisations.” She continues, “I suggest we descend into the quagmire, for it holds great depth,” attuning us to the “spatial/temporal fold within the here and now.”[45] The action of *Tropic of Orange* is neither consigned to a distant past nor postponed to an uncertain future, inhabiting into the quagmire of the present with relish as it moves from one character to the next, formally and narratively staging the simultaneous multiplicity of settler colonialism, racism, sexism, “*and, and, and*” that Byrd describes as characteristic of the cacophony of empire.[46]

The aural dimension of cacophony (as well as Brown’s reference to improvisation) is also particularly useful to consider Manzanar Murakami and Buzzworm, who each relate to Los Angeles through distinct soundscapes: Manzanar “conducts” a musical symphony of the city that

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[44] Julius B. Fleming, *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation* (New York University Press, 2022), 26, https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479806874. Fleming evocatively writes: “Because black patience routinely plunders black futures and produces traumatic black pasts, the moment or the instant of black freedom and vitality assumes radical meaning insofar as it strains against and reconstitutes the normative enclosures of racial time that habitually defer black freedom and black citizenship to the time of the future” (30).

[45] Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2021), 17, 8, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1dgmm37.

[46] Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, 66, italics Byrd’s.

only he can hear, and Buzzworm is so constantly "plugged in" to the issues of his community and the radio reports that come through on his Walkman that to be without it is like being "unplugged from his inner voice."[47] Sound theorist Brandon LaBelle's formulation of "acoustic territories" resonates with their auditory cartographies and with Byrd's conceptualization of the cacophonous discourses of settler colonialism, contending that the "seemingly innocent trajectory of sound as it moves from its source and toward a listener, without forgetting all the surfaces, bodies, and other sounds it brushes against, is a story imparting a great deal of information fully charged with geographic, social, psychological, and emotional energy."[48] Though studies of colonialism and neoliberalism alike—like sound as described by LaBelle—are often characterized by an emphasis on motion (of people, capital, and flora and fauna, in circumstances both forced and voluntary), it is in the traffic *standstill* on the freeway that *Tropic of Orange* finds the greatest musical movement, a crescendo so overwhelming that Manzanar exuberantly christens it "the greatest jam session the world had ever known."[49]

The novel's insistence upon palimpsest in its mapping of Los Angeles offers an alternative to dominant narratives that would characterize subjectivity, space, and time as firmly settled. The systemic and systematic erasure of Indigenous, Latinx, Black, and Asian American histories layered into Los Angeles's geographic and infrastructural landscape is made visible (and audible) in the novel, affirming Pacharee Sudhinaraset's ultimately hopeful argument that *Tropic of Orange* demonstrates that "the cataclysm of white settler modernity, dispossession, and

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[47] Yamashita, 29-30. Though beyond the remit of this chapter, the characters Emi and Gabriel—a television producer and investigative reporter, respectively—also produce their own noisy cartographies of Los Angeles in ways that complement and contrast Manzanar and Buzzworm's. See Natalie Aghoro, "Sonic Sites of Subversion: Listening and the Politics of Place in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*," in *The Acoustics of the Social on Page and Screen*, ed. Natalie Aghoro (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 147–63.
[48] Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*, Second Edition (Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), xii.
[49] Yamashita, 206. The wordplay here is especially pertinent (and charming): "jam" can be understood to mean the halting of traffic or an informal musical session in which performers typically improvise and riff off of each other. In a triple pun, it can also refer to the spread created by cooking and reducing fruit—like an orange, for instance.

the US state is not a totalizing event."[50] In the section that follows, I examine the novel's HyperContexts for the cartographic and epistemic framework it establishes, which structures my reading of Buzzworm and Manzanar's spatial practices and the reclamation of the freeway system by the disenfranchised as resisting colonial spatial logics. In their irreducible difference and simultaneity, these practices refuse coherence and containment, the novel insisting that it is the present—rather than the past, the future, or the "not-yet"—that is the site of revolutionary change.

HyperContexts, HyperContextualized

Just as the movement of Yamashita's various characters and the orange encourage different landscapes and mappings of Los Angeles, the very structure of *Tropic of Orange* cultivates a particular orientation towards the space and time of the city. Before the action of *Tropic of Orange* even begins, immediately following the traditional Table of Contents, the reader encounters a densely packed table titled "HyperContexts." In a meticulously organized seven by seven grid, each cell uniformly sized, this chart provides a staggering amount of narrative information to the reader organized along two axes: the horizontal axis details the weeklong duration of the novel, each day with its own descriptive subtitle (e.g., "Monday: Summer Solstice," "Tuesday: Diamond Lane"); and the vertical axis lists the seven primary characters. Each "cell"—there are no lines within the chart—at the intersection of a character and day of the week offers three points of information: a chapter title, location, and chapter number (e.g., "**Station ID-**Jefferson & Normandie / chapter 4").

At first glance, the chart seems straightforward in its chronological organization and neat visualization of the novel's sprawling chapters, characters, and locations, providing more texture

[50] Pacharee Sudhinaraset, *Worlds at the End: Los Angeles, Infrastructure, and the Apocalyptic Imagination* (Temple University Press, 2024), 23.

than the preceding Table of Contents while maintaining its sense of order. In its very title, the HyperContexts is presented in terms of reference and information management. "Hyper" signals excess; "contexts" name the information needed for comprehension. Together, they suggest a story so excessive that it spills beyond its own narrative bounds, requiring paratextual material to hold it in place, to make it manageable.

While the HyperContexts has been analyzed by countless scholars to as many ends—vividly analogized as a "skeleton," a "database," and an "appropriately postmodern" spreadsheet,[51] among other striking comparisons—it is broadly accepted that the HyperContexts plainly broadcasts the novel's self-conscious attention to questions of form and narrative authority. Sudhinaraset connects "contexts" to "literary composition, construction, or the infrastructure of writing itself," arguing that by foregrounding its own textuality, the novel shatters the illusion of absolute narratorial totality and infallibility. Though in consensus with Sudhinaraset's interpretation of "contexts," Tang draws distinctly different conclusion, identifying the explicit reference to form as indicative of an authorial presence external to the diegesis—an omniscient force not only capable of, but insistent upon, "translating" the narrative action to fit into the tidy grid.[52]

Though these are all thoughtful interpretations, I read the chart as initiating the novel's engagement with cartography. To the first-time reader, the HyperContexts appears to function as a map, ready to guide the reader through the unruly narrative terrain in front of them. Yet as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that there is much more to this novel than represented by

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[51] Pooch, 180; Frank, 18; Tang, 86.

[52] Sudhinaraset, 41; Tang, 86. Interestingly, Yamashita has stated that the HyperTexts that appears in the novel derives from a Lotus 1-2-3 chart she developed for her own practical purposes: to keep track of each character, plotline, research sources, literary references, and miscellaneous notes—in other words, as a way of "organizing [the] chaos" of the writing process. Jean Vengua Gier and Carla Alicia Tejada, "An Interview with Karen Tei Yamashita," *JOUVERT: Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 2, no. 2 (1998), https://legacy.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v2i2/YAMASHI.HTM.

the chart. By imitating the form of a traditional map while also undermining its claims to order and totality, the HyperContexts opens up the possibility of thinking about mapping not as a neutral reflection of reality, but as a practice embedded in questions of power, perspective, and erasure—and yet also potentially as a tool of resistance. Considering the way that the HyperContexts unsettle the authority of conventional cartographic forms provides a useful framework to consider the alternative mappings that emerge though the spatial practices of Buzzworm and Manzanar. In the section that follows, I review key critiques of cartographic epistemology that illuminate how maps have historically served colonial domination, as well as how they may be reconsidered to articulate alternative spatial negotiations.

The tradition of modern cartography that purports to privilege geographical accuracy can be traced to the Long Eighteenth Century, Europe's so-called Age of Reason. Animated by the pursuit of empirical inquiry, European Enlightenment-era thinkers sought the discovery of the totality of knowledge of the world and its inhabitants, human and otherwise. However, it was not enough to simply *have* this knowledge to establish mastery—from Linnaean taxonomies to Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, the Enlightenment epistemic process relied on, to paraphrase Foucault, putting things in order. European expeditions to Asia, Africa, and the so-called New World expanded the scope of the world to European eyes and whetted their appetite for domination. Cartography was a key technology by which information of the expanding world could be organized, and maps were tools through which European powers conceptualized and established the boundaries of the "known world."[53]

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[53] I take the concept of "modern cartography" stemming from the European Enlightenment from J.B. Harley. This term and Harley's emphasis on the Enlightenment have been critiqued by some; see Matthew H. Edney and Mary S. Pedley, "Writing Cartography's Enlightenment," *Cartographic Journal* 57, no. 4 (November 2020): 312–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/00087041.2020.1884428.

J. B. Harley contends that “colonialism is first signposted in the map margins,” and indeed one can trace a cartographic narrative of conquest of colonized peoples.[54] Works such as Theodor de Bry’s widely circulated *Historia Americae* placed elaborate engravings of Indigenous violence and cannibalism alongside travel narratives about the Americas; though de Bry’s images were entirely fiction (he had never been to the Americas), they nonetheless shaped European perceptions of Amerindian moral depravity, underwriting the justification of conquest.[55] As observed by Stephanie Pratt, images of Indigenous peoples began to disappear altogether as colonial efforts to seize and settle the Americas intensified into the 18th century.[56] This representational erasure demonstrates settler colonialism’s logic of elimination, which demands not only to conquer and displace but annihilate Indigenous presence altogether. Cartography’s violent power persists to this day, from the arbitrary colonial borders drawn across Africa and South Asia that remain sites of ongoing conflict to the municipal maps creating districts that determine who gets access to housing, transportation, education, and public resources—and who is left out.

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[54] J. B. Harley, “Texts and Contexts in the Interpretation of Early Maps,” in *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, ed. Paul Laxton (JHU Press, 2002), 46.

[55] Megan Vallowe, “Indigenous Resistance: Settler-Colonialism, Nation Building, and Colonial Patriarchy” (Ph.D. diss., University of Arkansas, 2013), 31-2. Representations of these variously racialized and colonized peoples across Africa, the Americas, and Asia served as a visual foil for Europeans, guiding them to develop their *own* superior racial and national identities by contrast. Indeed, at the center of the spirit of colonialism was an obsessive narcissism to construct a world with Europe at the top. The emerging European racial identity and its attendant moral superiority which, bolstered by the cartographic promises of territorial mastery, crucially shaped feelings of imperial entitlement (consider, for example, the moral imperative of the “White Man’s Burden”). I am reminded of Hortense Spillers’ wry observation that “[f]or all that the pre-Columbian ‘explorers’ knew about the sciences of navigation and geography, we are surprised that more parties of them did not end up ‘discovering’ Europe. Perhaps, from a certain angle, that is all that they found—an alternative reading of ego.” Kathleen Kirby draws a similar conclusion, noting that the maps reflected the Enlightenment subject’s predilection to “let the beam of attention play across the surrounding world… [T]o define itself by cataloguing others (e.g., women, natives, criminals, the insane) which it opposed because it did not require definition. Humanism constructs paradigms for deviant subjectivity from which it absents itself.” Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 70, https://doi.org/10.2307/464747; Kirby, *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity* (The Guilford Press, 1995), 45.

[56] Stephanie Pratt, “From the Margins: The Native American Personage in the Cartouche and Decorative Borders of Maps,” *Word & Image* 12, no. 4 (October 1996): 349–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.1996.10435438.

Traditional cartography hinges on the idea that maps represent space *as it is*; that is, that space was already formed and all someone had to do was perceive and record it—carrying the implication that the map *is* in fact the territory. In the case of Yamashita's novel, this would mean presuming that the HyperContexts accurately captures the trajectory of the story and its characters. Feminist interventions into studies of spatiality, however, have demonstrated the ways in which space is not a given, but actively *produced*; my reading of *Tropic of Orange* is indebted to these insights.

Colonial maps, Hortense Spillers reminds us, are "not a divine gift" but the products of "the dictates of conquering armies [and] the edicts of prelates,"[57] deeply embedded in the systems of power that commission them. In concert with this line of thinking, Kathleen Kirby considers the cartographic impulse of standardization by which "more generalized, more abstract, and less differentiated" representations legible by European standards were prioritized over representations of the land as they actually encountered it.[58] Colonial maps not only abstracted space but also time, claiming to represent space as "atemporal, objective, transparent"—as if the land existed as represented before it was mapped and as if it remains as represented in the present. However, this is merely an "illusion of total knowledge," obscuring the "gradualness of the explorers' coming-to-be-located, the long time they spent in an as-yet-unorganized environment"—in short, obscuring the long, messy process of *creating* geography.[59] In doing so, Kirby argues, they "materializ[ed] the land according to European logic" and "convert[ed] it to European land," their cartographic representations creating—through conventions of naming, fixing, and abstraction—a "different world" into which non-European

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[57] Spillers, 70.
[58] Harley, quoted in Kirby, 44.
[59] Kirby, 47-8.

subjects were spatiotemporally and ontologically anomalous.[60] Thus she offers the concept of the *space of the subject*: once space is given meaning by power, it in turn gives meaning to subjectivity—positioning bodies along axes of gender, race, nationality, and so on.[61]

Thus the HyperContexts foregrounds cartography both as a formal tool for narrative organization and as a site of epistemological and political contestation. Maps privilege abstracted information over context—the chart's very name foregrounds not just context but an *excess* of context, challenging cartography's totalizing logics. Of course, a reader could choose to read the novel in the traditional order per the Table of Contents, from the beginning (that is, the first page) to the end (the last page); the HyperContexts, however, makes visible different narrative timelines in its grid form. Presented with alternative organizations of the text, the reader might instead choose to follow the narrative arc of a single character as plotted by the HyperContexts—this would mean skipping portions of the novel that focus on other characters and plotlines, fundamentally changing their experience of the text. For example, if a reader were to follow just Buzzworm's story, it would mean reading only Chapters 4, 13, 16, 27, 29, 41, and 44 and would lead to a very different narrative picture than if someone followed only Manzanar's (Chapters 5, 8, 19, 28, 35, 42, and 46), or read the novel traditionally. It is here that the "hyper" of HyperContexts signals not just excessive size or quantity, but structure—alluding to "hypertexts" and rapidly evolving ways that we receive and process information amidst the intensification of globalization and the boom of the World Wide Web.[62]

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[60] Kirby, 55. See also Rifkin, *Settler Time*.
[61] Kirby refers to space in numerous registers: "topological, geopolitical, corporeal, psychic, discursive, and social" (15).
[62] Theodor Holm Nelson, *Selected Papers, 1977*, 1977, http://archive.org/details/SelectedPapers1977, 15. Nelson writes: "'Hyper-' is used in the mathematical sense of extension and generality (as in 'hyperspace,' 'hypercube') rather than the medical sense of 'excessive' ('hyperactivity'). There is no implication about size-- a hypertext could contain only 500 words or so. 'Hyper-' refers to structure and not size."

Hypertext, coined in the early 1960s by information technology forerunner, sociologist, and self-proclaimed "literary romantic"[63] Theodor Holm Nelson, is defined as "a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or represented on paper."[64] As conceptualized within the field of computer and information technology, a hypertext system allows a user to organize and search for documents through their links to concepts and ideas rather than traditional methods of alphabetical or numerical order; in hypertext, "horizontal and vertical hierarchies are forsaken in favour of…complex configurations and multiple combinations" of context and purpose.[65] The most well-known and ubiquitous hypertext is the World Wide Web, in which in infinite number of documents, applications, audiovisual media, and programs are connected in a vast searchable network. Because of its close attention to structure as necessarily "built to accept growth, change[,] and complex informational arrangements,"[66] hypertext technology finds a natural home in literary production and poststructuralist thought. Many features of hypertext overlap with formal and narratological strategies, such as "summaries, or maps of its contents and their interrelations… [and] annotations, additions and footnotes from scholars who have examined it."[67] Thus emerged hypertext fiction, a reader-directed and nonlinear digital literature made possible by computers.[68] In hypertext fiction, the reader plays an active role in the unfolding of

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[63] Owen Edwards, "Ted Nelson," *Forbes*, August 25, 1997, https://www.forbes.com/asap/1997/0825/134.html.
[64] Nelson, *Selected Papers, 1977*, 45.
[65] Alice Bell, *The Possible Worlds of Hypertext Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.
[66] Nelson, *Selected Papers, 1977*, 45.
[67] Nelson, *Selected Papers, 1977*, 45.
[68] Rita Wilson, "The Space(s) of Hypertext Fiction," *Alternation* 9, no. 2 (January 2002): 41, https://doi.org/10.10520/AJA10231757_640. See also Brooks Landon, "Hypertext and Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 20, no. 3 (1993): 449–56. Of course, narrative non-linearity is not exclusive to hypertext fiction—texts such as Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* (1963), Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963), and B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1967), to name just a few, have been retroactively claimed by hypertext theorists as proto-hypertexts. In fact, literature crucially shaped the early development of Nelson's hypertext systems: in a 1969 conference presentation, he used Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962)—what he called a "real hypertext"—to demonstrate the capabilities of a hypertext editing system. He would go on to call the year of research that led to that presentation "mis-spent"—not because of his use of Nabokov, but because it resulted in a system that "unfortunately dumbed

the narrative, clicking on a hyperlink to move from one individual window of text (a "lexia") to the next; because each lexia can contain more than one hyperlink, the work of hypertext fiction allows for multiple unique routes to navigate and experience the text. Because the reader can only encounter one lexia at a time, hypertext fiction produces a sense of heightened unpredictability. Unlike print novels, which offer visible and tangible wholes, hypertext fiction conceals its total structure, allowing "diverse and even antithetical statements coexist[ing] within a single structure, each capable of emerging in the act of reading."[69] With each following lexia unknown—and in some cases, potentially repeatable—the text "becomes *a present tense palimpsest* where what shines through are not past versions but potential, alternate views."[70]

Of course, *Tropic of Orange* is not technically a work of hypertext fiction. Unlike a reader of digital hypertext fiction moving from one isolated lexia to the next, the typical reader of *Tropic of Orange* will most likely read the novel in the traditional sequence, from the first page to the last. However, the HyperContexts asks the reader to confront this method of reading and the narrative it produces. Though not quite the lexia of hypertext fiction, the cells of the HyperContexts allow the reader to imagine and discover what alternative narrative possibilities lie beyond a reading that follows traditional narrative sequence. Laid out in its grid form, all seven characters, all seven days, and all noted locations exist on a single plane, visually evoking the cacophony of the many histories and discourses of settler colonialism. Considering Yamashita's first novel *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, Min Hyoung Song eloquently wonders, "How does one convey, capture, depict a simultaneity that has become such a salient feature of the world as daily apprehended by so many of its inhabitants without at the same time

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down the idea of hypertext." Theodor Holm Nelson, "[Pale Fire] PROPOSED SCRIPT FOR H'TEXT DEMO AT SJCC" (Spring Joint Computer Conference, Boston, 1969), 2, http://archive.org/details/ibd-1967.

[69] Wilson, "The Space(s) of Hypertext Fiction," 40.

[70] Michael Joyce, *Of Two Minds: Hypertext Pedagogy and Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 1995), 3, emphasis mine.

losing sight of a finite planet which everyone must share?"[71] We might consider the HyperContexts as the novel's first of many such efforts. Doreen Massey enriches this reading further, urging us to understand space not as a flat surface to be mapped or traversed, but as a dynamic configuration of social relations—a "simultaneity of stories-so-far," always in the making.[72] Her reconceptualization challenges the totalizing fixity of cartographic logic, offering a valuable way to think about spatial possibilities of "openness, and heterogeneity, and liveliness"—precisely the spatial imagination *Tropic of Orange* animates and that the HyperContexts visualizes.[73]

Curiously, the "grid" of the HyperContexts is presented without gridlines, the cells made visually distinct because of their even spacing following the alignment of horizontal and vertical axes. One might imagine that the gridlines are unnecessary because their absence graphically emphasizes the arbitrariness of borders as imbued with meaning by people, a position the novel evokes in its very title. The evenness of the cells departs from Western traditions of cartography that emphasize precision and scale when representing topographical features; if *Tropic of Orange* were to follow this logic, the cells for shorter chapters might be rendered smaller than the longer ones, signifying their relatively shorter length. This equality in size and therefore narrative significance tracks with Indigenous North American cartographic methods that emphasize cultural context over a standardized scale. Kelli Lyon Johnson notes that Inuit and sub-Arctic North American Indigenous mapmakers rendered topographical features proportionate to their importance to the community rather than to their actual size or presence, imbuing their maps

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[71] Min Hyoung Song, "Becoming Planetary," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 557.
[72] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005), 130. Massey articulates this in the form of three "propositions" as to how we should recognize space: first, as a "product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny;" second, as the "sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality;" and third, as "always under construction…. It is never finished; never closed" (9).
[73] Kirby, 5.

with cultural narratives indicating the "degree to which *relationships* among geographical features and locations supersede[d] mere representations of their existence on the ground."[74] Regardless of length or position within the narrative, each chapter—and by extension, each moment in time and place—is granted equal importance and urgency.

It also resonates with forms made possible by the Web, the content of each cell evoking the idea of a hyperlink, creating a chart where all narrative possibilities are presented simultaneously and equally accessible with a simple click;[75] there is no beginning or end, no here nor there—instead, the narrative is presented in all its coincident frenzy and commotion. Where the Table of Contents "recognizes the possibility of reading this book as a technology of containment," the HyperContexts opens the reader to the "simultaneity of plotlines and the various options with which to engage the diverging storylines, similar to the crisscrossing of L.A.'s freeways."[76] It is fitting that the novel formally refracts the many palimpsests of LA's infrastructure through hypertext fiction, a form born from the unprecedented magnitude of information networking that earned the Web the epithet the "information highway."

However, the HyperContexts, like all visual cartographic exercises—no matter how alternative—has its limits. Nevertheless, these limits only further enrich the novel's formal cacophony. Through its graphic tidiness, the HyperContexts appear to function for *Tropic of Orange* as a traditional map would for any kind of geographic terrain. With the mathematical and scientific promise of an orderly grid, it takes information from the body of the text, organizes it according to an evenly distributed standard measurement of time, and visually presents it for the

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[74] Kelli Lyon Johnson, "Writing Deeper Maps: Mapmaking, Local Indigenous Knowledges, and Literary Nationalism in Native Women's Writing," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 19, no. 4 (2007): 106-7.
[75] Joyce, *Of Two Minds*, 3. The effect is not unlike the "nomadic movement of ideas," described by Joyce, that is "made effortless by the electronic medium that makes it easy to cross borders (or erase them) with the swipe of a mouse" in hypertext fiction.
[76] Sudhinaraset, *Worlds at the End*, 42.

purpose of making legible the narrative's many moving parts. However, the uniformity of the grid is unable to represent the many narrative entanglements woven by the many movements throughout the novel: physical locations are manipulated by the titular orange, characters' paths intersect and diverge, and ultimately time itself seems to collapse in on itself. As the novel progresses (within a traditional beginning-to-end reading), the tidy HyperContexts grid proves less and less useful to traverse the novel's rapid and often seemingly random shift from character to character, narrative genre to narrative genre, and location to location. Upon closer inspection, the "locations" provided in the HyperContexts are not always anchored to specific and physical places in the world, venturing into the realm of the broad and abstract; for example, settings include "The World," "Avoiding the Harbor," "The Other Side," and "Over the Net."[77] As the present thickens, as time itself expands and contracts, as the eponymous orange manipulates lines of latitude and longitude as it moves northward, the HyperContexts' organizing emphasis on the even distribution of the seven days of the week borders on the absurd. The orderly one-dimensional cells of the grid cannot account for the multitude of mysterious and dramatic events that occur across the hemisphere over the course of the novel, including, but not limited to: a sudden outbreak of poisoned oranges across the Americas; an epic battle in which Rafaela transforms into a plumed serpent and consumes her attacker; the machinations of a hemispheric infant organ trafficking ring; and a homeless takeover of the freeway system and the media airwaves. The simplicity of the grid emphasizes by contrast the unwieldiness of the narrative, asking readers to question established ideas of linear uniformity, organization, and order. In its own inability to fully account for the cacophony of the narrative that emphasizes its own textual materiality, the HyperContexts invites the reader to consider alternate ways of reading and imagining.

[77] Chapters 22, 28, 30, and 43, respectively.

The Fruits of Empire

"No city, in fiction or film, has been more likely to figure as the icon of a really bad future," declares Mike Davis—adding parenthetically, "(or present, for that matter)." Exploring the scope of Los Angeles-based cultural narratives in search of representations of apocalypse, Davis scans the genres he encounters; they begin as one might expect: crime novels, historical novels, disaster fiction—and then, with a scant 30 titles to its name, he notes the existence of a body of "citrus fiction."[78] There is no further elaboration on the conventions of citrus fiction, but it highlights (somewhat whimsically) the significance of the orange in California's history and representation—which brings us to the novel's first narrative mapping: the eponymous orange, an object by which and onto which Yamashita maps the literal and metaphorical landscape of colonial violence. Like we are encouraged to see Los Angeles through the postures of the novel's many characters, we are also encouraged to occupy the position of the orange as a colonial commodity and see the legacy of its violence through its movement and its consequences, as well as the possibility of resistance.[79] This focus on materiality is demonstrated by the elaborate description of the orange tree in Gabriel's property that bears the eponymous orange. Despite its deep past, the orange grounds the novel's entrenchment in the material present, insisting on the tangible legacies of violence that postmodern abstraction might otherwise obscure. As it moves northward from Gabriel's Mazatlán home towards LA, the reader learns about its previous treks across the Americas:

> It was a rather sorry tree, yellowing perhaps from lack of some nutrient or another, but for some reason, [Rafaela] had been watching it every day…. Gabriel had actually brought this tree from Riverside eight years ago. It was a navel orange tree, maybe the

[78] Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (Metropolitan Books, 1998), 278-9.
[79] For a rich reading of the novel as disrupting the human/nonhuman binary through the orange, see Heejoo Park, "Nonhuman Subject and the Spatiotemporal Reimagination of the Borderlands in Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange," *Literature* 2, no. 4 (December 2022): 278–87, https://doi.org/10.3390/literature2040023.

> descendant of the original trees first brought to California from Brazil in 1873 and planted by L.C. Tibbetts. This was the sort of historic detail Gabriel liked. Bringing an orange tree (no matter that it was probably a hybrid) from Riverside, California to his place near Mazatlán was a significant act of some sort.[80]

To Gabriel, the orange tree's lineage—its origin in 19th century Brazil, its cultivation in Riverside by L.C. Tibbetts, and its transplantation in Mexico—is a charming historical curiosity. However, this seemingly innocuous appreciation for botanical history obscures the settler colonial structures that made such transplantation possible. Ecology is not incidental to settler colonialism—it is foundational. Colonizing powers have always relied on the exploitation and expropriation of the natural world—through land seizure, unfettered resource extraction, and ecological disruption—to establish and maintain power. Under the guise of scientific progress, settlers framed their interventions as rational, productive, and even righteous—characterizing the theft of Indigenous lands as making "proper" use of land "incorrectly" cultivated or "wasted" by Indigenous peoples.

Settler colonial conquest is broadly understood to be governed by a logic of elimination. Approached from an ecocritical perspective, the settler desire to destroy and replace Indigenous peoples and lands might analogously expressed as the desire to "transplant and redefine," both literally and metaphorically: by introducing new flora and fauna, eradicating native ones, and breeding new species; by building and destroying surrounding landscapes to "nostalgically [transform] their new environments to mimic their homeland;" and by dispossessing and annihilating Indigenous human communities to grant settlers the space and time to take root and

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[80] Yamashita, 11.

grow.[81] By dominating the very landscape, settlers are enabled to dominate its inhabitants (and vice versa).

Discursively speaking, environmental thought has shaped Western worldviews as far back as Ancient Greece, where it was believed that different geographic climate zones produce a different set of physiological and temperamental effects in their people; therefore, one could make sweeping generalizations about entire populations based simply on the zones they inhabited.[82] Versions of such environmental determinism prevailed in European medicine for centuries (until the development of germ theory), creating categories of humans with essentialized traits corresponding to their natural surroundings. As European powers expanded their imperial ambitions, all manner of new exotic plants entered the realm of European knowledge and classification. Pre-Linnaean botanical method often anthropomorphized plants, leading scientists to conceive of human populations as similarly receptive or resistant to guidance, conditioning, or improvement by outside actors.[83] The language of botany provided fertile ground for colonial expansion, presenting system with which one could identify and classify—that is, racialize—possibilities of cultivation: who was naturally suited for it, who was wild or untamable and in need of it, and who could be strategically transplanted in the name of order and profit. Botanical discourse not only justified colonial intervention, but also obfuscated

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[81] Anthropology and Environment Society, "Life on the Frontier: The Environmental Anthropology of Settler Colonialism," *Engagement* (blog), September 20, 2016, https://aesengagement.wordpress.com/thematic-series-2/life-on-the-frontier-the-environmental-anthropology-of-settler-colonialism/.

[82] Paul S. Sutter, "The Tropics: A Brief History of an Environmental Imaginary," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Oxford University Press, 2014), 180-1, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195324907.013.0007.

[83] Interestingly, the novel evokes the Early Modern anthropomorphism of plants with a twist—it is the eponymous orange that moves north with a will of its own, bringing with it the deep-rooted *consequences* of colonialism rather than its violences.

its brutality by reframing violent displacement as benevolent cultivation informed by scientific truth.[84]

The orange itself is ripe with history specific to the novel's California setting. By the turn of the 19th century, Southern California was home to hundreds of thousands of acres of citrus groves, labor plantations, and irrigation canals, earning the region (and Riverside, home to Tibbetts, more specifically) the title "Orange Empire." This empire was built upon the ongoing destruction of Indigenous communities across the Southwest, forcing Indigenous peoples to construct the very missions, plantations, and agricultural infrastructures that would further abuse their labor (and that of variously racialized migrant groups) for immense profit.[85] The California orange became an icon of the American West, conjuring romantic images of Spanish colonial occupation, the rugged spirit of the frontier, and capitalist get-rich-quick fantasy. Like the banana plantations of Central America—whose exploitative economies enabled the rise of the so-called "banana republics" and forced entire nations to serve the demands of US multinational fruit companies—the Orange Empire was part of a hemispheric pattern of ecological imperialism structured by settler colonial logics of exploited racialized labor, land seizure, and environmental extraction. The wealth and expansion of the Orange Empire significantly impacted subsequent settler development of Southern California and the country at large, its need for water, land, labor, and capital triggering vast transcontinental and transnational movements of people and resources to support it. The orange industry was instrumental to the rise of corporate capitalism in Southern California, laying the economic and infrastructural foundation for the transnational flows of capital and labor in motion throughout the novel's cartography of NAFTA-era Los

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[84] Roya Biggie, "Displacement's Botanical Roots: The Racial Rhetoric of Transplantation in Early Modern Thought," *English Literary Renaissance* 54, no. 3 (Autumn 2024): 374-400.

[85] Citrus Power Crew, "From Citrus to Logistics: Centuries of Labor," *Sweet and Sour Citrus* (blog), accessed March 1, 2025, https://sweetandsourcitrus.org/from-citrus-to-logistics-centuries-of-labor/.

Angeles.[86] Yamashita's orange is the fruit of centuries of oppressed labor and annihilated lives. As the orange drags the Tropic of Cancer (and everything that comes with it) northward to Los Angeles, returning to the place where it was grafted, it manifests the histories of colonial violence that do not disappear. All said and done, the orange portends, you reap what you sow.[87]

Rafaela contemplates that while "Gabriel had taken some pains to plant the tree…to mark the Tropic of Cancer," she herself "didn't think much about Gabriel's fascination with an imaginary line," though she "[knew] instinctively the importance of the surviving tree." Even before the orange fruits and begins its northward journey, Rafaela intuits the weight of its history. Narrated in a lush and lyrical reminiscent of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Rafaela senses the tree as a living organism rooted in the here and now, as opposed to the symbolic historical importance projected by Gabriel.[88] That the tree grows along the Tropic of Cancer underscores the novel's

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[86] Ronald Tobey and Charles Wetherell, "The Citrus Industry and the Revolution of Corporate Capitalism in Southern California, 1887-1944," *California History* 74, no. 1 (1995): 6–21, https://doi.org/10.2307/25177466. It is worth noting that the orange is not the only commodity crossing borders in the novel. Susan Thananopavarn calls our attention to the infant organ trafficking ring that runs parallel to the orange's movement that Rafaela attempts to escape with her son. She draws on anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes's concept of *rotten trade*: a "trade in 'bads'—arms, drugs, stolen goods, hazardous and toxic products as well as traffic in babies, bodies and slave labor—as opposed to ordinary and normative trade in 'goods.'" Scheper-Hughes quoted in Thananopavarn, *LatinAsian Cartographies: History, Writing, and the National Imaginary* (Rutgers University Press, 2018), https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/176/monograph/book/57880, 123.

[87] "Reap what you sow" is incidentally also the narrative and organizational conceit of Juan Gonzalez's *Harvest of Empire*, an excellent comprehensive examination of US intervention across Latin America and its direct relationship to the many various waves of mass migration to the US. See Juan Gonzalez*, Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America,* Revised edition (Penguin Books, 2011).

[88] It is worth noting that Gabriel's insistence on the tree's transplanted alignment with the Tropic of Cancer—and his dedication to the Mazatlán home more broadly—is shaped by his positionality as a Mexican American. This attachment contains the tension between a (sincere) diasporic yearning to reconnect with the "homeland" and the risk of fetishizing that homeland, transforming it into a symbol of return. While liberal multiculturalism valorizes hybridity as a peaceful coexistence, it often obscures the violence that underlies such "blending," as seen in Gabriel's own fascination with the tree's history. It also creates the subject of the global or cosmopolitan multicultural citizen, at home anywhere in the world but especially in the "homeland." This also is ensnared in transnational power dynamics animated by border crossing: though a racialized subjectivity may preclude Gabriel from full national belonging in the US, this does not translate in his movement to Mexico; rather, his formal US citizenship places him in a position of significant material power. Inadvertently, his actions echo settler colonial logics of property acquisition, where cultural and territorial belonging are marked by the same acts of possession and transplantation—this too is evidence of the transit of empire. However, he ultimately feels dislocated by and critical of this attachment as he uncovers the web of conspiracies that take him across many other borders: "I had for so long yearned for my place in México, for the tropical privacy of my hideout. If I held a historic connection to this place, it suddenly felt vague. I hadn't recognized my own place…. No one in my entire family had ever bothered to

interest in both natural and constructed borders. The "imaginary line" Gabriel reveres—and Rafaela largely dismisses—has no physical presence on Earth, indicating only the northernmost point reached by the movement of the sun. It is through human intervention that the Tropic of Cancer links the terrestrial to the celestial and becomes imbued with symbolic and imperial significance.[89] Though astronomically derived, this "border made plain by the sun itself" has long been made geopolitically real, demarcating the edges of US imperial expansion—from the "acquisition" of Caribbean islands and the Philippines during the Spanish-American War to ongoing colonial and economic domination across the Americas. From the Tropic of Cancer to the US–Mexico border, from the streets of Los Angeles to imperial and transnational trade routes, the orange produces lines both visible and invisible—natural, geopolitical, and narrative—that Yamashita plots across overlapping terrains to reveal the entangled legacies of empire.

In the following sections, I consider the novel's tracking of Buzzworm and Manzanar, figures who behold and traverse the city from different spatial and racial vantage points to produce a narrative cartography of LA that magnifies the overlapping cacophonies of settler violence—of gentrification, incarceration, environmental degradation, war—in contrast to the hegemonic accounts that flatten and mute them. Through their experiences of the city and the climactic freeway gridlock, *Tropic of Orange* maps historical and ongoing infrastructures of oppression and solidarity alike onto the palimpsest of Los Angeles, offering an unexpectedly hopeful vision that the end as we see it—of time, of space, of the world—is not quite as it seems.

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come here. They called it Gabe's Folly. 'Hey, ése, what about investing in the homeland—East L.A.?' they snickered" Yamashita, 92.

[89] Sutter, 180.

Buzzworm's Cartography of "Makin' contact"

The colonial logics of cartography are so embedded in the state and everyday life that it can be characterized by what David Turnbull calls a "taken-for-grantedness,"[90] a generally accepting and uncritical orientation towards space that obfuscates its historical and temporal contingency. If there is one character in *Tropic of Orange* who takes nothing about the space he moves through—and the attempts to represent in any form or medium—for granted, it is Buzzworm. As he takes one of his countless walks around South Central LA, he contemplates how "some representations of reality were presented for your visual and aural gratification so as to tap into what you *thought* you understood" rather than expose complex, clashing, and potentially painful realities. "It was a starting place," he muses, "but not an ending."[91] The "it" of Buzzworm's statement is ambiguous; it might quite simply refer to the thought itself as inaugurating a longer meditation on representation, or perhaps on the limits of knowledge. Given the novel's spatiotemporal cartography of Los Angeles as a palimpsest for various racial and colonial histories, I read Buzzworm's statement as referring specifically to the streets of South Central (and other similar LA neighborhoods) marked by layers of governmental neglect and violence as spaces of life—a *starting* place—rather than of death or abjection.

Infrastructure is typically understood as the material foundation of a place, comprised of a dense network of variously overlapping and transecting systems—roadways, train tracks, flight paths, tunnels, bridges, waterways, pipelines, waste management systems, communication lines, and utility grids—built into the very landscape. Within capitalist modernity, the development of infrastructure is heralded as progress made material, connecting and thereby imposing cohesion

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[90] David Turnbull, *Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers: Comparative Studies in the Sociology of Scientific and Indigenous Knowledge*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2000), 94. "[T]here has been a rather heterogeneous, locally contingent process in which maps have become integrated with science and the state. In that process the space that we have taken for granted has been produced. Space is a contingent assemblage, though we find this hard to see because we live in a knowledge space in which maps are a mimetic reflection of external objective space."

[91] Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 25, italics original.

and order upon the territory it covers—"like so many jigsaw pieces," as articulated by Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin.[92] Infrastructural development purports to positively reconfigure not just space but also time, promising its users improved speed and efficiency, enhancing the productivity of their daily lives. These infrastructural networks claim to unfetter the lived experience of the "here" and "now," making water piped hours before from a distant source appear in an instant or allowing people to "visit" web sites across the planet.[93] Scholars across various disciplines have generatively problematized such a superficial characterization of infrastructure, analyzing its affective, historical, political, temporal, and symbolic dimensions across various spatiotemporal scales, from the individual act to the planetary epoch.[94]

Tropic of Orange attends to LA's urban infrastructure as a tool and imposition of colonial domination. As Tracey Banivanua-Mar and Penelope Edmonds note, "the impact of settler colonialism is starkly visible in the landscapes it produces," systemically and systematically creating, organizing, and destroying space resulting in "socially coded areas of human habitation and trespass that are bordered, policed and defended."[95] Through the pedestrian amblings of Buzzworm, a Black, working-class Vietnam War veteran and lifelong South Central LA resident, the novel exposes the violence of urban infrastructural policy that strategically and intentionally displaces, dispossesses, and disenfranchises racialized communities in the name of the public

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[92] Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities, and the Urban Condition* (Routledge, 2001), 8.
[93] Graham and Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism*, 11.
[94] The introduction to the edited volume *The Promise of Infrastructure* provides a comprehensive review of the scholarship of infrastructure and temporality; see Hannah Appel, Nikhil Anand, and Akhil Gupta, "Temporality, Politics, and the Promise of Infrastructure," in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, ed. Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel (Duke University Press, 2018), 1–38.
[95] Tracey Banivanua-Mar and Penelope Edmonds, "Making Space in Settler Colonies," in *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*, ed. Tracey Banivanua-Mar and Penelope Edmonds (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 2, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230277946.

good.[96] Every day he moves through the neighborhood, offering insightful, humorous, and sometimes acerbic advice to neighbors and observations about daily live, community issues, and the changing space of the city. As he walks and talks his way around Los Angeles, he serves as a kind of tour guide for the reader, providing a narrative map that colors our encounter with the city. Though LA is more commonly thought of as a city of vehicular travel, Buzzworm travels only by foot as he narrates his urban surroundings. A pedestrian in a city designed around car use, Buzzworm's movement across the city is "off the map" that privileges the network of freeways, overpasses, and other roadways that facilitate the rapid movement of people and commodities required for capitalist profit.

Where some characters inhabit the logic of cities designed to incentivize car use (such as Gabriel or Bobby, whose car use expands their range of movement within and beyond Los Angeles), Buzzworm evokes the figure of the flâneur by refusing such modes of travel. The flâneur, the "passionate spectator" popularized by Charles Baudelaire, ambles through the city in no rush and with no destination in mind, enraptured by his surroundings and "[rejoicing] in his incognito" in the crowd.[97] This literary figure encounters the cities he inhabits from a place of privilege and remove, evoking a sensation of wonder and leisure in the reader. Where being "incognito" as a vulnerable person living in poverty in a city can attune the reader to institutional neglect or alienation, the flâneur's experience of being "incognito" is not a sign of social abandonment but of a luxuriant absence from the oppressiveness of modern subjectivity.

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[96] The work of Mike Davis is inescapable in the study of Los Angeles, and for good reason. As space does not permit me a fuller review of the history of urbanization in Los Angeles, please see Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, New Edition (Verso, 2006); *Ecology of Fear*. Cristina Rodriguez helpfully elucidates much of the policy at play in the novel; see Rodriguez, "'Relentless Geography': Los Angeles' Imagined Cartographies in Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange," *Asian American Literature: Discourses & Pedagogies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 104–36.

[97] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Thom Mayne, 2nd edition (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 9.

Baudelaire's flâneur's ambulatory gaze is taken up by Walter Benjamin to theorize modernity and the rise of commercialization. Reflecting on 20th century capitalist reification, Benjamin's flâneur is an "ambiguous figure, partly perceptive of the shifts in subject-object relationships brought about by industrialization, partly deluded about them."[98] Though Benjamin marked the 1930s as heralding the disappearance of the flâneur, many scholars and artists have revisited the figure in a 21st century context, attending to the intersections of race, gender, and nationality. Sara Faradji productively revisits the figure of the postcolonial flâneur in her study of Teju Cole's *Open City*, reading how the novel's protagonist is able to "engag[e] in more than mere observation" in his walks around New York City, his unique position as an economically privileged Nigerian immigrant informing his struggle between empathy for the "traumas, racial violence, and historical atrocities that many immigrants endure" and his concurrent deeper detachment from them.[99] Buzzworm functions as an iteration a racialized flâneur who supports the reader in navigating the space of Los Angeles, but not from a posture of leisure or from the position that being incognito is necessarily liberating.

Unlike Baudelaire's 19th century privileged aesthete and Benjamin's 20th century wandering symbol of urban capitalist alienation, Buzzworm is no mere spectator in the spaces he crosses and the people he encounters—he takes an active role in the uplift of the community: "You saw Buzzworm walking the hood every day, walkin' and talkin', *making contact.*" The idea that he is "making contact" through his travels is key; his ambulation around South Central is not

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[98] Martina Lauster, "Walter Benjamin's Myth of the 'Flâneur,'" *The Modern Language Review* 102, no. 1 (2007): 142. "His greatest delusion is spatial, since he experiences the streets as an interior, a mixture of shopping arcade, conservatory, living-room, panorama, music hall, cabinet of curiosities or botanical collection, and Great Exhibition hall. This interior unites all times, all parts of the globe, and all phenomena of contemporary society, and their availability in one moment or glance intoxicates the flaneur so that his inner life begins to tick like a clock, signifying a physical internalization of the world of objects." Lauster's argument is built on a critique of Benjamin's "carelessness" in reading of Baudelaire and other sources.

[99] Sara Faradji, "A Walk to Forget: The Postcolonial Flâneur's Negating Journey in Teju Cole's Open City," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 53, no. 3 (2022): 2-4. Faradji's reading Cole's novel and the figure of the flaneur is animated by and constructed in favor of a framework of "critical postcolonial cosmopolitanism."

the “elegantly artificial behavior” of the classic flâneur that enacts a “force field repelling the frenetic activity around him.”[100] As Graham and Marvin so irreverently declare, “PROXIMITY ≠ MEANINGFUL RELATIONS!” That is, simply being in, near, or connected to a space does not guarantee a significant or profound connection, exposing the kinds of disconnection fostered by urban infrastructural development and “erod[ing] the notion that cities, regions and nations necessarily have any degree of internal coherence at all.”[101] By making contact with the unhoused, incarcerated, impoverished, and otherwise marginalized residents of Los Angeles, Buzzworm traces a cityscape that takes meaningful contact as its very foundation—evoking Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of “contact zones,” or spaces where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” in ways that reveal “contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths.[102]

In this way Buzzworm’s ambulatory mapping of Los Angeles contrasts against the model of postmodern “cognitive mapping” offered by Jameson in *Postmodernism*. Kathleen Kirby offers an extended critique of Jameson’s “need for maps” as a solution to the “problem” of postmodern urban space, asking, “A problem for whom?” Kirby argues that, like the colonialist cartographers, Jameson enters an “unfamiliar landscape and seek[s] to treat it like a familiar one” based on his own position of gender, economic, and cultural privilege.[103] Where Jameson demonstrates an anxiety that the “‘postmodern body...is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed,’” Kirby observes a process in which the “space makes his body *become* conscious to him, an occurrence that is unusual, as his is accustomed…to forget the body”—unlike people who are

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[100] Kirby, 75.
[101] Graham and Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism*, 15-6.
[102] Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession*, 1991, 34.
[103] Kirby, 57-8.

racialized, gendered, or otherwise visually marked in ways that do not permit them to "forget" their bodies.[104] Buzzworm, as a Black man on the streets of LA or in the battlegrounds of Vietnam, is constantly aware of (or made aware of) his body and the meanings that others project onto it.

Though Kirby concludes that most all cartographic impulses are rooted in a desire to fix and dominate both the space and the subject,[105] Black and Native feminist scholars have recuperated mapping beyond its colonial functions. Against traditional Eurocentric cartographies that render Black subjects "ungeographic"—lacking developed spatial knowledge, history, and agency—Katherine McKittrick limns a legacy of Black women's geographies that "manipulate[d] and recast the meanings of slavery's geographic terrain,"[106] revealing not only the violent exclusions inherent in dominant geographies but also "provid[ing] spatial clues as to how more humanly workable geographies might be imagined."[107] In *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, Mishuana Goeman likewise theorizes *(re)mapping* as the metaphoric, epistemological, and material practices through which Native women confront and interrogate the conditions of settler domination.[108] She explores how these practices—in literature, activism, and daily life—resist the linear, extractive spatial practices of settler colonialism by asserting land as relational, dynamic, and always in process.[109] Taken together, McKittrick and Goeman offer cartographies that critically interrogate settler logics of property

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[104] Jameson quoted in Kirby, 61-2.

[105] Kirby, 64. "There may prove to be, then, different forms of relating to space than those implied by mapping, ones that continue to be practiced today by those people who literally cannot afford to separate themselves from the ground: the indigenous, the indigent, women (until recently), and especially, I think, children. Mapping excludes these subjectively variable perspectives on epistemology, but more importantly, it ignores the variability of subjective structure."

[106] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xvii, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv711.

[107] McKittrick, xxiii.

[108] Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt46nq0v.

[109] Goeman, 6. She cites Massey here.

and dispossession, turning instead to the geographies wrought by the embodied experiences and enduring struggles of Black and Native women as generative sites of spatial knowledge, imagination, and resistance.[110] Both McKittrick and Goeman theorize mapping as a practice of resistance and reimagining, a framework that helps illuminate how Buzzworm's spatial narrations in *Tropic of Orange* enact a cacophonous cartography—insisting on overlapping, non-linear, and unruly spatial relations that trouble colonial orders. In his ambulations through South Central and other marginalized neighborhoods, Buzzworm enacts the kind of Black geographic work McKittrick describes, rendering visible the political, historical, and affective dimensions of spaces that dominant cartographies either erase or deem peripheral;[111] his presence reframes these zones as lived sites of struggle, care, and community knowledge rather than spaces of absence. Buzzworm's movements and his insistence on bearing witness to the layered, contested realities of these spaces contribute to the novel's cacophony in Byrd's sense—a dissonant, polyvocal refusal of singular, totalizing narratives that instead foregrounds the entangled spatial histories of racialized life under settler capitalism.

Admitting that the study of infrastructure can be "frequently mundane to the point of boredom," Susan Leigh Star catalogues the field's typical objects of study: "things such as plugs, standards, and bureaucratic forms" and "lists of numbers and technical specifications, or as

[110] McKittrick writes, "Bodily violence spatializes other locations of dehumanization and restraint, rendering bodily self-possession and other forms of spatial ownership virtually unavailable to the violated subject. One of the many ways violence operates across gender, sexuality, and race is through multiscalar discourses of ownership: having "things," owning lands, invading territories, possessing someone, are, in part, narratives of displacement that reward and value particular forms of conquest.6 And, at least for my purposes, this reward system repetitively returns us to the body, black subjecthood, and the where of blackness, not just as it is owned, but as black subjects participate in ownership" (3). Goeman writes, "The Native women's texts with which I work are documents of the violence inflicted on their communities and a critique of the spatial restructuring of their lands, bodies, and nations; they are what Glissant refers to as a grammar of liberation that seriously engages alternative spatial practices to that of making land into property or treating land as purely a surface upon which we act" (15).

[111] McKittrick, 7. "That is, invisible geographies, marginality, indicate a struggle, and ways of knowing the world, which can also illustrate wider conceptual and material spaces for consideration: real, lived dispossessions and reclamations, for example. The margins and invisibility, then, are also lived and right in the middle of our historically present landscape."

hidden mechanisms subtending those processes more familiar to social scientists." They are, in short, "dead lists"[112]—fixed and static documents compiled and archived according to the needs of the overseeing institution or state. The infrastructure as mapped by Buzzworm, however, is far from dead—it is a commitment to life itself. Rather than reflecting from an uncritical or alienated remove, Buzzworm's navigation of the space is a mode of building deeper community relationships. His care for the life that the city ignores is evidenced in his reputation as a "walking social services," a business card always at the ready with helpful resource information scrawled on the back: "rehab number, free clinic, legal services, shelter, soup kitchen, hotline."[113] As he makes his way through the neighborhoods using the infrastructure constructed to marginalize him, Buzzworm ensures communal survival by providing the people of South Central an unofficial network of support services of his creation. Though this infrastructure is not visible on any map, he makes sure his neighbors are seen to be cared for.

Buzzworm maps the city as it is lived, as opposed to how it appears on the map. Official maps, he observes, are functionally useless for this purpose:

> He followed the thick lines on the map showing the territorial standing of Crips versus Bloods. Old map. 1972. He shook his head. Even if it were true, whose territory was it anyway? Might as well show which police departments covered which beats; which local, state, and federal politicians claimed which constituents; which kind of colored people (brown, black, yellow) lived where; which churches/temples served which people; which schools got which kids…[114]

This train of thought continues for almost seven additional lines, Buzzworm listing all the information that would allow someone to traverse or understand Compton with a meaningful purpose. The list includes information that might be catalogued by City Hall or similar institutions, such as "which taxpayers were registered to vote," and information only accessible

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[112] Susan Leigh Star, "The Ethnography of Infrastructure," *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (1999): 377.
[113] Yamashita, 26, emphasis added.
[114] Yamashita, 81. Incidentally, the map Buzzworm is reading from Mike Davis's *City of Quartz*, torn out and given to him by Gabriel.

by making contact: “which liquor stores served which people; which houses were crack; which houses banging; which houses on welfare.” Buzzworm unsettles the map’s pretense of mastery of its territory by interweaving official and unofficial knowledges, attending to the spatiotemporal contingencies that render the space subject to change. The list is presented with consistent anaphora, each informational criterion appearing equally unadorned as the ones preceding and following it; in this way, Buzzworm’s enumeration of what the map is missing narratively enacts in microcosm the formal cacophony of the HyperContexts. Each piece of information missing from the official map is presented with equal urgency, each equally important as “layers of the real map” that Buzzworm needs.[115]

Buzzworm’s textual map paints Los Angeles as a palimpsest, thick with layers of history that continue to shape the lives of its most marginalized residents. Presented on its own, the map in Buzzworm’s hands neatly figures into dominant representations of Compton as the archetypal gangland. Buzzworm challenges this cartographic ahistoricity, each narrative layer specifically naming a moment in time which, when beheld with all other layers, produce a cacophony of colonialism’s “incommensurate but related and interconnected histories and formations.”[116] Knowledge of “which liquor stores served which people” layers onto the map the 1992 riots following the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department officers in the use of excessive force on Rodney King, a swelling of outrage against police brutality that disproportionately targeted Black people and of the increasing violence between the Korean American and Black communities; understanding “which local, state, and federal politicians claimed which constituents” layers LA County’s controversial practice of redistricting that selectively and strategically redraws municipal borders to ensure political gain while dividing communities and

[115] Yamashita, 81.
[116] Sudhinaraset, 7.

disconnecting them from resources;[117] and to see "which kind of colored people (brown, black, yellow) lived where" is to see the layers of discriminatory housing and infrastructural policy that restricts racialized and immigrant populations to certain areas and/or displaces them to new ones. The organizing conceit of the map—delineating Bloods vs Crips territory—excavates the many layers of discriminatory housing, bank lending, policing, and redlining practices that Stefano Bloch and Susan A. Phillips trace back to "New Deal era local, state and federal policy" that "all but ensured a ghettoization in which gangs became entrenched," thereby illustrating how "inequality is embedded in and made possible by cartographic practice."[118] Asking, "whose territory is it anyway?" Buzzworm defies the stasis of the 1972 map with its spatiotemporal boundaries that cannot attune to the neighborhood's true vigor and plasticity, defying by extension the ownership the map attempts to assert over the territory itself and the lives of its residents.

There is no character more in sync with the people of Los Angeles than Buzzworm. Whether personally seeing to the needs of his neighbors or sleeping through the night, he always has his radio "plugged into one ear," the endless stream of music and talk shows "massaging the nerves" in his brain and serving as a soft but constant "inner voice."[119] His narrative voice is similarly musical, rife with colloquialisms, wordplay, anaphora, and syntactical syncopation that evokes the flow of hip hop. While some mistakenly assume that "he wasn't paying no attention with that thing in his ear," Buzzworm demonstrates a heightened ability to listen to what is around him and what comes through his headphones that Natalie Aghoro calls a "dual

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[117] Redistricting remains a problem in LA to this day, and racism continues to be a significant contributing factor. See Jill Cowan, Serge F. Kovaleski, and Leanne Abraham, "How a New City Council Map of L.A. Turned Into a Political Brawl," *The New York Times*, September 3, 2023, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/03/us/los-angeles-city-council-redistricting.html.
[118] Stefano Bloch and Susan A. Phillips, "Mapping and Making Gangland: A Legacy of Redlining and Enjoining Gang Neighbourhoods in Los Angeles," *Urban Studies* 59, no. 4 (March 1, 2022): 751–2, https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980211010426.
[119] Yamashita, 27-9.

receptivity."[120] This ability to concurrently process information coming from his direct surroundings and from his radio allows him to put the local in conversation with the global in real time, to synthesize what he learns on the ground from his neighbors with what he learns through the disembodied airwaves. Armed with this uniquely situated knowledge, Buzzworm returns to the streets of his community "so's to be ready with the dialogue" to speak against city and corporate officials who would "pit black against brown."[121] Thus the work Buzzworm provides for his community is not just individual and unofficial, but structural as well. He mediates the neighborhood's internal conflicts ("one side got crack, other got the weapons…someone had to be there to get the sides to see eye to eye"), earning him the attention of local politicians ("the big guns") who solicit his support when they want to "do the political hip hop"[122]—that is, appearing to uplift the community by "preaching the gospel of hope not dope" while simultaneously establishing control by quashing dissent, ultimately warning: "[d]on't get no ideas." Buzzworm's influence extends to the mass information networks of the media, as Gabriel seeks him out when in need of a story, insider information, or an on-the-ground sleuth.

Where a tourist or privileged spectator may behold South Central as racially dehumanized, Buzzworm refuses one-dimensional maps that demarcate which people are deserving of care and which are not. He serves as an active commentator on the maps of the city, sharing with the reader the history—and his opinion of the history—of the changing space of South Central at the hands of corporations and city councils interested in demolishing homes and community spaces to expand the freeway system and other infrastructures (infrastructures that

[120] Aghoro, 155.
[121] Yamashita, 102.
[122] Yamashita, 216.

South Central residents are unlikely to benefit from).[123] Moving through the city and actively processing the information imbued in his environs and coming through his radio, Buzzworm produces an infrastructure and map of Los Angeles that allows for mutability and contingency to be accounted for.

Buzzworm does not simply walk through Los Angeles—he listens, he talks, he makes contact. Through these layered practices, he seeks to connect people and communities who have been divided or displaced by failed or nonexistent infrastructures. He cultivates a cartography rooted in a critical awareness of and empathy for the vast array of peoples, experiences, and histories of the city. "[Listening] to everything the air had to offer," Buzzworm extends that offer to his neighbors, "trying to let the brothers know they had to expand their horizons."[124] Tuning into "rap, jazz, R&B, talk shows, classical, NPR, religious channels, Mexican, even the Korean channel"[125] on the radio, Buzzworm enacts a listening practice that "resists and actively counters the systemic segregation" of LA's racialized communities.[126] Though the experience of racialized discrimination and violence is not homogenous across these various groups, what matters more is that the listener recognize and experience them in their layered relationality and coexistence. Buzzworm "didn't know a thing they were saying" on the Korean radio station, "but he liked the sounds" so much he repeats them to his Korean neighbor, creating a moment of mirth and connection when his neighbor—between laughing fits—informs him he has recited a laxative

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[123] Gilbert Estrada examines the strategic displacement of predominantly Mexican American communities in East LA as a result of freeway development. These infrastructural changes (ushered in by the local governments and the Sears department store) claimed that the development would overall improve the lives of East LA residents, but Estrada indicates that in reality this was simply not the case. See Gilbert Estrada, "If You Build It, They Will Move: The Los Angeles Freeway System and the Displacement of Mexican East Los Angeles, 1944-1972," *Southern California Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2005): 287–315, https://doi.org/10.2307/41172272.
[124] Yamashita, 102-3.
[125] Yamashita, 29.
[126] Aghoro, 156.

advertisement.[127] Buzzworm's overlapping traversals of spatial and aural infrastructures reveals and creates new layers of LA's palimpsest in the present tense, "uniting the community not into a unitary, but diversified whole with various cultures enriching the unique, lived experience" of the place.[128] Amidst settler colonialism's cacophonies, Buzzworm encourages his neighbors expand their experience of the time and place of LA, to "[h]ear life in another sound zone."[129] With the life of the community flowing all around and sounds from the world flowing from the radio, Buzzworm's Los Angeles is not a the end of a journey through time and space, but a beginning that invites you to "walk to some other rhythms."[130]

In the section that follows, I move from Buzzworm to Manzanar Murakami. Buzzworm encounters Los Angeles from a mobile position on the ground from within the community that is informed by the aerial infrastructures of radio waves; Manzanar is the reverse, perched atop an overpass, alone, at a physical remove from the expanse of terrestrial movement he surveys below. Occupying a different geographical and racial position than Buzzworm, Manzanar excavates a map that permeates the layers of earth upon which Los Angeles is constructed and the millennia over which they formed. Between Buzzworm's map from below and Manzanar's map from above—both entangling aurality into the space and time of the city—the novel suggests a way that we might begin to "put down all the layers of the real map."[131]

Manzanar Murakami's Mapping Layers

There is a manifest destiny-like logic to the ongoing commitment to dominate the natural landscape of Southern California. Though indigenous peoples thrived across the region for millennia, there is "[n]o belief more deeply rooted in the Southern Californian mind than the

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[127] Yamashita, 29.
[128] Aghoro, 156.
[129] Yamashita, 102-3.
[130] Yamashita, 102-3.
[131] Yamashita, 81.

self-serving conviction that Los Angeles would be Death Valley," remarks Mike Davis, "except for the three great aqueducts that transfer the stolen snowmelt of the Sierra and Rockies to its lawns and pools."[132] Buzzworm produces a map of highly localized histories of racist and colonial violence, informed by what goes on in the broader world but still firmly anchored in the spaces he himself moves through and the people he encounters. Manzanar exponentially amplifies the scale of Buzzworm's map, making visible (or rather, audible) the vast overlapping layers of planetary history that saturate Los Angeles despite the imposed borders of municipality, state, nation, and free trade agreements. As Manzanar experiences the music of the city, he wonders, "But what were these mapping layers?" implicitly connecting his cartographic project to Buzzworm's in spite of their difference in scope.

Surveying the city from atop a Harbor Freeway overpass, Manzanar Murakami "conducts" the flow of daily traffic. His serious commitment to conducting the city earns him a reputation as kind of an urban legend, an eccentric if harmless angel floating above the City of Angels. Though undoubtedly out of sync with life "on the ground"—rumor has it he left behind his family, home, and all material possessions to dedicate himself to his vocation as a conductor (much to the ire of the local Japanese American community that considers him a "blight" upon their model minority image)—listening carefully and connecting to the cadence and rhythms of the city proves to be his forte. In the syntax and descriptive prose of his narrative voice, Manzanar narratively evokes the melodies he conducts. From the cacophony of the daily movement of commuter cars, school buses, and shipping trucks, Manzanar perceives a symphony that "united families, created a community, a great society, an entire civilization of sound."[133] One might assume that an alternative map of LA's infrastructure would reject such

[132] Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 10.
[133] Yamashita, 35.

narratives of cohesion, perhaps likening Los Angeles to a body bisected by the freeway system; Manzanar, however, conducts the freeway reveling in a sense of unity that "pumping and pulsating, that blood connection, the great heartbeat of a great city."[134] While this image of the freeways as a healthy artery that keeps the city running overlaps with one mobilized by urban developers and private companies that displace racialized communities to construct the freeway system—a logic of the freeway that Buzzworm intentionally refuses in his ambulatory mapping—Manzanar does not make this comparison in the interest in capitalist gain. The freeways and the vehicles that traverse it are not only routes but also "root[s]," nourishing the "organic living entity" of Los Angeles;[135] a former surgeon, Manzanar's commitment to the protection of life gives form to the city as a whole body alive with movement and sound.

Listening to the city as a living body, Manzanar keeps time in "the vibration rumbling through the cement and steel" that resonates in his own body.[136] Under Manzanar's baton, time on the freeway proceeds not to facilitate and supervise productivity, but as an expression of human affect. Observing a stretch of time where traffic is "thick but moving," Manzanar artistically interprets this movement not in its relation to the restrictions of the standard workday—time taken to "leave their offices, pack their belongings, descend in elevators, retrieve cars from parking lots, plod through city streets," and so on—but in the feelings it arouses in the people: "An incredible yearning went forth, perhaps of love and desire. Even if it were only the simple hunger for dinner, it was…sensed in a brutal and yet beautiful way." The "rhythmic cadence and repeated melody" that Manzanar "coax[es]…tenderly to brief life" brings forth "the possibility of revery."[137] Rather than signal a window of opportunity for the efficient movement

[134] Yamashita, 35.
[135] Yamashita, 37.
[136] Yamashita, 35.
[137] Yamashita, 34.

of capital or commodities along the freeways, Manzanar attunes himself to "that blood connection" that unites his "entire civilization of sound."

Rather than perceive the freeway through the capitalist and gentrifying logics that led to destructive development, he adopts and adapts Michel de Certeau's description of the view from atop as panoptic and theoretical.[138] The totality of the city perceived by Manzanar also moves beyond this characterization. Where Buzzworm's map of Los Angeles presents a view of the city from his position the ground, fostering community connections and considering how they are shaped by dynamics of power imposed from the top (i.e. governmental institutions and corporations), from his great height Manzanar perceives the city in all its natural and man-made totality not just from the level of the ground, but from the earth's most subterranean layers:

> For Manzanar it began with the very geology of the land, the artesian rivers running beneath the surface, connected and divergent, shifting and swelling. There was the complex and normally silent web of faults—cracking like mud flats baking under a desert sun, like the crevices in aging hands and faces.

From his vantage point, Manzanar excavates a history and composition of LA's infrastructure that predates its 19th and 20th century development, reaching back to the very prehistoric earth upon which the city is built. His historicization of the city invokes deep time, the billions of years that predate not just settler occupation of the land but human existence itself. However, his conjuring of deep time does not minimize or displace the human; like Buzzworm, he conceives of the city as a space teeming with life, even where one may not expect it: the subterranean waterways run and shift and swell as they converge and diverge, and the tectonic fault lines erupt

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[138] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, 3rd ed. (University of California Press, 2011). Critical opinion on Manzanar as a figure privileged with a panoptic view and narrative authority varies. For example, Amy C. Tang argues that Manzanar has narrative authority in his capacity as a composer. By contrast, Ruth Y. Hsu and Rachel Adams argue otherwise. Tang, *Repetition and Race*; Ruth Y. Hsu, "Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange and Chaos Theory: Angels and a Motley Crew," in *Karen Tei Yamashita* (University of Hawaii Press, 2018), 105–22; Adams, "The Ends of Postmodernism."

with noise that synesthetically conjure images of "aging hands and faces." Enmeshed in these natural networks of movement are those produced by humans:

> Yet, below the surface, there was the man-made grid of civil utilities: Southern California pipelines of natural gas; the unnatural waterways of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and the great dank tunnels of sewage; the cascades of poisonous effluents that surging from rain-washed streets into the Santa Monica Bay; electric currents racing voltage into the open watts of millions of hungry energy-efficient appliances; telephone cables, cable TV, fiber optics, computer networks.[139]

The networks of the city's subterranean infrastructures—natural and constructed—are imbued with a sense of impending doom. Layered over the San Andreas Fault are the natural gas pipelines, each with their own ominous temporality: the threat of San Andreas's next "Big One" that looms over (or rather, under) the people of Los Angeles,[140] and pipelines that enable a material transit of empire and a settler future by transporting oil and gas "out of occupied Indigenous territories and fuel the maintenance of environmentally and socially devastating ways of life."[141] Intersecting with these lines are the destructive waterscapes of the Los Angeles Aqueduct that drains water from the Owens Valley inhabited by Paiute peoples to, as Davis put it, fill Los Angeles lawns and pools. The LA Aqueduct is saturated with racial violence that transcends the city's spatiotemporal setting. As Sudhinaraset elucidates, discourses of racial purity and eugenics in LA at the end of the 19th century were coupled with those of public hygiene and infrastructure. As the city rapidly expanded in population and geographical size, the increasing pollution of the Los Angeles River became associated with the filth of the multiracial communities and its water deemed "offensive, undrinkable, nauseating," apparently so overflowing "corpses of animals, "Chinamen," and Indians" that the "'foul' river is rerouted to

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[139] Yamashita, 56-7.

[140] Yuri Fialko, "Report: San Andreas Fault Due for 'Big One,'" interview by Robert Siegel, Radio, June 21, 2006, http://npr.org/2006/06/21/5501767/report-san-andreas-fault-due-for-big-one.

[141] Anne Spice, "Fighting Invasive Infrastructures: Indigenous Relations against Pipelines," *Environment and Society* 9 (2018): 44–5. Spice draws on Jodi Byrd's *Transit of Empire* here.

'N****r Alley.'" By contrast, the proposed LA Aqueduct conjured a progressive image of LA life fashioned after Anglo European "gentleman's estates," enticing Los Angeles towards a developed future by dominating and extracting resources from the land.[142]

In his frustration while poring over the map of Bloods and Crips territory, Buzzworm thinks to himself that "[i]f someone could put down all the layers of the *real map*, maybe he could get the *real picture*."[143] Here I would like to highlight the formal distinction between the map and the real picture. As discussed in the previous section, Buzzworm's contemplation of the map reveals the inherent shortcomings in its textuality. Fixed on the page, it cannot account for the constant expansion, contraction, and transformation of the spaces (official and unofficial) that it represents; the same can be said for the issues raised by the HyperContexts. This contrasts against what Buzzworm actually seeks: the "real map" that may or may not be representable as a picture. Between Buzzworm's double receptivity as he makes contact across marginalized neighborhoods and Manzanar's passionate and careful attention to the city's most minute and buried rhythms, the traditional map of LA is revised to include:

> [T]he prehistoric grid of plant and fauna and human behavior…the historic grid of land usage and property, the great overlays of transport…a thousand natural and man-made divisions, variations both dynamic and stagnant, patterns and connections by every conceivable definition from the distribution of wealth to race, from patterns of climate to the curious blueprint of the skies.[144]

Observing that "[t]here are maps and there are maps and there are maps," Manzanar produces a cartography that resonates with Goeman's (re)mapping: one that is inherently contingent, malleable, and multilayered, just like the space and lives of the people it represents. Through Buzzworm and Manzanar's aural and spatiotemporal navigations of Los Angeles, and through

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[142] Sudhinaraset, 35. She notes that the epithet "N****r Alley" was used at the time to refer to indigenous Americans, Italians, Basques, Jews, and Slavs.
[143] Yamashita, 80-1, italics mine.
[144] Yamashita, 56-7.

the fragmented and unpredictable narrative form, the novel produces a "a great theory of maps" that makes knowable—however fleetingly—the cacophony of colonialism. In the next and final section, I consider the climax of the novel along the freeway. As the orange moves northward towards LA all manner of chaos erupts: batches of poisoned oranges cause a public hysteria so frenetic that it kills the national citrus industry in "22 minutes" flat; Angelenos notice time itself curving, expanding, and contracted as they move throughout the city; and the physical landscape warps so significantly that it causes a massive pile-up on the once-bustling freeway system. From this apocalyptic chaos emerges an unexpected celebration of life and connection, the marginalized peoples of the city flooding the abandoned freeway and producing a groundswell of community in defiance of the layers of violence that marginalized them. In this almost utopic freeway commune—however fleeting it is—the novel promises a vision of possibility amidst the cycles of cataclysm and catastrophe constantly enacted by settler colonialism. The freeway, the novel suggests, is not the end, but the starting place.

Conclusion: Paradigm Shift

Tropic of Orange climaxes in a traffic jam that allows the space of the freeway to be reclaimed by the unhoused, disenfranchised, and otherwise marginalized masses of Los Angeles. The cacophony is myriad: the reader experiences the literal cacophony of the reclaimed cars and incoming U.S. military vehicles as well as the narrative cacophony of many characters unexpectedly encountering each other and increasingly featured in each other's chapters, blurring the lines between the sections that were previously easily distinguishable from one another. The length of each section becomes more and more inconsistent, defying the neat cells of the HyperContexts and emphasizing the shortcomings of one-dimensional cartographic practices. The pacing of the novel feels increasingly frantic, making the gridlock on the freeway all the

more significant. Time freezes into a "long moment of stasis" in which Manzanar experiences not just the time and space of the city, but also his place within it:

> The past flooded around him in great murky swirls. For a moment, he saw his childhood in the desert between Lone Pine and Independence, the stubble of manzanita and the snow-covered Sierras against azure skies. He remembered his youth, the woman he loved, the family he once had, a nine-year-old grandchild he was particularly fond of. He remembered his practice, his patients, his friends…
>
> Now human civilization covered everything in layers, generations of building upon building upon building the residue, burial sites, and garbage that defined people after people for centuries.[145]

As the orange draws closer and closer, the depth of Manzanar's map of LA's colonial infrastructures zooms out to account for geopolitical breadth:

> Encroaching on this vision was a larger one: the great Pacific stretching along its great rim, brimming over long coastal shores from one hemisphere to the other…. [F]rom the southernmost tip of Chile to the Galapagos, skirting the tiny waist of land at Panama, up Baja to Big Sur to Vancouver, around the Aleutians to the Bering Strait. From the North, that peaceful ocean swept from Vladivostok around the Japan Isles and the Korean Peninsula, to Shanghai, Taipei, Ho Chi Minh City, through a thousand islands of the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Micronesia…And there was the great land mass to the south, the southern continent and the central Americas.[146]

As the orange travels north to Los Angeles, dragging with it the Tropic of Cancer and forcing a reckoning with the historical and ongoing colonization of the Americas, Manzanar surveys a Los Angeles whose borders extend beyond those officially determined by the nation-state. Collapsing into the space of Los Angeles are the internment camps that incarcerated Japanese Americans during World War II,[147] all of the regions on the Pacific Coastline, the islands of the Bering Sea

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[145] Yamashita, 169-70.
[146] Yamashita, 169-70.
[147] For want of space I cannot address Yamashita's curious decision to represent Japanese American internment through its absence. Sudhinaraset elegantly reads this narrative move as countering Asian American narratives that render internment hypervisible and indigenous displacement (upon which internment depended) invisible (44-5). In Chapter 6 of *Transit of Empire*, Byrd attends to Manzanar Murakami to consider how the internment of Japanese Americans on Native lands reveals how discourses of Asian immigration and belonging become entangled in those of Native sovereignty: "Caught against his will by and within the parallax oscillations of exception that arise from the discourses of Indian removal and reorganization and underpin the creation of Japanese American internment camps, Manzanar began his life as a captive within the larger forces of imperialism that attempt to continually

home to indigenous inhabitants and the radioactive remnants of nuclear weapons testing, and across the rest of the globe—defying the colonially-determined borders on the map that separate one nation from another, and that bridging the physical distances between them.

As the wealthy abandon their cars, droves of L.A.'s unhoused residents descend upon the scene, reclaiming the freeway space that was once the "no-man's-land of public property," a "rational downtown backdrop of business, bureaucracy, banking, insurance, and security exchange."[148] Manzanar witnesses this scene with breathless excitement:

> A kind of solidarity: all seven million residents of Greater LA out on the town, away from their homes, just like him, outside…
>
> They all converged everywhere at once. Man's most consistent quest for continuing technology in all its treaded ramifications jammed every inch of street, driveway, highway, and freeway. And Manzanar, loathe to lose any moment, writher with exhilaration and christened it all: the greatest jam session the world had ever known.[149]

Los Angeles, a city steeped in a history of manifest destiny, urban expansion, and American pop culture, is forced to a stop on the freeway system, on the very roads that earlier served as an essential artery pumping blood to the rest of the city. However, in this stop is a moment of generative collaboration and cooperation—what Manzanar calls "a kind of solidarity"—when the marginalized communities take over the freeway. One car becomes a home to an unhoused mother and her baby; a Cadillac gets the mechanics under the hood cleared out in favor of an urban garden featuring carrots, lettuce, and tomatoes. Other residents keep the space neat with a move towards ecological sustainability with "bottles, cans, and plastics" sorted and ready for waste pickup.

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consolidate U.S. control over Indian lands" (167-8). For other generative readings of Manzanar and the legacy of internment, see Chiyo Crawford, "From Desert Dust to City Soot: Environmental Justice and Japanese American Internment in Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange," *MELUS,* 38 no. 3 (2013): 86-106; and Gayle K. Sato, "Post-Redress Memory: A Personal Reflection on Manzanar Murakami," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 39 no. 2 (2013): 119-35.

[148] Yamashita, 119.

[149] Yamashita, 206.

This is not a desire to exert ownership over the freeway, nor a reclamation of property for profit, but a moment of truly shared existence that transcends settler capitalist logics; it is less Manifest Destiny than destiny manifest—a harvest of solidarity sown through care and collective struggle. From this blockage Manzanar extracts a symphony, "the greatest jam session the world had ever known." The wordplay here is especially pertinent and charming: "jam" can be understood to mean the halting of traffic or an informal musical session in which performers typically improvise and riff off of each other. In a triple pun, it can also refer to the spread created by cooking and reducing fruit—like an orange, for instance.

Much of the scholarship on *Tropic of Orange* focuses movement, contrasting the (selectively) increased flow of trade under NAFTA against the standstill of the freeway traffic jam, importantly calling attention to the selective opening of borders for certain people or certain goods facilitated by neoliberalism and the forced immobility (via incarceration, immigration policy, and discriminatory urban development practices) it imposes.[150] I would like to reorient focus away from literal movement. Two exceptions to the scholarship that privileges mobility are Sharada Balachandran Orihuela's essay "'Between Ownership and the Highway:' Property, Persons, and Freeways in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*" and Pacharee Sudhinaraset's chapter, "Los Angeles's Infrastructural Palimpsest: An Apocalyptic Origin Story" in *Worlds at the End: Los Angeles, Infrastructure, and the Apocalyptic Imagination*. Both scholars critically attend to the material space of the freeway, though through different points of entry. Balachandran Orihuela examines the freeway as the "material representation of the crowning

[150] See, for example, Adams; Blyn; Sarah D. Wald, "'Refusing to Halt': Mobility and the Quest for Spatial Justice in Helena María Viramontes's 'Their Dogs Came with Them' and Karen Tei Yamashita's 'Tropic of Orange,'" *Western American Literature* 48, no. 1/2 (2013): 70–89. In her reading of Helena Maria Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came With Them*, set during the expansion of the freeway system through East L.A. and the increased surveillance of and violence inflicted upon its residents, Alicia Muñoz draws similar conclusions about physical mobility as resistant and liberatory; see Muñoz, "Articulating a Geography of Pain: Metaphor, Memory, and Movement in Helena María Viramontes's 'Their Dogs Came with Them,'" *MELUS* 38, no. 2 (2013): 24–38.

achievement of free trade," which the gridlock enacted by the city's marginalized populations ("migrants, narcotraffickers, and the homeless") "misuse[s]," and, in so doing, disrupts the flows of capital and logics of ownership "integral to creating the American citizen."[151] Sudhinaraset (who I have referenced throughout this chapter) reads Yamashita's novel alongside contemporaneous Chicanx literary representations of L.A.'s urban development, tracing the infrastructures of water and transportation as placing the novel in a genealogy of settler theft of Indigenous lands and resources and reading the climax as a "reminder that the subjugated will not stay away for long."[152]

To both of these analyses of the freeway traffic jam, I say, "yes, and—" (or, in Byrd's words, "*and, and, and*").[153] Both Balachandran Orihuela and Sudhinaraset compellingly illustrate the structural logics unsettled by the stasis—in the former, of free trade capitalism and ownership, and in the latter, of settler extraction and dispossession. I posit that this moment of literal stillness is not presented in binary opposition to movement—rather, it asks us to rethink how our ideas of movement (through time and through space) are structured by settler capitalist logics. In this traffic jam we do not have the traffic—that is, mobility—of the commodities and labor that keep capitalism going; this much is made clear by Balachandran Orihuela and Sudhinaraset (among others). However, there is not a complete or total cessation of movement altogether—rather, in this jam, there emerges a different conceptualization of movement that is detached from settler and capitalist logics. Given Yamashita's tendency towards wordplay throughout the novel, I propose that we can read a different kind of movement into this scene of putative stasis. In particular, I believe the multiple meanings of *movement* are particularly

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[151] Sharada Balachandran Orihuela, "'Between Ownership and the Highway': Property, Persons, and Freeways in Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange," *Journal of American Studies* 55, no. 4 (October 2021): 759, 579, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582000170X.
[152] Sudhinaraset, 53.
[153] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 66, emphasis mine.

relevant: through Manzanar's ears, the gridlock utopia is an exuberant *musical movement* in his grand symphony of the city; for Buzzworm, plugged into the interpersonal relationships amongst communities, we witness a *collective movement* in its political and civil rights connotations: unhoused people flooding the streets, taking over the abandoned vehicles, and reappropriating them for mutual aid (community gardens, mobile healthcare, and childcare, for example).[154] As the news media and military forces alike swarm the freeways, Buzzworm takes over a broadcast of his own, transmitting to the world a refusal to be made invisible and silent, to be representationally dead. The freeway may be unmoving in its intended purpose to strengthen capitalist development and domination, but it is alive with the movement of coalition and solidarity in the present—unrestrained by the past and declining the empty promises of "not yet."

The gridlock vibrates with the simultaneity of happenings across the city. "Despite everything, every sports event, concert, and whatnot was happening at the same time," observes Manzanar.[155] What follows is nearly two full pages cataloging every event erupting and mutating in tandem, containing for example: "Scottie Pippen fouled Shaq who sank a free throw for the Lakers at the Forum in the last seconds. The Trekkie convention warped into five at the L.A. Convention Center. Bud Girls paraded between boxing matches at the Olympic Auditorium. Placido Domingo belted Rossini at the Dorothy Chandler under the improbable abstract/minimal/baroque direction of Peter Sellers. At the Shrine, executive producer Richard Sakai accepted an Oscar for the movie version of *The Simpsons*." This proliferation of simultaneity (musical, cultural, and spatial) resonates with Doreen Massey's understanding of place not as a fixed location but as a convergence of intersecting trajectories, a "throwntogetherness" of the present that invokes a sense of wonder—for "what could be more

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[154] Balachandran Orihuela makes mention of "social movements" in her article, but does not engage with the term in its multiple meanings (778).
[155] Yamashita, 175.

stirring than walking the high fells in the knowledge of the history and the geography that has made them here today"?[156]

The gridlock utopia is ultimately quashed by the military power of the state in a manner Manzanar likens to "the most militaristic nations looked down as it had in the past on tiny nations and puny countries the size of San Bernardino;" as the warplanes release their bombs over the freeway, the utopia resists one final time as every airbag simultaneously deploys to block the explosives. Emi is shot and Manzanar is brought back to the family ties he once abandoned, leaving the freeway with her body. Some scholars, such as Robin Blyn, read this moment as indicative of the failure of such resistances against the rapidly proliferating power of neoliberal networks. Blyn's insistence that revolution and resistance must emerge immanently from within neoliberalism's own material and temporal conditions results in a reading that flattens the textured narrative structure and temporality of *Tropic of Orange*. The novel depicts time as layered—not as linear or superseded—a structure that better captures how settler dispossession continues to organize space, time, and life. Furthermore, to argue that the gridlock utopia constitutes a "failure" of any kind fundamentally misreads the novel.

During the gridlock, the people of LA begin to see the city as traced by Buzzworm and Manzanar. Buzzworm observes with amazement that,

> [E]veryone in LA was walking they just had no choice.… Cars so squeezed together, people had to climb out the sun roofs to escape. Streets'd become unrecognizable from an automotive standpoint. Only way to navigate was to feel the streets with your own two feet.
>
> So people were finally getting out, close to the ground, seeing the city like he did. He even noticed a couple examining the base of a palm tree, then looking upward with some kind of appreciation. Well, how about that?[157]

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[156] Massey, 140.
[157] Yamashita, 187.

In this moment of temporal stasis, the vertical hierarchies and privatized mobilities of car culture give way to horizontal modes of relation and engagement. What was once unseen—the ground beneath the tires, the palm tree's rooted base—is now newly visible, newly tangible, newly immediate. The palm trees, which Buzzworm notes earlier in the novel become visible only at great distance, become differently visible to the droves newly forged pedestrians forced to experience the present rather than speed by—enabling them to "look upward" and see the city as Buzzworm does. The city's infrastructure, engineered for speed, commerce, and profit—a purpose that stretches beyond the Orange Empire's dispossession of Indigenous inhabitants and exploitation of variously racialized labor—becomes instead a site of presence and attention. This enforced pause does not signal collapse so much as revelation: a shift from the forward thrust of capital to the embodied present of community proximity. Buzzworm's amazement is not just at the unusual sight of pedestrians, but at the possibility that people might begin to *feel* the city not as commodity or obstacle, but as something knowable because it is lived and shared.

Manzanar's vision of the city also extends beyond himself. As Manzanar surveys the reappropriated freeway, he "began to sense a new kind of grid, this one defined not by inanimate structures or other living things but by himself and others like him." One by one, he notices that he is no longer the sole conductor of LA's symphony: "On a distant overpass, he could make out the odd mirror of his figure, waving a baton. And beyond that, another homeless person had also taken up the baton. And across the city, on overpasses and street corners, from balconies and park benches, people held branches and pencils, toothbrushes and carrot sticks, and conducted."[158] As more and more of the disenfranchised take up the baton, not only hearing but conducting the symphony of the city, the novel "exposes the hidden, liberatory potential of the

[158] Yamashita, 203.

'motley community'—in their liquid resilience, their disruptive potential, and their spontaneous, adaptive capacity."[159]

Even after it is bombed by the military might of the state, Buzzworm notes, "Not an orange in sight, neither domesticated nor imported. Paradigm had definitely shifted."[160] The existence, however fleeting, of the freeway reclamation offers a vision of what kind of upheaval or rebellion is necessary to bring colonial infrastructure to a halt amidst the NAFTA-era collapse of commercial borders and expansion of US geopolitical and economic influence, as well as the new flows of commodities and bodies across these borders. Balachandran Orihuela notes that not only does the reclamation of the freeway by the marginalized force the reader to "navigate the freeway in unfamiliar ways in order to test and contest the powers of the state," but "[m]ore importantly, they demand recognition."[161] Though the intent of this claim is well-taken, I argue that attending to the logics of property and inclusion within a settler colonial context of would helpfully reframe the jam not as recognition, but as a more radical refusal. In the previous chapter, I explored through the work of Frantz Fanon and Glen S. Coulthard the ways in which recognition for colonized peoples manifests as inclusion into the settler state on the state's terms, stripping them of specific identity, relationships, history, and claims to sovereignty. Recognition by the state merely exacerbates the colonized subject's temporal dislocation: to refuse recognition is to be characterized by *ressentiment* and an inability to "move on" from the past, and to accept recognition is to detach from the lived past of injury and harm into a hollow and meaningless present. Though the freeway traffic jam attracts the attention of the state, it does not seek its recognition—rather, it turns *inward*, each migrant and displaced person looking to one

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[159] R. Y. Hsu, "*Tropic of Orange* and Chaos Theory," 113.
[160] Yamashita, 226.
[161] Balachandran Orihuela, 777.

another for joyous solidarity. This is most vividly illustrated in the sequence of unhoused people taking up Manzanar's baton—a mutual, collective self-recognition.

Though Manzanar himself is absented, his transcendent musical cartography of the city—those real layers Buzzworm was after—live on: "Buzzworm gritted his teeth. Took a breath. Manzanar's symphony swelled against his diaphragm, reverberated through his veteran bones. Solar-powered, he could not run out of time."[162] The novel's shuffling through narrative voices produces a feeling of constantly being in medias res, oscillating between various scenes in the midst of action with little to no contextualization; the novel ends in a similar vein, the time that Buzzworm will not "run out" of not gesturing towards a future, but a present full of more action, more "serious itineratin' to do."[163] The novel's ending scene is indeed one of "serious itineratin':" Bobby Ngu, flying across the Pacific Rim Auditorium like an angel, hurtles towards Rafaela and Sol, "Anybody looking sees his arms open wide like he's flying…Don't nobody know he's hanging on to these invisible bungy cords. That's when he lets go. Lets [sic] the lines slither around his wrists, past his palms, through his fingers. Lets [sic] go. Go figure. Embrace. That's it."[164] The novel ends not on a move towards a future, but towards an existing present: the family Bobby already has; the crowds brought forth by Arcangel; the symphony conjured by Manzanar that now thrum in Buzzworm. The novel's multiple narrative mappings of the space and time of Los Angeles asks us to reorient ourselves to the ways that settler colonialism structures our experience of the environment, both natural and manufactured. The cacophonous encounter that looks like liberation at the heart of Yamashita's novel points us to a new way of reading grounded in decolonial practices. Let's go, let go, that's it. What better starting place than here and now at *another* end of the world? What better time?

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[162] Yamashita, 228.
[163] Yamashita, 227.
[164] Yamashita, 230.

Chapter Three
How Does it Feel to be a Solution? Questioning Plural Narrators in Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* and Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao*

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: […] How does it feel to be a problem?
>
> *The Souls of Black Folk*, WEB Du Bois

> To be in any form, what is that?
> (Round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither,)
>
> "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman

The March 1958 issue of *MAD Magazine* features a comic strip of the Lone Ranger and Tonto in the midst of hostile Indigenous warriors on horseback. Realizing they are surrounded, the Ranger cries, "Indians! Indians all around us! Well, Tonto, ol' kimosavee, it looks like we're finished!" Tonto, however, is unbothered, and blithely responds: "What do you mean…WE?"[1] Just in case the rhetorical punchline does not immediately land, the two illustrated panels provide easy clarification. In the first panel, the Ranger and Tonto are depicted side by side, visually distinct from the attacking warriors who are shown in menacing shadowy silhouette. In the second, the Ranger is in the foreground looking over his shoulder at Tonto and the crowd of now forward-facing warriors, a shared toothy grin across their faces. The joke lies in Tonto's rejection of the Ranger's "we," instead identifying himself with the "Indians all around" and thereby leaving the Ranger outnumbered and—true to his name—alone.

While some identify the ruggedly individualist "I" as the quintessential American pronominal identity, I find the collective "we" to be far more compelling in what it reveals about the ongoing mechanics of the settler colonialist state. The United States was born from the assertion of a unified and coherent national collective, first in the Declaration of Independence's claim that "*we* hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" to justify breaking away from the British Empire, and again a decade later in the Constitution's

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[1] *MAD Magazine* no 38, March 1958, illustrations by Joe Orlando, E. C. Publications, p. 42

pronouncement that it spoke for "*We*, the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union."[2] The idealistic "we" of the United States' founding documents purports to be one of hope and inclusion, assuring everyone democracy's egalitarian promise of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In reality, however, this collective has proved unstable and historically contingent, strategically including and excluding along the axes of race, gender, sexuality, class, disability, and religion to maintain the hierarchies of power necessary to maintain the settler state at any given moment. In the moment the supposedly "more perfect Union" was formed, indigenous genocide and dispossession were centuries in progress and worsening, reaffirmed by the so-called Peace of Paris treaties; the human value of an enslaved Black laborer was formalized as three-fifths of a free white citizen by the delegates of the Constitutional Convention, nearly half of whom kept and profited from enslaved labor themselves; under laws of coverture, women were stripped of their independent legal identity upon marriage, subsumed entirely by and at the mercy of their husband; and men who did not own property were considered without "judgement of their own" and subsequently denied suffrage.[3] Who really is the "we" so optimistically conjured in the founding documents?

James Baldwin took up Tonto's joke and the vexed American "we" while promoting *The Fire Next Time* in at a predominantly Black church in 1963, repeating Tonto's "What do you mean, we?" refusal and reflecting on the bloodshed from which the United States emerged:

> "*We* did several things in order to conquer the country. There existed, at the time *we* reached these shores, a group of people who had never heard of machines, or, as far as I know of money, I think *we* would call them now a backward nation, and we promptly eliminated them. *We* killed them. I'm talking about the Indians in case you don't know

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[2] "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives, November 1, 2015, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript (emphasis added); "The Constitution of the United States," National Archives, October 30, 2015, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution (emphasis added).

[3] John Adams quoted in Benjamin Edelstein, Mark L. Thomsen, and Atiba R. Ellis, "Unequal Access: The Perpetual Struggle for Voting Rights and the Case of Wisconsin," *Fordham Law Voting Rights and Democracy Forum Fordham Law Voting Rights and Democracy Forum* 3, no. 1 (2024): 7n28.

> what I'm talking about…. *We've* made a legend out of a massacre…. One of the other things *we* did in order to conquer the country, physically speaking, was to enslave the Africans."[4]

What does Baldwin mean, "we?" His condemnation of the American "we" as inherently guilty of myriad violences seems fairly straightforward, first in his recognition of the indigenous people who were "promptly eliminated" so the nascent nation would have land, and second in his discussion of the enslavement of Africans to labor on that stolen land. This aligns neatly with the white, settler "we" exemplified by the Lone Ranger outnumbered by the Indigenous peoples he presumes hostile. Baldwin's inclusion of himself and his Black audience in this national "we," however, troubles its premise of intrinsic and internal coherence, stability, and homogeneity. Kevin Bruyneel elegantly reads this speech in the context of Baldwin's nonfiction writing, placing it within a constellation of references to colonial conquest and genocide, indigeneity, and the persistent American fascination with cowboys and Indians. Baldwin's invocation of Indigenous people and settler colonialism is "fraught, complicated, and at times even contradictory,"[5] writes Bruyneel. In some instances, he reproduces the historical erasure of Indigenous people, making "prophetic use of Indigeneity for Black political purposes" by beginning the narrative of American racism "*after* the American Indian."[6] In others, he offers a "vision of contemporary radical politics and coinhabitative connections among Indigenous and Black peoples" by "unraveling the political life of race in the United States…by grounding it in colonization, the condition of the possibility of chattel slavery, just as the expansion of slavery served as a key impetus for greater land dispossession from Indigenous nations."[7] In the tension between how he "reproduces and refuses settler memory," Baldwin's "fitful" implication of

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[4] James Baldwin quoted in Kevin Bruyneel, *Settler Memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 76, italics mine.
[5] Bruyneel, *Settler Memory*, 108.
[6] Bruyneel, *Settler Memory*, 92, italics mine.
[7] Bruyneel, *Settler Memory*, 102, 109.

himself in the American "we" reveals a "grappling with the relationship of Black people to the past, present, and future of an American nation built upon and sustained through white supremacy;"[8] that is, Baldwin wrestles with what it means to be forcefully incorporated into this settler and racist "we" that is "*defined by* and *generated through* violence" as a subject of that violence.[9]

The central question that animates this chapter can best be conveyed through a slight revision of Tonto's punchline: "What do *we* mean, we?"[10] I am interested in the ways that Asian American novels narratively and formally navigate incorporation and participation in—and perhaps, revision of—the settler American "we." To this end, I read two contemporary speculative novels that take up this question in dramatically different ways: Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), narrated in its entirety by the enigmatic and choral collective voice of the city of B-Mor (formerly Baltimore), and Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao* (2022), narrated by a young woman who is connected to the minds of others and the expanse of the Internet via a neural implant. Though the novels take different narrative approaches—Lee's first-person plural "we"-narrator and Vara's (deceptively) singular "I"-narrator—both novels ultimately grapple with the collectivity that has been imposed upon them and what it means for their futures. For the voice of B-Mor, this involves deep introspection into the essential character and constitution of their community refracted through and interspersed with the travails of Fan, an errant resident who leaves B-Mor behind. Athena, the narrator of *The Immortal King Rao*, struggles to understand the boundaries of her self—where she ends and the world begins—as she is abruptly thrust from double isolation (the psychological solitude of her pre-linked mind and the physical

[8] Bruyneel, *Settler Memory*, 103, 77.
[9] Lisa Beard quoted in Bruyneel, *Settler Memory*, 92, italics original.
[10] To avoid confusion, in this chapter I do my best to eschew the personal "we" that refers to myself, fellow scholars, and readers. All mentions of "we" refer to the various narrators and the identities conferred by racial, settler, and national narratives.

seclusion of the island where she grows up) into collectivity on an astronomical scale, triggered by the activation of the neural link without her consent and her first journey into a world plagued by climate catastrophe and its discontents. Both narrators do so through lengthy recollections of the past, the voice of B-Mor reflecting on its collective founding and Athena narrating her father's biography alongside her own trials and tribulations.

After contextualizing each work and author more fully, I situate the novels in the following section within critical conversations on collective narration. After considering the narratological and subjective stakes of plural narration, I then explore how each novel constructs their collective narrators through prolonged confrontations with histories of with labor, race, caste, and settler capitalism. I particularly engage Kevin Bruyneel's concept of *settler memory* to frame the way that the past remains relevant even in these forward-looking novels. Inseparable from the past is the future, which animates the urgency of each novel, so I then turn then to the question of futurity, examining how each text uses its distinct narrative voice and the speculative mode to engage with the past and sketch its vision of the future. In *On Such a Full Sea*, the we-narrator struggles with its imposed collective identity, but through the retelling of Fan's story, the possibility of agency and reshaping the collective future is opened. The novel positions futurity as possibility, where small acts can gradually erode the power that history has to predetermine the future. By contrast, *The Immortal King Rao* presents a more grim outlook, in which Athena's seemingly singular "I" is shaped by extractive, settler capitalist systems that corrode the boundaries of the self and ensure that the future remains captive to a past that cannot be forgotten, only inherited. I conclude by focusing on each novel's female protagonist, considering how they variously embody the novels' stakes of futurity: Fan, whose opacity and distance from the narrator leave space for hopeful indeterminacy and collective transformation, and Athena,

whose vivisection by the Shareholder Government suggests that the future might simply be a perpetual victim of a past beyond repair. Both *On Such a Full Sea* and *The Immortal King Rao* explore the tensions between individual agency and collective forces, using their respective narrative voices to interrogate the role of narration in shaping possibilities for the future.

While these narrators contemplate the past, they do not remain mired in it; instead, they revisit the past in order to imagine what might come next—both novels are resolutely concerned with questions of futurity. The past is, of course, inescapable—this is so foundational a premise of critical race, gender, and decolonial studies that it almost goes without saying, and it is reflected to different ends across the previous chapters of this dissertation. This is most evident in Chapter One, which examined *The Sympathizer's* sustained focus on the processes by which narratives of the past become institutionalized—specifically taking up cinema, textbooks, and, of course, the retrospective form of confession. Through the narrator's multiple confessions and the various formal maneuvers, the novel insists that the past—far from being static or complete—is an active process, continually revised through omissions, erasures, reinterpretations, and the addition of new perspectives. If full recognition and representation are to be attained, *The Sympathizer* posits, we must return to the past—repeatedly and honestly, in all its pain and contradictions—because the key has been hiding in plain sight. Chapter Two turned to *Tropic of Orange*, which refuses both the limitations of nostalgia and the uncertainty of the "not-yet" future, situating its radical vision of coalition and resistance firmly in the immediacy of the present. While the novel does not recapitulate the past explicitly, it does not leave it behind, demonstrating through the simultaneous movements and interactions of the many narrating characters how the time and space of the present is thick with layered residues of the past. This chapter, by contrast, turns toward the future. Although the novels under consideration in this

chapter return to the past at length, they do so in service of futurity. Each conjures a world transformed by the very forces traced in earlier chapters, asking what kinds of futures emerge—and who determines them—from histories of extraction, exploitation, and disavowal.

On Such a Full Sea is Chang-rae Lee's fourth novel, building on a body of work that has become canonical in contemporary US literature and has provided fertile ground for analyses of race, class, and national belonging: *Native Speaker* (1994) considers deeply entrenched Asian American stereotypes and themes of betrayal through the eyes of a Korean-American corporate spy in the multiethnic urban space of New York City; *A Gesture Life* (1999) complicates the seemingly typical Asian American immigration narrative with Japan's colonization of Korea to wrestle with questions of complicity and guilt; *Aloft* (2004), in its centering of a white Italian American protagonist, has invited productive discussions of the limitations imposed upon the ethnic US writer and what constitutes multiethnic literature; *The Surrendered* (2010) writes against the American tendency to label the Korean War "the Forgotten War" through its intense concentration on the generationally deep and geographically broad consequences of the havoc wreaked in its wake; and his most recent novel, *My Year Abroad* (2021), is an exuberant trans-Asiatic travelogue following the exploits of an American (specifically, one-eighth Asian) college student plucked from the New Jersey suburbs by a hedonistic Chinese entrepreneur that ultimately reveals the labor exploitation at the heart of the accumulation of excessive wealth. Though *On Such a Full Sea* engages recurring thematic concerns in Lee's oeuvre—migration, socioeconomic stratification, and surveillance, for example—it stands apart as his only work of speculative fiction.

While *On Such a Full Sea* marks a generic shift within a well-established literary career, Vauhini Vara approaches the speculative novel from an entirely different trajectory. Although *The*

Immortal King Rao is her first novel, it is hardly her first published work—before turning to fiction, Vara built a career as a journalist, writing prolifically on the intersections of international politics, business, and technology. She often covered the rise of Big Tech, tackling issues such as data privacy, algorithmic bias, labor exploitation, and the consolidation of corporate power. These concerns are unmistakably reflected in *The Immortal King Rao*, which imagines (with eerie prescience) a future society governed by a ubiquitous algorithm and structured by corporate technocracy, asking what happens to the individual and the collective when technological optimization and unfettered global capitalism collude and metastasize into every facet of everyday life. Unlike the voice of B-mor, Athena is not an explicitly plural narrator, narrating the story through a first-person "I." However, her narrative position is shaped by increasingly invasive and all-encompassing relationships—to her father, who has linked his brain to hers; to the exiles, who she runs away to join; and to the Shareholder Government, which imprison her for her father's murder—that prompt ruminations on what it means to be a citizen of this hyperconnected world. While Athena speaks in the singular first person, I argue that her "I" is deceptively individual—it is in fact constituted through the fusion of multiple collectivities with her very DNA via her neural link. As technology increasingly embeds itself in the fabric of the quotidian (through social media, artificial intelligence, and corporate and state surveillance, for example), the novel questions through Athena where the self ends and collectivity begins, and what consequences arise from such an entanglement.

Despite the apparent differences between B-Mor's plural "we" and Athena's "I," both novels envision strikingly similar settings—in which climate catastrophe runs rampant and the state has been entirely subsumed by a private corporation—and feature narrators who resist the conventions of explicitly racial self-reflection often associated with Asian American literature.

For the voice of B-Mor, racial and national identities are treated as relics of a bygone era, and largely absent from explicit reference. In their place, the governing Directorate enforces the all-encompassing "we" of B-Mor, an identity deliberately engineered to uphold a social order in which the community—itself designed as a labor facility—exists solely to produce goods for a socioeconomic elite it will never join. Athena of *The Immortal King Rao* is also not a self-consciously racialized narrator; she does not dwell on her identity as an Asian American (or South Asian American, or Indian American, or mixed race) woman, nor does she reflect on Asian American community and history in the manner of classic Asian American fiction. Instead, her narrative position is shaped by increasingly invasive and pervasive relationships—to her father, to the exiles, and to the Shareholder Government—that prompt ruminations on what it means to be a citizen of this hyperconnected world. The novel's direct references to race emerge primarily in the narration of King Rao's life, which also introduces the crucial (and, within Asian American studies, rarely confronted) dimension of caste, demanding a reevaluation of prevailing understandings of South Asian American immigration and racial formation. In spite of this, the novels are not entirely indifferent to race; even as their narrators resist or avoid direct racial self-articulation, both Lee's and Vara's novels represent racialization as an inescapable structural force embedded in the hierarchies of power that shape the worlds they inhabit.

These hierarchies become most legible in the novels' sustained focus on the transnational flows of labor and extractive logics of an ever-expanding capitalist system. The association of Asians with labor and capital dates back to the abolition of the slave trade across the Americas, in which Asian indentured workers were positioned as a cheap and exploitable labor force that could also serve as a "racial barrier" between the white colonial class and the newly emancipated

Black population.[11] As Iyko Day argues in *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logics of Settler Colonial Capitalism*, it is at this intersection of settler colonialism and racial capitalism that the Asian subject in North America comes to symbolize settler anxieties relating to labor and capital. Today, Asians in America continue to be wielded as a buffer between white and Black America via the pervasive model minority myth that declares them the "successful" racialized population who, through their supposedly innate family-, education-, and work-oriented culture, ascend the American socioeconomic hierarchy. In so doing, they "prove" the racist cultural narratives that cast Black populations as pathologically lazy and irresponsible, "naturally" predisposed to poverty, crime, and disproportionately burdening public welfare funds—if Asian immigrants (those perpetual foreigners) can achieve class mobility, the model minority myth insists, why have Black populations failed to do so? The model minority Asian is a useful prop brandished as a convenient denial of the persistent reality of racism's sociopolitical and economic reality in the US.

The model minority myth enacts violence upon all parties implicated in the hierarchy it sustains, creating a narrative in which all racialized subjects appear in America under the same conditions and are met with equal opportunities, obstacles, and material resources. It produces a monolithic, essentialized Asian America wholly defined by its proximity and service to—*not* equality within—white supremacy, perpetuating the conflation of Asian bodies with capital that underwrites settler colonialism. It neglects the vast heterogeneity within Asian America, effaces the ongoing racisms that impact its communities, and erases the histories of interethnic and interracial solidarities forged to challenge the US's foundational and persisting racism and colonialism. Furthermore, by positioning Asian Americans as intermediaries between the opposing racial poles of white and Black, it preserves the national settler narrative of race that

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[11] Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 24.

depends on the erasure of indigeneity—and with it, the unresolved questions of sovereignty and dispossession upon which the settler state is built. Both *On Such a Full Sea* and *The Immortal King Rao* situate racialized labor at the heart of global capitalism's operations, tying the model minority myth to pernicious settler strategies of extraction, dispossession, and temporal dislocation; through their speculative frameworks, each novel interrogates—to very different ends—the possibilities of agency and resistance beyond the totalizing logics and histories of settler capitalism.

Vijay Prashad's probing analysis into South Asian American complicity with and resistance to the model minority narrative, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, revises WEB Du Bois to ask, "How does it feel to be a solution?"[12] That is, how does it feel to be flaunted as the "solution" to the "problem" of Black America? In this chapter, I consider the positioning of the Asian American subjects as the "solution" not only to anti-Black racism, but to the systems of settler colonial capitalism that rely on structural racism to endure. The crises of collectivity narrated in *On Such a Full Sea* and *The Immortal King Rao*, I argue, are rooted in a desire to exist beyond being a solution to the settler state's problem of racial management. Follow the script of the model minority, settler white supremacy proposes, and earn inclusion into the "we" who is guaranteed life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Both novels present a deeply troubled relationship with the national "we," and the promises it makes, specifically in the narrators' inability to consent to the collective identity and their realization of the layers of violence and subjugation—upon themselves and others—that construct that identity. This relationship—to the "we" and the past from which the "we" was inherited—not only shapes their material and psychological existence, but also their modes of narration. While these voices—B-Mor's we-narrator and Athena Rao—have different relationships to the collective, they both

[12] Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), viii.

ultimately reveal how the individual and collective intertwine in the creation or closing off of futurity. How does it feel that "we" are the solution? What do we mean, "we?"

"We do welcome our turn:"[13] Plural Narrators

Depending on one's point of view, the literary use of first-person plural perspective can be seen as either a venerable narrative tradition—recalling the collective voice of the classical Greek chorus—or as an outdated form incompatible with contemporary narrative sensibilities, "invit[ing] protest and ridicule" in its "presum[ption] to speak…for a nation, a city or, especially a generation."[14] Assuming this narrative perspective therefore comes with certain risks: at best, it cultivates empathy with readers and takes on an air of collective wisdom; at worst, it invites "charges of gutlessness and self-importance" in its evasion of singular identity and potentially comes across as "pedantic or condescending."[15] Much of the apprehension surrounding the first-person plural narrator stems from its implicit assumption of a stable, coherent collective that serves as referent for the narrating "we." The use of the we-narrator is one of the most striking features of *On Such a Full Sea*, and is central to the novel's meditation on collectivity—not as something organically formed through shared agency, but as something strategically produced and managed by the directorate, its governing body.

The first-person plural narrative has only relatively recently become a subject of scholarly interest, with classical narratology traditionally adhering to Gérard Genette's axiom that "every narrative is, explicitly or not, 'in the first person.'"[16] However, since the publication of Susan Lanser's *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (1992) and Monika

[13] Chang-rae Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* (Riverhead Books, 2014), 195.
[14] Laura Miller, "THE LAST WORD: We the Characters," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2004, sec. Books, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/18/books/the-last-word-we-the-characters.html.
[15] Ben Zimmer, "We," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 1, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/03/magazine/03FOB-onlanguage-t.html;
[16] Gérard Genette quoted in Natalya Bekhta, "We-Narratives: The Distinctiveness of Collective Narration," *Narrative* 25, no. 2 (2017): 168, https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2017.0008.

Fludernik's *Toward a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996), a rich body of narratological scholarship on we-narratives has developed. Brian Richardson has worked extensively with we-narratives as a subcategory of *unnatural narratives*, or narratives that contain "significant antimimetic events, characters, or settings."[17] Richardson classifies we-narratives as unnatural based on the "degree to which they diverge from the poetics of realism;" for example, as when a we-narrator strains the reasonable belief of the reader by claiming to collectively represent "impossible perceptions" of private individual thoughts and feelings.[18] In her comprehensive study of the we-narrative form, *We-Narratives: Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction*, Natalya Bekhta offers a theoretical departure from the framework of unnatural narrative, arguing that we-narratives are now so rhetorically and literarily conventionalized that they do not contravene realist modes of storytelling.[19] Bekhta's approach foregrounds we-narratives as having a "collective narrative agent and possessing a collective subjectivity," which uses the first-person plural "we" pronoun in order to "produce a sense of the group as a separate unit, reinforces its solidarity, and removes any implications of an 'I' speaker behind the 'we.'"[20] By attending to the collectivity of the we-narrator as distinct from the individuality of the first person I-narrator (and from a singular first-

[17] Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (The Ohio State University Press, 2015), 3. Richardson's unnatural narrative has since been taken up by scholars to different ends. For a detailed review of the many theories of unnatural narratology, see Bekhta, *We-Narratives*, 41–46.
[18] Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (The Ohio State University Press, 2006), 59; Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative*, 34.
[19] Natalya Bekhta, *We-Narratives: Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction* (The Ohio State University Press, 2020), 44. In "We-Narratives," Bekhta offers "new *rules of collective realism*" drawing from philosophy and sociology to confirm that humans naturally form collective groups in the "real world" not unlike those represented in fictional narratives, thereby nullifying claims that collective voices are inherently antimimetic (170–176, emphasis original). Many other scholars find it necessary to couch analysis of fictional we-narration in terms of how "factual" or "realistic" it is; this, for example, was the theme of the May 2015 special issue of *Narrative* titled, "Social Minds and Fictional Narration." As demonstrated in Chapter 1 one of this dissertation, I am not interested in how factually "realistic" a text is, and I am even less persuaded by theorizations of realism that focus on mimesis (as opposed to the more compelling exploration of realism's imaginative capacity to highlight contradiction, fragmentation, and formal limits).
[20] Bekhta, *We-Narratives*, 11.

person narrator's use of "we"), Bekhta presents a way to understand how literary we-narratives function as a unique site to consider questions of subjectivity and epistemology.[21]

However fraught the US's founding "we, the people" is when critically scrutinized, it remains a powerful symbol in the political and cultural imagination, holding the *potential* of Utopian togetherness despite real-life inequalities, an *aspiration* that there might yet emerge a more perfect Union. This notion of collective unity is evoked in texts ranging from Walt Whitman's poetics of collectivity in search of the "promise of democratic community" to President Barack Obama's declaration at the at the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma March: "The single-most powerful word in our democracy is the word 'We.' 'We The People.' 'We Shall Overcome.' 'Yes We Can.' That word is owned by no one. It belongs to everyone."[22]

While President Obama's use of the collective American "we" clearly demonstrates a specific rhetorical reclamation of American identity historically denied along the axis of race, I would like to consider the dynamics of settler colonialism that problematize inclusion into the national "we" as inherently progressive or reparative. In his theorization of settler metapolitics, Aaron John Spitzer analyzes how modern settlers leverage discourses of liberalism in order to thwart claims of self-determination maintained by Indigenous peoples. Examining contemporary cases spanning Australia, Canada, the continental United States, and US-controlled territories across the Pacific, Spitzer demonstrates how settlers have variously exercised individual voting rights and electoral redistricting procedure to undermine Indigenous boundaries. This strategic weaponization of liberal-democratic egalitarianism, Spitzer argues, furthers the logic of elimination as articulated by Patrick Wolfe—that settler colonialism's goal is to "destroy and replace" Indigenous peoples—by "dissolving Indigenous demotic and territorial boundaries and

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[21] Bekhta, *We-Narratives*, 3.
[22] Bonnie Costello, *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 2–3.

replacing them with new, broader boundaries within which settlers dominate."[23] Simply put, just as settler territorial conquest entails turning the indigenous "their" land into the settler "ours," settlers continue to erode indigenous sovereignty by forcibly absorbing the Indigenous "them" into the settler "we the people" as supposedly equal—but racially marked—subjects of the democratic settler state.[24]

Racialization is a key component of this process, and is particularly fraught in the case of Indigenous peoples incorporated into the American "we." Indigenous peoples are interpellated into the settler state not as "discrete polities in need of collective boundaries"—that is, in terms of their claims to sovereignty and self-determination independent from the settler state—but as "racialized individuals in need of liberal equality," entirely dependent on the state for recognition of their rights, representation, and the allocation of land and resources.[25] The settler "we" is therefore a racializing one, delimiting the boundaries of each absorbed racial group and regulating them accordingly to maintain white supremacist hierarchies. This is very much at play in *On Such a Full Sea*, and in Asian American literature more broadly.

In his studies of unnatural narrative, Richardson has explored the proliferation of we-narration in minority, postcolonial, and feminist literatures to explicate collective struggles and oppression.[26] While I favor Bekhta's argument that we-narrative is *not* inherently "unnatural" given the cultural ubiquity of the first-person plural, Richardson's observation is worth accepting to consider the questions of resistance that first-person narration raises. As established in Chapter

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[23] Aaron John Spitzer, "Constituting Settler Colonialism: The 'Boundary Problem', Liberal Equality, and Settler State-Making in Australia's Northern Territory," *Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 4 (2019): 559, https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2019.1690763.
[24] Aaron John Spitzer, "The Metapolitics of Settler Colonialism: Individual Rights, Collective Boundaries, and Indigenous (de)Colonization" (Ph.D. diss., University of Bergen, 2020), 34.
[25] Spitzer, "The Metapolitics of Settler Colonialism," 32.
[26] See Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*, 37–60; Richardson, "U.S. Ethnic and Postcolonial Fiction: Toward a Collectivist Poetics," in *Analyzing World Fiction: New Horizons in Narrative Theory*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (University of Texas Press, 2011), 3–16; Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative*, 143–161.

One, questions of representation remain central to Asian American cultural production and critique. For non-racialized groups, the first-person singular "I" is unequivocally solitary, emphasizing that universal notions of truth are "slippery and protean" and therefore "authenticity can be found only in individual experience."[27] Thus, the singular first-person remains singular, and it is the first-person plural that bears the burden of "speaking for" the collective, begging the questions, who claims to speak for the group? Who has granted that authority?[28] For Asian American writers, however, even the first-person "I" cannot be extricated from the collective.

Within the Asian American literature, first-person narration has been indelibly marked by the conflation of the author's racial (Asian American) identity with the text's narrative voice. In *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds*, Stephen Hong Sohn traces the emergence of 20th century Asian American literature to two main forms: autobiography/memoir and the ethnoracial bildungsroman. American interest in Asia dates back to the 17th century, driven by the circulation of Oriental commodities that cultivated a reading public increasingly interested in "authentic" Asian narrative literature. Despite their formal and generic differences, Sohn notes that both autobiography and bildungsroman became linked in Asian American writing due to their shared emphasis on the relationship between the narrating subject and the narrative perspective. In early 20th century Asian American literature, "narrative cohesion" was seen to be achieved through the "maintenance of *one* narrator or main character, whose life readers follow from beginning to end and who *can* or *could be* conflated with the author."[29] The corresponding boom of commercial interest in Asian-authored literature proved to be a double-edge sword:

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[27] L. Miller, "THE LAST WORD." Miller cites the work of Vladimir Nabokov and Philip Roth as emblematic of this "idiosyncratic [and] often unreliable" first-person singular narrator.
[28] Jacques Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper, (Stanford University Press, 2002), 46–54.
[29] Stephen Hong Sohn, *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (NYU Press, 2014), 4–6, italics original.

while it allowed Asian American writers narrative space to represent themselves, it also burdened them with the pressure of "authentically" representing Asian racial experiences to an overwhelmingly non-Asian audience, often placing them in the uncomfortable position of the native informant. This "authenticity paradigm" that presumes an alignment of the author, narrative perspective, and narrative content continues to frustrate Asian American representation and criticism—and by extension, racialization—to this day.[30] Before returning to *On Such a Full Sea* and *The Immortal King Rao*, I would like to briefly contextualize them alongside two canonical works of Asian American literature that differently engage narrative perspective to negotiate the complexities of racial and gender subjectivity: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) and Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011).

Given its canonical status and its vexed reception history, *The Woman Warrior* is an exceptional case study to consider the blurring of the boundary between the author and the narrative voice (and by extension, between autobiography and fiction) through its assertion of a racialized and gendered first-person "I" narrator. The narrator's voice moves between first-person ruminations of her family's history in China, her own experiences in the US, and second- and third-person talk-stories narrated to her. The narrator grapples with her existence as an "I"-subject, torn between conflicting implications of what it means to definitively articulate a nationally alienated Chinese American self in the English first-person:

> I could not understand 'I.' The Chinese 'I' has seven strokes, intricacies. How would the American 'I,' assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? […] I stared at that middle line and waited so long for its black center to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it.[31]

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[30] Sohn, *Racial Asymmetries*, 5.
[31] Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Vintage International Edition (Vintage, 1989), 166-167.

To the narrator, the American "I" appears in stark and unadorned contrast to the Chinese character not only visually, but also in literary and ontological registers. Her struggle is not merely orthographic or textual, but a deeper confrontation between her racialized and gendered subjectivity and what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls the *transparent "I"* that represents "Man, the subject, the ontological figure consolidated in post-Enlightenment European thought.[32] The transparent "I" is produced through a logic of discovery, the assumption that there is a stable and coherent truth about humanity—articulated by "Man"—that can be uncovered or revealed through reason, empiricism, and classification. As such, the transparent "I" is granted, in da Silva's words, a "privileged ontoepistemological standing" as the "sole self-determined being."[33] Da Silva critiques dominant theories of racial subjection that overstate the logic of exclusion and paradoxically reinscribe the authority of the universal subject, and in so doing, suggest that racial emancipation can only be articulated on the terms of that universal subject—through inclusion into that transparent "I."[34]

In the American literary landscape, the transparent "I" is most visible in the autobiographical form. Autobiography is a quintessentially American literary mode, from the earliest colonial travel and settler narratives to contemporary autofiction.[35] The "self-determined" nature of the transparent "I" brings the logic of discovery to the land and peoples of the Americas, "creating" the United States through conquest and occupation. Kingston aligns the graphic simplicity of the textual "I" with the ubiquitous "I" of American ideology, which fetishizes rugged individualism and the idea of the "great" self-made man that undergirds the

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[32] Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University Of Minnesota Press, 2007), xvi.
[33] Da Silva, xviii.
[34] Da Silva, xxiv.
[35] Robert F. Sayre, "Autobiography and the Making of America," *The Iowa Review* 9, no. 2 (April 1978): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2338; See also Rebecca Van Laer, "How We Read Autofiction," *Ploughshares* (blog), July 1, 2018, https://blog.pshares.org/how-we-read-autofiction/.

American autobiographical tradition.[36] In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator's "I" is at once liberating and restrictive: it allows the Asian American woman (long excluded from both nation and national narrative) the capacity for autonomous self-representation, while simultaneously demanding through the narrator's ambivalence a critical reevaluation of the terms by which that representation is made legible. The narrator's textual "I" persists even though she "forgot to pronounce it," demonstrating that the individualistic self-reference of the "I" alone is insufficient to redress the literary and historical silencing of Asian American women.[37] Here Kingston challenges the transparent "I" not by simply rejecting it outright, but by occupying it in a way that unsettles its authority and liberal imperative for inclusion on its terms.

The polarizing reception of *The Woman Warrior* adds to the complexity of the narrating "I." Upon its publication, Jeffrey Paul Chan and Benjamin R. Tong criticized the novel as a representation of Chinese culture, accusing Kingston of intentionally distorting Chinese cultural narratives, mistranslating Chinese words, and perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes to appeal to (and profit off of) white American audiences—and white feminists in particular.[38] While some of these criticisms betray a degree of underlying misogyny in their resistance to being represented by a Chinese American woman, critics like Chan and Tong nonetheless correctly identify the orientalism that particularly inflected the novel's glowing reception by white women and demonstrate the way in which—based on the reader—Kingston was hailed as spokesperson for multiple collectives: Chinese American women, Chinese Americans more broadly, or women in

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[36] Bonnie Melchior, "A Marginal 'I': The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior," *Biography* 17, no. 3 (1994): 281.

[37] For an analysis of how Kingston strategically employs various kinds of silences in the novel, Jill M. Parrott, "Power and Discourse: Silence as Rhetorical Choice in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," *Rhetorica* 30, no. 4 (2012): 375–91.

[38] Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Art and the Ethnic Experience," *MELUS* 15, no. 1 (1988): 3, https://doi.org/10.2307/467038; Julia H. Lee, *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston* (The University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 20.

general.[39] Objections to the text's authenticity were compounded by the novel's subheading, *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, a phrase selected by the novel's publisher that replaced Kingston's original title, *Gold Mountain Stories*.[40] In spite of Kingston's long-standing clarification that *The Woman Warrior* is a fictionalized retelling of her own experiences, persistent tensions remain, with non-Asian readers approaching the text with an ethnographic impulse to read it as culturally representative, and Asian American readers disputing its claim to authenticity.[41] The polarized reception of the novel, paired with Kingston's insistence that the novel is fictive, stages and resists the demand that racialized (and gendered) authors produce a transparent, legible "I" that can stand in for an entire community or identity—with or without their intention or consent. The controversy around *The Woman Warrior* and Kingston herself thus reveals how Asian American subjectivity is made legible only when seen to be narrating from a position of representative cultural authenticity—precisely the position Kingston narratively

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[39] J. Lee, *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston*, 21.

[40] There is a robust body of scholarship that engages *The Woman Warrior* as generatively troubling the established conventions and subjects of life writing. For example: Victoria Myers examines Kingston's method of "ambiguously mix[ing] techniques more usually associated with myths…with techniques more usually associated with non-fiction," arguing that it reveals that the "language of autobiography aris[es] in the process of her coming to terms with the community which…structures her experience" (112-113). Shirley K. Rose reads the text in a tradition of midcentury ethnic life writing that makes visible the oppositional "myths" of autonomy and participation in autobiographic narrations of literacy (3-4). Josephine Nock-Hee Park contextualizes contemporary Asian American poetics within the legacy of Kingston's modernist "[taking] apart [of] the genre of the memoir in fractured tales overrun with myths (126). Myers, "The Significant Fictivity of Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior," *Biography* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 112–25; Rose, "Metaphors and Myths of Cross-Cultural Literacy: Autobiographical Narratives by Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, and Malcolm X," *MELUS* 14, no. 1 (1987): 3–15, https://doi.org/10.2307/467469; J. Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

[41] Kingston has also addressed the burden this places on ethnic writers, asking: "Why must I 'represent' anyone besides myself? Why should I be denied an individual artistic vision? And I do not think I wrote a 'negative' book, as the Chinese American reviewer said; but suppose I had? Suppose I had been so wonderfully talented that I wrote a tragedy? Are we Chinese Americans to deny ourselves tragedy?" Maxine Hong Kingston, "Cultural Mis-Readings by American Reviewers," in *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue: New Cultural Identities*, ed. Guy Amirthanayagam (Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), 63, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-04940-0_5.

rejects by crafting an "I" (within and beyond the text) that is deliberately unstable, stylized, and specific, rather than universal or transparent.[42]

Where Kingston unsettles the authority of the transparent "I" by articulating it ambivalently, Julie Otsuka turns away from the individual altogether. In *The Buddha in the Attic*, Otsuka adopts the first-person plural, narrating in the "we" of a generation of Japanese women brought to the United States in the early twentieth century as so-called "picture brides." In spite of its apparent scale and collective unity, the "we" of *The Buddha in the Attic* is marked with an aching loneliness; the white Americans they encounter in the US, their Japanese American husbands, and even their own children exist in the distant realm of "them" outside of their "we."[43] The novel's setup of minority subjects narrating as a collective strategically reverses traditional American paradigms of "us versus them," in which "us" is traditionally white, settler, and masculine and "them" is a racial or sexual Other. This is not the broad and expansive "we" of American democratic potential. The racial and sexual specificity of the narrative voice emphasizes the multiple layers of alienation faced by the Japanese American women who are

[42] Unfortunately, the reception of *The Woman Warrior* is almost impossible to discuss without referencing the controversy sparked by Frank Chin, who has accused Maxine Hong Kingston for decades of being "un-Chinese," a "fake," and dripping with "white supremacist arrogance," particularly condemning what he sees as her emasculation of Asian men by fictionalizing the "icky-gooey evil" of Chinese culture towards women. His relentless and often incendiary charges have become so tied to Kingston's legacy that their pairing remains a canonical reference point in Asian American cultural study. This association is so entrenched in Asian American discourse that Karen Tei Yamashita comically (that is, in illustrated comic form *and* for the purpose of humor) stages it in her 2010 novel *I-Hotel*, inserting a series of portraits of Chin and Kingston in a chapter pointedly titled "War & Peace," identifying them in the final panel as "Matriarch" and "Patriarch." While their dynamic is often framed as a literary rivalry or feud, such depictions obscure the deep misogyny underlying Chin's reproaches (and his own literary work), as well as the disturbing intensity with which he has lambasted Kingston—who has stated on multiple occasions that his hostility has included threats of physical violence. I find Julia H. Lee's sharp assessment both incisive and overdue in its call to recalibrate how Kingston's work is engaged: "For too long, Chin's critiques have played an outsized role in Kingston criticism especially given how debunked, challenged, and misguided that criticism now seems to be. Perhaps Chin should be consigned to the textual space where he belongs—a footnote—to stop giving a spotlight to a writer whose only method of disagreeing with a woman is to threaten to punch her in the face. One must acknowledge the critical history that surrounded and even at times produced Kingston's career, but one does not need to pay deference to it 'ad infinitum.'" J. Lee, *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston,* 114n9. See also, if you must, Frank Chin, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and Fake," in *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese Literature*, ed. Jeffrey Paul Chan et al. (Meridian, 1991), 1-92.

[43] Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Buddha in the Attic by Julie Otsuka - Review," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/27/buddha-in-the-attic-review.

rarely granted a historical or cultural voice. Yet even as the narrator speaks as a collective racial, sexual, and immigrant subject, it is not a homogenous one:

> Some of us on the boat were from Kyoto, and were delicate and fair, and had lived our entire lives in darkened rooms at the back of the house. Some of us were from Nara, and prayed to our ancestors three times a day, and swore we could still hear the temple bells ringing. Some of us were farmers' daughters from Yamaguchi with thick wrists and broad shoulders who had never gone to bed after nine. Some of us were from a small mountain hamlet in Yamanashi and had only recently seen our first train. Some of us were from Tokyo, and had seen everything, and spoke beautiful Japanese, and did not mix much with any of the others.[44]

Through this communal "we" and the multiplicity of experiences it reports, *The Buddha in the Attic* holds in tension the solidarity of the racialized collective with the diversity of the individuals who comprise it, refusing the impulse of homogenization. The anaphora of "Some of us" rhythmically reiterates—over the course of a single unbroken paragraph spanning nearly two full pages—the plurality within the collective voice, emphasizing both the communal and the irreducibly individual dimensions of the "we." Though each sentence begins the same way, each following clause accumulates difference—of geography, class, age, physicality, education, religion, and experience—layering complexity onto a group that might otherwise be made visible (or included, to follow da Silva's critique of the logics of exclusion) collapsed into a single identity. Rather than erasing difference in favor of unity in order to speak "for" the collective, the repetition insists on internal differences, refusing the homogenization imposed on racialized subjects. These are not women being described—they are describing themselves, even if only in partial glimpses, and thus reclaim some agency in how their lives are remembered and recorded.

The Buddha in the Attic ends with the internment of Japanese Americans. Rather than follow them to the camps scattered across North America, the novel unexpectedly plucks the narrating "we" from the Japanese women and hands it to their white American neighbors and

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[44] Julie Otsuka, *The Buddha in the Attic* (Anchor, 2012), 7-8.

communities.[45] They respond to Japanese internment with mixed feelings: curiosity, uncertainty, concern, relief—and above all, with gradual disinterest as memory fades. The Japanese women's collective "we" that dominates the novel emerges not only through shared race, gender, and conditions of immigration, but through the active performance and narrative memorialization of that shared identity in all of its diverse experiences.[46] By contrast, the "we" of the white townspeople is forged through denial and forgetting. It distances itself from complicity by remarking in the passive voice that, "the Japanese have left us," and proceeds to slowly but surely claim and rename the possessions, property, and even pets left behind.[47]

The shift to the white townspeople's "we" is jarring and unsettling, sharply at odds with the rich and textured narration that that precedes it. The relative brevity of this final section—barely fifteen of the novel's 130—further heightens its dissonance. Why, after devoting nearly the entire novel to illuminating in detail the lives of a historically obscured population, would the novel close with a such a brief dalliance with a totally different—and historically overrepresented—perspective articulated through the same textual "we?" Giving the white communities the last word, as it were, seemingly reproduces the silence imposed upon the

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[45] For want of space and relevance I cannot pursue it here, but there is a fascinating critical conversation to be had by reading *The Buddha in the Attic* alongside Richard Wright's 1941 photodocumentary text *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*. Both texts adopt specifically racialized and gendered collective narrators—Otsuka's early Japanese American women immigrants and Wright's Black men—to recuperate the dignity, heterogeneity, and representation historically denied to them. Particularly striking is how each concludes with a startling pronominal reorientation to its oppressor: Otsuka's relocation of the "we" to white townspeople and Wright's searing direct address to white America: "Look at us and know us and you will know yourselves, *for we are you*, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives!" Such a comparative reading would yield rich insight into how different kinds of collectivities are narrated to different political and affective ends. Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (Viking, 1941), 146, emphasis mine.
[46] Delphine Munos, "We Narration in Chang-Rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* and Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*: 'Unnaturally' Asian American?," *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 4, no. 1 (June 28, 2018): 66–81, https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2018-0005.
[47] Otsuka, *The Buddha in the Attic*, 128.

Japanese American community during internment.[48] However, in doing so, the novel exposes how their dispossession extended beyond the space of the camps themselves: into the home, the neighborhood, and ultimately the historical record.

Through the shift to the white neighbors' perspective, the novel depicts not just the material expropriation of Japanese American life but also the narrative appropriation of their removal and absence. The narrative "we" becomes just another thing scavenged from "their" lives, claimed by and folded into the white, settler "we." In displacing the Japanese American "we" at the moment of internment, *The Buddha in the Attic* highlights how Asian American subjectivity is rendered precarious not only through physical removal, but through narrative dispossession—stripped of authorship of its own memory and overwritten by the settler gaze. This resonates with the dynamics Kingston critiques in *The Woman Warrior*, where the narrator's "I" is at once a tool of self-representation and a site of tension. In both novels, Asian American subjectivity is entangled with the struggle to assert autonomy within dominant cultural frameworks that insist on erasure or distortion. Where Kingston unsettles the transparent "I" by complicating its assumptions of universalism (what da Silva would call *transparency*), Otsuka's novel grapples with the presumptions of collective memory, showing how collective attempts to self-represent the racialized subject can be subsumed by the settler collective.

In *Unnatural Voices*, Brian Richardson declares, "the vast majority of 'we' texts valorize collective identity in no uncertain terms: 'we' is almost always a favored term and a desirable subject position that is to be sought out and inhabited."[49] However, this assertion does not hold uniformly across racialized we-narratives. In *The Buddha in the Attic*, the "we" of the Japanese

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[48] It is worth noting that critical opinion on this narrative shift in the novel is mixed; for a brief review of its reception, see Ruth Maxey, "The Rise of the 'We' Narrator in Modern American Fiction," *European Journal of American studies* 10, no. 10–2 (2015), https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.11068.
[49] Richardson, *Unnatural Voices,* 50.

American women is marked less by collective empowerment than by vulnerability, as it is ultimately replaced at the moment of internment by the white settler "we." The novel carefully attends to the internal variation within the group it represents—registering a range of experiences and expressions that resist any notion of a unified or monolithic collective identity; certainly, the numerous circumstances of racial, physical, and sexual violence endured by the collective—as well as their ultimate silencing—hardly holds itself as favored.

Similarly, both Lee's and Vara's novels complicate the desirability of the narrating collective, portraying it not as an inherently valorized identity but as one shaped by colonial, racial, and historical impositions and violence. The narrating voice of B-Mor reveals the core anxieties of its collective ontological crisis: what it means to bear the burden of racialized history, to what extent that history dictates the future, and what it might take to imagine beyond it. The history in question is their forebears' arrival—the process by which they transformed Baltimore into B-Mor, thereby transforming themselves from New China migrant laborers into B-Mor's fabled originals, from "them" into "we." Reflecting on its collectivity in the wake of Fan's unprecedented departure, the voice of B-Mor is forced to confront the precarity of its inherited identity that has long been concealed by historical mythologizing. "How could we assure our communal well-being?" wonders the narrator, contemplating various socioeconomic, medical, and political events that might one day thrust B-Mor into turmoil. "The truth is that we could not. As conceived, as constituted, we may in fact be of a design unsustainable."[50] In *The Immortal King Rao*, the question of whether a collective identity can survive the weight of its own history yields a more unsettling reflection. Athena's relationship to the collective—human

[50] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 104.

and virtual—veers between feeling like a "host" consumed by a parasite and marveling that it just might be "the answer" to humanity's inevitable self-inflicted extinction.[51]

In the sections that follow, I examine how each plural narrator is constituted through memories and histories of labor and caste—histories that shape not only the racial and national subjectivity of the collective but also the terms by which agency and futurity become thinkable. I consider these engagements with the past through theorizations of settler colonialism's narrative, temporal, and political dimensions and their consequences. In *On Such a Full Sea*, the collective "we" of B-Mor emerges from a storied account of the metamorphosis of foreign migrants into compliant citizens, a change that, in the generations since, permeates every aspect of life—family structure, education, jobs, and even the very architecture of their city. In *The Immortal King Rao*, Athena's plural "I" is shaped by the inheritance of deeply entangled familial, technological, and colonial networks. These pasts are not fixed or passive reference points, irrelevant to the future, but active processes that prompt a reckoning with what kind of agency, collective, and future, remain possible. How the past informs—either generatively or destructively— the collective narrator's identity is central to both novels, setting the stage for their engagement with futurity. In the immediately following section I discuss memory and history, and I turn to speculation and futurity in the section after that.

"[N]othing less than the history of ourselves:"[52] Settler Memory

Legends and Labor in On Such a Full Sea

"It is known where we come from, but no one much cares about things like that anymore," the narrative voice muses in the opening lines of *On Such a Full Sea*. "We think, Why bother?"[53] Thus, with a collective shrug, the novel immediately signals the uneasy relationship

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[51] Vauhini Vara, *The Immortal King Rao* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 104, 365.
[52] Vara, 309.
[53] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 1.

between the voice of B-Mor and its own history—an ambivalence that will gradually give way to a deeper reckoning with origin stories and identity. Lee's speculative novel looks to an unspecified postapocalyptic near-future in which the United States national government has been replaced or subsumed by the mysterious "directorate," and American society has been geographically and socioeconomically reorganized into three stratified tiers: "Charters," or exclusive wealthy metropolitan centers; "Facilities," gated cities that exist to supply the Charters with resources; and the "counties," open, unincorporated territories where violence is imminent, survival uncertain, and upward mobility all but impossible. The novel is narrated by the first-person plural "we" of the Facility B-Mor, formerly the harbor city of Baltimore, Maryland, that specializes in raising the fish enjoyed by citizens of the Charters. The narrative voice's opening renunciation of history is less a gesture of true indifference than an early indication of its disillusionment with the dominant, mythologized origin story that defines its identity.

Over the course of the novel, the voice of B-Mor meanders in an out of extended self-reflection while recounting the trials and tribulations of Fan, a pregnant teenager whose departure from the Facility in search of her missing partner. It becomes clear that the "we" of B-Mor is deeply entangled in multiple overlapping pasts: the immigrant success story that underwrites their present stability, the more distant New China heritage, and the unfolding community aftershocks in the wake of Fan's disappearance. Little by little, the we-narrator recounts these wide-ranging episodes of social unrest: people hack surveillance cameras to share footage of her departure; graffiti appears across the city with images of Fan and her lover, Reg; there is a disturbing rise in physical abuse and suicide; and the once orderly crowds are swept up in random frenzies in public places, throwing litter and themselves into the fish tanks and ponds that produce the commodity that makes possible their Facility's existence. The narrative "we"

that might signal coherent unanimity or self-valorization is revealed to be a community in crisis, disrupted by moments of piercing social disharmony. Caught illegally raising catfish after Fan's departure, an older B-Mor couple simply responds, "Who cares anyway?" to the directorate officials, echoing the novel's opening question, "Why bother?" The narrator recounts that this startling moment prompted a deep reflection on when the "character and disposition of this place might have changed so profoundly as to be untenable," such that a once-respected community member with a "modest but certainly adequate and forever secure" pension would answer so indifferently.[54] The narrator's shock that someone secure in their pension would respond so indifferently after committing so egregious an infraction underscores just how deeply B-Mor's collective identity has been shaped by an association with labor and capital. A pension is the modest but ultimate indicator of a secured future in B-Mor, granted after a lifetime of industriousness and quiet compliance; these traits are so idealized in the community's origin story that they have calcified into essential pillars of its future as well. If even the most venerated and productive of us is dissatisfied or restless, the voice of B-Mor seems to brood, what does that say about the stability of the community built on such ideas?

"Why, in the life of a community," wonders the voice of B-Mor in one of its many anfractuous rhetorical questions, "does a certain happening or person become the stuff of lore?"[55] Lore, memory, history—no matter the narrative form the past takes, the voice of B-Mor winds through it: official sources such as the "archival vids and pix" that document the arrival of the "old-timers" in B-Mor, museum exhibits, and school lessons; and unofficial sources, such as collective memory, talk-story, urban legend, social media posts, "guerilla-painted" graffiti, and pure speculation in the absence of concrete truth. The events of Fan's adventures once she leaves

[54] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 64.
[55] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 185.

the walls of B-Mor which comprise the main plot of the narrative are also shrouded in mystery, with the voice of B-Mor admitting frankly when its narration is beyond the "official record" of Fan's departure and signaling the information it came to know "later," offering no further explanation as to the veracity or provenance of its story.[56] This layering of official and unofficial histories in *On Such a Full Sea* suggests a complex engagement with the past, one that engages what Kevin Bruyneel theorizes as *settler memory*: the selective, partial, and revisionary recollection of the past that obscures and sustains the operations of settler colonialism.

B-Mor's identity comes from a meticulously constructed history given the by directorate, comprised of "the oft-documented stuff about how by dint of their collective will and the discipline of their leaders in keeping everyone focused on the job the originals transformed the desperate nothingness about them."[57] This historical narrative identifies a prior absence as a natural and necessary precondition of B-Mor's existence; the "transformation" of that "desperate nothingness" is thus framed as essential to B-Mor's very collective constitution. This is emphasized through the Facility's very construction and infrastructure, in the layers of high walls, gates, and security stops that physically contain it from the surrounding counties to the carefully calibrated education it receives and closely monitored television and Internet content it consumes from the outside world.

As Said makes clear, however, historical narration is never neutral. "Far from being a neutral exercise in facts and basic truths," he observes, "the study of history, which of course is the underpinning of memory, […] is to some considerable extent a nationalist effort premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to […] one's country, tradition, and faith."[58] Through its

[56] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 33.
[57] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 68-9.
[58] Edward W. Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (January 2000): 176, https://doi.org/10.1086/448963.

narration of history, the directorate constructs a system that shapes B-Mor into a peaceful, compliant, and productive population—an identity grounded in labor and usefulness to the Charters. This identity not only sustains and profits the directorate, but also reinforces the very historical narrative and imposed identity that legitimizes its control. This, too, is a matter of pronominal urgency. Considering how memory has been strategically subject to "inventive reordering and redeploying" by Zionists to maintain occupation of Palestine,[59] Said argues that "memories of the past are shaped in accordance with *a certain notion of what 'we' or, for that matter, 'they' really are*."[60] There is narrative power in the consolidation and assertion of a national "we," one that can be strategically mobilized "for historians as well as ordinary citizens and institutions [as] very much something to be used, misused, and exploited"[61] rather than sit "inert and passive."[62]

Bruyneel takes the malleability of collective memory and its impact on national identity central to the exercise of settler memory, in which memory "serves to reaffirm the settler claim of belonging to, appropriation of, and authority over lands, on the one hand, and the disavowal of the genocide, dispossession, and alienation of Indigenous peoples, on the other hand." Memory is not simply a story that exists at a distance, detached from the material world, argues Bruyneel—it is in the quotidian "function and practices of memory" that the "creation, mobilization, and reconstitution of a people be it as citizens and subjects of state authority or of…a nation, of a race, or as settlers" is facilitated.[63] Bruyneel contends that in order to apprehend the ubiquity of settler memory, one first must accept the "entangled rather than

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[59] Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," 180.
[60] Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," 177, emphasis mine.
[61] Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," 179.
[62] Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," 185.
[63] Bruyneel, *Settler Memory*, 12-13.

distinct relationship between history and memory" as it manifests in daily life.[64] For the narrative voice of B-Mor, the question, "What do we mean, we?" is one of existential urgency. Its "we" has been continuously disciplined by the directorate—through their geographical isolation and founding mythos—such that the past overdetermines the present and the future remains unintelligible outside of the self-perpetuating terms of settler memory.

The function and practice of settler memory actively saturates daily life in B-Mor, most prominently in the labors of B-Mor's ancestors that settled and transformed that desperate nothingness. The collective narrator recalls learning in school the mythic arrival of their ancestors—"the originals"—and how they inaugurated what would become B-Mor. Upon arrival, "[t]he originals went about their first labors, renovating the row houses," building themselves into the very land.[65] The "first labors" of the ancestors takes place not in directorate warehouses, tanks, or fields that they were brought over to staff, but in the city's terrain: constructing their very homes, infrastructure, and public spaces; labor is not limited to the workday clock or workplace, but is suffused into every aspect of daily life. B-Mor's ancestors in this history perfectly embody the ideal of the model minority community, sourced the by the directorate for the "strict purpose" of disposable labor, earning this opportunity through their intrinsic "work- and family-centric culture" that allows them to "not only endure and eventually profit the seed investors [of the directorate] but also prosper in a manner that would be perpetually regenerative."[66]

As established several times in this dissertation, racialized migration and labor are key concepts around which much Asian Americanist critique coalesces—and yet this critique unfortunately tends to neglect settler colonialism's historical, material, and conceptual

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[64] Bruyneel, *Settler Memory*, 12.
[65] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 20-1.
[66] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 19.

significance in these processes. It is in this critical gap that I find Iyko Day's scholarship especially generative. In *Alien Capital*, Day develops a transnational approach to Asian North American visual and literary production, critiquing cultural narratives that oppose capitalism by nostalgically idealizing pre-capitalist or non-capitalist socioeconomic formations—narratives which, she contends, often reinforce settler logics by obscuring the foundational violences of land theft and Indigenous dispossession. Day demonstrates how Asian racialization in North America has long been framed through the frame of capitalist exploitation—such as migration for economic survival and labor oppression—arguing that when these narratives are mobilized without attention to settler colonialism, they risk reproducing settler ideas of land as empty and labor as redemptive or inclusive.

Day limns how Asian North American subjectivity has been formed under the mutually constitutive systems of settler colonialism and racial capitalism. She argues that Asians are incorporated into the settler nation not only for their economic utility as cheap, flexible labor, but also to become racialized as symbols of abstract labor against the settler ideal of concrete labor (the intangible, such as finance or exchange, versus the "real," such as physical objects or land).[67] Day reveals how Asian bodies come to be seen as the embodiment of "bad capital," marginalized for participating in the very economic systems that control and exploit them, and onto whom white settler anxieties about capitalist abstraction are projected.[68] Each novel narrativizes histories of transnational flows of Asian labor to critique the entrenchment of the model minority myth. In *On Such a Full Sea*, the all-consuming past of B-Mor has been wholly constructed subordinate to a national narrative of belonging secured via productive labor, gesturing both to the histories of indenture as well as Japanese American internment. In *The*

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[67] Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016), 8-10.
[68] Day, *Alien Capital*, 4.

Immortal King Rao, the eponymous King Rao is the archetypal contemporary immigrant success story: coming to the US via the classic Brain Drain circuit, studiously working his way up from grading undergraduate papers in a cramped basement while on a computer engineering scholarship, and all the while building a tech empire, earning his eventual position as the leader of an ever-expanding technocracy through exceptional merit. Turning now to the broader genealogy of the model minority myth within Asian American discourse allows for a deeper interrogation of its complicity in upholding settler colonialism's capitalist and racializing even as it appears to offer upward mobility.

For better or for worse, model minority discourses continue to dominate mainstream Asian American representation and scholarly discussion.[69] In public perception, the model minority figure has come to be synonymous with Asian Americans as the racial group par excellence, ostensibly achieving socioeconomic success due to an innate predisposition to discipline, family values, education, and deference to authority. This not only essentializes Asian American subjectivity, but also makes the Asian subject vulnerable to state violence and neglect. It also conceals the strategic ways the model minority identity has been repeatedly conferred and transferred across differently racialized immigrant groups to manage racial hierarchies and uphold dominant power structures. At various historical junctures, Jewish Americans, Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean, and different Latinx communities have been positioned as model minorities. As with Asian Americans, this positioning does not necessarily reflect stable "success" (cultural, socioeconomic, or otherwise), but instead functions as a means

[69] For a perspective that contends this focus on model minority politics is overstated, see OiYan Poon et al., "A Critical Review of the Model Minority Myth in Selected Literature on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Higher Education," *Review of Educational Research* 86, no. 2 (2016): 469–502. For one that contends that such a focus is not only superficial but also harmfully "half-finished" in its critique of structural anti-Blackness, see Claire Kim, "The Misbegotten Critique of the Model Minority Myth," *Theory & Event* 27, no. 2 (2024): 258–86.

to reinforce assimilationist imperatives and discipline other marginalized peoples as deficient by comparison.[70]

The prevailing discourses of model minority politics generally trace its origin in the emergence of racial liberalism in the 1950s, following the wartime internment of Japanese Americans (which I address shortly) and decades of exclusionary immigration and naturalization policy that rendered Asians in America legally alien and culturally unassimilable. While these are indeed important reference points in this history, they tend to limit themselves to the violence of racialized migration, labor, and exclusion—overlooking, as Iyko Day cautions against, settler colonialism's entanglement with racial capitalism. These narratives also tend to define Blackness unilaterally as the bottom of the racial hierarchy, cemented as the inadequacy or failure against

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[70] There has been significant popular and scholarly discussion on the perceived decline of the Jewish model minority, leading to claims that Asian Americans have become the "New Jews" while Jews are seen to have largely assimilated into the US cultural mainstream, occupying a position of unmarked whiteness akin to WASPs. Some Asian American figures have embraced this connection to Jews, none more (in)famously, perhaps, than Amy Chua in her polarizing memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011). Others have responded more ambivalently to the various implications of this connection, as explicitly fictionalized by Gish Jen in the novel *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), and as expressed by writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Samantha Lan Duong, and Viet Thanh Nguyen on Jewish American literature's profound influence on their own work. See also: Day, *Alien Capital*, 1-40; Jonathan Freedman, "Transgressions of a Model Minority," *Shofar* 23, no. 4 (2005): 69–97; and Helen Kiyong Kim and Noah Samuel Leavitt, *JewAsian: Race, Religion, and Identity for America's Newest Jews* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016). Though many researchers have debunked claims that Black Caribbean immigrants "succeed" disproportionately compared to Black Americans, the association with model minority status persists. See Mosi Adesina Ifatunji, "A TEST OF THE AFRO CARIBBEAN MODEL MINORITY HYPOTHESIS: Exploring the Role of Cultural Attributes in Labor Market Disparities between African Americans and Afro Caribbeans," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 13, no. 1 (April 2016): 109–38, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X16000035; Derron Wallace, "Model and Failing Minorities? Divergent Representations of Black Caribbean Achievement," in *The Culture Trap: Ethnic Expectations and Unequal Schooling for Black Youth*, ed. Derron Wallace (Oxford University Press, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197531464.003.0002. African immigrants are also leveraged as a model minority population, with some claiming that they outperform Asian immigrants. See Mercy Agyepong, "'Africans Do Not Fail': Examining the Model Minority Stereotype and Anti-Blackness at a New York City Public School," *Teachers College Record 126*, no. 10 (2024): 123–57, https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681241312303; Omiunota N. Ukpokodu, "African Immigrants, the 'New Model Minority': Examining the Reality in U.S. K-12 Schools," *The Urban Review* 50, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 69–96, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-017-0430-0. Within the nation's various Latinx communities, different groups with different national affiliations are alternatingly positioned as model minorities, perhaps most notably the post-Revolution figure of the Cuban "golden exile," welcomed to the US not as a refugee but a political exile opposed to Communism; Jorge Duany, "Neither Golden Exile nor Dirty Worm: Ethnic Identity in Recent Cuban-American Novels," *Cuban Studies* 23 (1993): 167–83. See also Jessica L. Perez Monforti, "A Model Minority: The Paradox of Cuban American Political Participation Regarding Official Language Policy in Miami-Dade County, Florida" (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 2001), https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/etd/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10_accession_num=osu1400070171.

which model minority status is compared. Indigeneity, as one might predict, is completely absent.

In her article "The Black Model Minority: Slavery, Settlement, and the Genealogy of the Model Minority," Bayley J. Marquez thoughtfully approaches the racialized construction of the model minority through the lens of education, tracing its genealogy back to the late nineteenth century. Centering her analysis on the Hampton Institute in Virginia—a school that enrolled both Black and Indigenous students—Marquez enriches established critiques of education as an assimilationist force, showing how the Institute positioned newly emancipated Black students as exemplary models of industriousness and compliance in contrast to their "war like" Native peers.[71] This racializing distinction served multiple nested "coercively didactic" purposes: first, it reframed enslavement as a benevolent pedagogical project that had "civilized" Black people; second, it cast emancipation as an act of federal generosity to which Black people owed a debt of gratitude and therefore continued subordination; third, it used the figure of the "grateful" and compliant Black model student as a standard that Native students should emulate; and fourth, it expropriated discourses of emancipation from the context of enslavement to that of Indigenous dispossession, reframing land theft and allotment as analogous forms of uplift and equality.[72] In doing so, the Hampton Institute reinforced racial and settler colonial logics as mutually constitutive through the obfuscation of their violences: enslavement becomes re-narrated as a civilizing gift, which then reframes dispossession as a gracious offer of inclusion.

I find Marquez's argument especially energizing in the impressive range of fields it puts into conversation: Asian American, Black, Native, and cultural studies; feminist, pedagogical,

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[71] Bayley J. Marquez, "The Black Model Minority: Slavery, Settlement, and the Genealogy of the Model Minority," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 19, no. 1 (March 2022): 142n19, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X21000345.
[72] Marquez, 136.

and legal critique; and sociology and settler colonial theory. This broad interdisciplinarity not only enriches her analysis but also affirms the need for relational approaches to uncover new or otherwise obscured insights into material and ideological processes of domination. In doing so, she shows that settler colonialism, capitalism, and racism are not confined to any one field or group but are pervasive and elusive, mutating and obscuring themselves across historical moments and contexts. This insight is especially generative in my own work, which similarly aims to draw on diverse colonial, ethnic, and cultural frameworks to limn the interconnectedness of racial formations.

By tracing the contradictory and precarious construction of the Black model minority, Marquez demonstrates how even this ostensibly "favorable" positioning—as hardworking, compliant, and assimilable—was rooted in anti-Blackness. Through her examination of the Institute, she reveals how Black students were strategically held up as exemplars not to affirm their virtues or humanity, but to justify enslavement as a civilizing project, recast emancipation as a benevolent gift that demanded gratitude and subservience, and establish a standard of accepting violence against which Indigenous students were negatively measured and expected to emulate.[73] The construction of the model minority subject, as Marquez deftly shows, has never been stable or coherent, offering a compelling expansion of the context with which to examine how the afterlives of enslavement remain entangled with settler colonialism and racial capitalism, shaping the uneven and contingent racialization of different groups over time.

Marquez's foregrounding of the industrial school as a site where settler colonialism exercised the disciplinary forces of labor and pedagogy to construct a racialized model minority

[73] Marquez, 138. This precarious and paradoxical position is made clear the Institute's segregation of Black and Native students, as well as in the eventual disposal of the Black model student when no longer aligned with the settlers' civilizing goal—underscoring the persistence of racist logics that regarded Black people as morally, intelligently, and civilizationally bankrupt even while strategically touting them as models for Native students.

subject enriches the conceptual frame through which to consider the legacy of Japanese American internment. This history casts a long shadow over B-Mor's collective identity in *On Such a Full Sea*, which is shaped by the entrenched settler memory that narrates its origins and purpose in the process by which the originals labored to transform the "desperate nothingness" of the land into a home defined by stability and productivity.[74] Marquez contends that industrial schools like the Hampton Institute and the racial education they propagated were not novel, but a reincarnation of the settler pedagogical project of plantation slavery, declaring, "[t]he plantation is the settlement and also the school." Citing Tiffany Lethabo-King, she continues: "The transformation of land through Black labor on the plantation produces a myriad of effects: eliminating Indigenous presence on that land, creating settler space, and creating settler profit for the white settler/master." The educative space of the plantation connects to Asian American racialization not just through the use of Asian indentured labor across the Americas in the wake of emancipation, but in the application (and mutation) of its logics to Japanese American internment.[75]

The claim that Japanese Americans were interned because they were thought to pose a genuine security threat has been scrutinized by many scholars, who generally agree that World War II's racial hysteria was mobilized to obscure myriad underlying reasons. Iyko Day takes an economic approach, noting that Japanese success in business and agriculture on the West Coast sparked significant anti-Japanese agitation, leading to internment being underwritten as a means of protecting white labor interests from "economic destruction."[76] Dispossessed and displaced, the Japanese were dispersed to camps across the West and Midwest, made to work the land and

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[74] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 69.
[75] Marquez, 135.
[76] Day, *Alien Capital*, 122. See also Brian Masaru Hayashi, *Democratizing the Enemy: The Japanese American Internment* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 1-10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7rr6g; Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

by extension, in Jodi Byrd's words, "forced to play out in an abridged trajectory the US frontier discourses, in which the only way to become 'true' American citizens is to first go native and then carve democracy out of the wilderness."[77] This history saturates *On Such a Full Sea*, where the labor of the originals serves as both literal cultivation of land and symbolic fulfillment of the settler state's narrative of industrious assimilation. Recalling the archival documentation of the arrival of its ancestors, the voice of B-Mor ponders the wilderness—"so depleted a cityscape"—that they were tasked to carve into home.[78] The we-narrator continues:

> We should concede that unlike the experience of most immigrants, there was very little to encounter by the way of an indigenous population. There were smatterings of them to be sure, pockets of residents on outskirts of what is now the heart of B-Mor, these descendants of nineteenth-century African slaves and twentieth century laborers from Central America and even bands of twenty-first century urban-nostalgics, all of whom settled on the intimate grid of these blocks and thrived for a time, and for reasons that history can confidently trace and identify but never quite seem to solve, inexorably declined and finally disappeared.[79]

Here the dynamics of settler memory are at play, the mythological tale of the originals' arrival both acknowledging and disavowing the city's Indigenous peoples. Through the separation of B-Mor's "we" from "most immigrants," the voice of B-Mor simultaneously acknowledges an encounter with indigeneity as typical to migration—contradicting the claim of only "desperate nothingness"—and also dismisses it.

Also striking is the manner in which the narrator describes the people of Baltimore before it became B-Mor—the supposedly insignificant indigenous population excluded from and erased by the "we" constituted through settler memory. The indigenous population encountered, however, does not correspond to Native or First Nations peoples associated with North American indigeneity. Instead, this indigenous population is comprised of variously racialized peoples

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[77] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 192.
[78] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 18.
[79] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 19.

connected to centuries of differently manifested US settler empire: Black people, connected to the legacies of chattel slavery and, as Marquez demonstrates, the industrial school; Latinx people, tied to US intervention guided by "Big Stick"-style foreign policy and multinational corporate exploitation across Central America; and "twenty-first century urban nostalgics," gesturing toward the predominantly white and upper-class gentrification of urban neighborhoods at the expense of local communities of color.

The specific terms used refer to Baltimore's indigenous population also actively engage settler memory's permeation of everyday functions and practices—in this class, everyday language: the "natives," the multiethnic but predominantly Black and Latinx population of Baltimore, and the "originals," the migrants from New China who transform it to B-Mor. Each of these terms claim autochthony in its own fashion: "natives" through the assertion of (a clearly undervalued) birthright, and "originals" which denotes a point of origin for which there is no precursor. The term "originals" participates in the settler logic of terra nullius, rebranding migrants as first peoples while denying the continuity and presence of those who came before—an Ideological maneuver that legitimizes erasure under the guise of origin. The narrator's claim to ancestral originality given the existing population of B-Mor calls to mind Byrd's elucidation of the cacophonies of empire projected onto Shakespeare's Caliban and examination of the machinations by which settlers and arrivants seek to inhabit indigeneity; Byrd asks, "What happens when Caliban is forced to leave the island so that other Calibans might arrive?"[80]

In the case of Japanese American internment, in which the internees are dispatched to tame or enliven a barren landscape, and in so doing, undergo a resignification: transforming from alien labor to a model of productivity.[81] Or, as Byrd pithily quips, the "Asian body is…made to

[80] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 69.
[81] Day, *Alien Capital*, 123.

bear cowboys *and* Indians."[82] This transformation from the embodiment of yellow peril to model minority exemplar is process Day calls "colonial elimination through assimilation," invoking the logic of elimination that governs the institution and demand for blood quantum as determining Native identity as it is made legible to the government for representation and resources.[83] The absorption of Asian Americans into the settler state via performance of the model minority figure likewise fits into Spitzer's metapolitical theory of settler colonialism, in which the threat of the collective "them" of Asian America (and their labor and wealth) is incorporated into the national "we," and touted as the very success of liberal individualism.

One might be tempted to write such a handling of indigeneity off cursory, as a gesture to indigeneity as an abstract analogy for all marginalized communities, and therefore merely another instance in which indigeneity is made to be both present and absent.[84] However, the novel refuses such easy analogizing by which indigenous peoples continue either to be sidelined, or worse, erased completely. To be clear, *On Such a Full Sea* does not explicitly represent indigenous characters or populations; anything to the contrary cannot be argued by any analysis of the novel. I argue, however, that because it engages explicitly with the structural and narrative erasures of indigeneity and enslavement in its putatively innocent and neutral collective perspective, the violence of such deletions ends up being all the more stark; furthermore, the impact of this violence is heightened as the narrative voice reveals its own fissures and uncertainties.[85]

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[82] Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 210.
[83] Day, *Alien Capital*, 148-9.
[84] While there are many important critiques of metaphors and analogies of indigenousness that illuminate how they more often erase the conditions of Indigenous dispossession than emphasize its ongoing processes, Yogita Goyal has incisively demonstrated how analogy can be productively used to interrogate the literary and historical legacies of enslavement. Yogita Goyal, *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery* (NYU Press, 2019).
[85] See Byrd, *Transit of Empire*. One of Byrd's arguments is that U.S. settler colonialism has produced and relied on a transferrable racialized "Indianness" to facilitate the dispossession of indigenous lands and resources while also providing a basis for the marginalization of non-indigenous racialized populations. Central to this argument is a

In its long, elliptical musings, the narrative "we" reveals internal unease and discord. Many of its ruminations on the past are marked with a quiet disillusionment, recalling a time where it was "as yet unaware of certain aspects of B-Mor" that now trouble it so deeply.[86] Before gaining knowledge of these sinister and enigmatic "certain aspects," the narrative voice is the eager audience of Uncle Kellan, an older family member who "talk[ed]-story" about the history of B-Mor. Through this narrative form that draws from both Chinese oral storytelling and Hawaiian pidgin (considered a hallmark of early Asian American fiction), Uncle Kellan serves as a voice that counters the official historical narratives of B-Mor, regaling the "we" with "stories [that] weren't exactly the ones you studied in school or watched vids of in the historical museum" predicated on that preexisting "desperate nothingness."[87]

> [H]e would remind us that there were, in fact, numerous existing businesses when the originals arrived, businesses run by the smattering of natives who had stayed on, whose deeds and leases to their properties were unilaterally voided and reassigned to the (then nascent) directorate.
>
> But there was no real population to speak of anyway, one of the more stridently confident of us might have said. Those shops were failing![88]

The child narrator's response undoubtably parrots the history taught in school and memorialized in museums overseen by the directorate, and again reveals how the inhabitants of B-Mor are expected to conceive themselves as having rightfully earned their place through their productivity as laborers. In this narrative, the existing population of Baltimore registers as not even "real" because of their "failure" to succeed per capitalist standards; the original residents thus narratively erased, so too is their displacement and dispossession conveniently erased—for how can you eliminate a population that does not even exist? Uncle Kellan's stories reveal settler

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critique of the use of "Indianness" to understand other forms of racialized oppression, noting that "this conflation masks the territoriality of conquest by assigning colonization to the racialized body."

[86] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 68.

[87] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 68-9. For the role of the talk-story narrative as counter memory in Asian American literature, see King-Kok Cheung, "Talk-Story: Counter-Memory in Maxine Hong Kingston's China Men," January 14, 2015, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/77n2q7qn

[88] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 69.

colonial capitalism as integral not just to the historical conditions that created B-Mor, but also to the narrative strategies of settler memory that erase indigenous dispossession in order to maintain a harmonious and profitable settler society.

The official B-Mor history that characterizes the displacement of the natives as related to an inherent failure to maintain their land and property is a pillar of the Doctrine of Discovery, in which early European colonial powers granted themselves the legal right to claim land that they physically encountered. The Doctrine of Discovery is recapitulated in US settler national narrative in which Indigenous peoples are cast as wards of the state by federal and state policy, supposedly so incapable of self-determination of any kind that they are stripped of sovereignty and dispossessed of land. The "stridently confident" rebuttal to Uncle Kellan by the younger we-narrator echoes multiple instances in which the state justified the Indigenous land theft and dispossession. Marquez, for example, notes that both the plantation and the industrial school sustained the argument that enslavement "made Black people 'producers of something useful'" and therefore justified the seizure of Indigenous land, its conversion into property, and its labor to be performed (and profit reaped) by exploited labor.[89] Outside of the continental US context, Secretary of State John W. Foster argued for the annexation of the sovereign kingdom of Hawai'I based on the ascribed inferiority of the Indigenous peoples due to their perceived failures as laborers, thereby heralding of the migrant Asian worker as a more suitable laboring subject: "[T]he native inhabitants had proved themselves incapable of maintaining a respectable and responsible government, and lacked the energy or the will to improve the advantages which

[89] Marquez, 136,

Providence had given them in a fertile soil…[T]heir places were being occupied by sturdy laborers from China and Japan."[90]

The narrative voice of B-Mor represents the way that Asians in North America are interpellated in the settler colonial capitalist regime as aliens, distinct from settlers in their embodiment of labor and racialized identity, while still participating in a system that displaces and dispossesses indigenous populations. It also centers the relationship between the narrative of history and its material consequences, aligning the narrative erasure of the native inhabitants of B-Mor with their geographical, political, and economic dispossession. The articulation of labor as B-Mor's singular raison d'etre aligns with Day's explication of settler colonial association of Asian labor with the domination of capitalist abstraction, and is key to understanding the novel's layering of the we-narrator's ontological crisis as one of overdetermined Asian American racial identity within a settler colonial capitalist system.

Understanding the we-narrator as a particularly racialized collective voice in spite of the glaring absence of explicit racial identifiers and its racial history is central to its identity crisis. The figure of the model minority embodies the spirit of neoliberal multiculturalism and colorblind racial ideologies through its foregrounding of labor as the singular key to belonging and citizenship; it promises that with the correct amount and type of labor, one's racialized identity can be transcended and its attendant political and material oppressions rendered obsolete. Race is both absent and present throughout the novel. The narrative voice rarely uses explicit or direct racial markers and identifiers, deferring instead to family names or physical descriptions of skin tone, facial features, or hair color or texture that indicate a potentially racialized heritage that is seldom confirmed. There are several exceptions: Loreen calling Fan a

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[90] John W. Foster, *American Diplomacy in the Orient* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 366, quoted in Michael J. Devine, "John W. Foster and the Struggle for the Annexation of Hawaii," *Pacific Historical Review* 46, no. 1 (1977): 29–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/3637401.

"New China bitch" out in the counties; Fan observing a maid of Southeast Asian descent, noting that the directorate's attempt to integrate laborers of different Asian ethnicities was quashed because of violence (further demonstrating that even the Asian model minority figure is heterogeneously racialized); and the description of the "Parkies," Black natives of Baltimore who refused to leave the city (and from whom Reg—and by extension, Fan's unborn child—is descended).

When the we-narrator suggests that to dwell on it the story of the originals would be a "sentimental journey" that it has since grown beyond through their time in B-Mor and their material contributions through the Facility-produced commodities, it also reveals that under the directorate, racial categorizations have also been dismissed as "sentimental." The voice of B-Mor repeats this community history in which the natives conveniently disappear to make way for the labors of the originals, and in the repetition there lies a hint of doubt. As the narrator contemplates the status of community "lore" achieved by Fan and the discord sparked back in B-Mor, the history studiously learned becomes less a pillar of B-Mor's identity and more a limiting enclosure, imposed to keep it consistent and compliant. It may be easy, perhaps too easy, to categorize *On Such a Full Sea* merely as a futuristic retelling of the standard migration story between Asia and the United States because: the community of B-Mor is structured by nation-specific immigration policy; that immigration is explicitly attached to labor needs; and the laborers engage in community-building for the development of a collective identity based on the idea of a shared and preserved past. However, the novel uses these familiar tropes to show how limited and facile such strategies are for Asian American subject formation. The seemingly harmonious collective "we" of B-Mor simultaneously performs and critiques the conception of Asian America as a monolithic model minority, programmed to quietly and unprotestingly

perform the labor that sustains existing hierarchies of power at the expense of other marginalized groups. The we-voice of B-Mor reveals deep anxiety about its existence as a solution to the directorate's need for labor and commodities and what other futures are foreclosed or possible through a reckoning with that past.

Algorithms and Ancestry in The Immortal King Rao

Upon first glance, Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao* appears to be yet another installment in the well-established tradition of the diasporic Anglophone South Asian family saga, novels that sprawl across generations and continents to ruminate on ideas about home, belonging, and the burden of history, sometimes to the point of cliche. The novel opens with familiar imagery, setting the scene in the "hot, wet nothing of a village" Kothapalli in post-Independence India, complete with lush descriptions of peepal trees, old men lounging on upturned crates by the road, and the stray dogs who circle around them. This is the birthplace of the narrator's father, the eponymous King Rao, who achieved a life worthy of his name in spite of his "nothing of a village" origins.[91] In this village, dreaming of a future in which she has been admitted to a teachers' college in spite of the social and institutional obstacles in her path, a future where she can leave Kothapalli and its nothing-ness behind, a young Dalit woman named Radha steals a bar of soap from the local shop—"not for the soap, but for the life she promised herself."[92] This promise shatters when she is assaulted by a man of the village and hastily married to him, into the Rao family, as a solution to the "shame." Assaulted again on her wedding night, Radha becomes pregnant and dies while delivering the eponymous King Rao. Over the course of the novel, the narrator recounts how the Rao family maneuver themselves and other Dalit families in their community towards economic ascendency through coconut farming

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[91] Vauhini Vara, *The Immortal King Rao* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 1.
[92] Vara, 7.

and business acumen, Rao's emigration to the United States to study computer programming, and his meteoric rise as a larger-than-life Steve-Jobs-esque tech giant (*Coconut*, not Apple). This is where any similarity to the standard diasporic South Asian family novel ends.

Vara subverts and complicates these familiar tropes with a uniquely assembled narrative voice and apocalyptic worldbuilding. Like *On Such a Full Sea*, Vara's novel looks to a near future where corporations have entirely subsumed the nation and restructured society according to its principles of capitalism. The world of *The Immortal King Rao* is the "Hothouse Earth," in which climate catastrophe can no longer be addressed with preventative measures and havoc is regularly wrought across the planet in the form of floods, fires, drought, and steadily rising sea levels. Confronted with the immediate threat of the end of humanity, national governments have been dissolved in favor of the Shareholder Government, a supranational super-corporation in which citizens are capital-S "Shareholders." Shareholders gain or lose access to opportunity and resources in accordance with their Social Capital, which is determined by how "well" they live their lives. These determinations—as well as the making of laws and judicial decisions, and the development of a standardized global education curriculum and testing—are meted out by the deific program called the Master Algorithm, or "Algo." And who is the creator of the Algo—and first CEO of the Shareholder Government—but King Rao. Those who have rejected this way of living settle out in the "Blanklands," autonomous islands free of the Board, the pressures of a social profile, and the oversight of the Algo, but wracked by poverty and violence, and especially vulnerable to the impact of climate disaster.

This is but one of the stories in *The Immortal King Rao*. The novel is narrated by Athena, King's daughter and personal experiment. The novel is comprised of three distinct narrative threads: first, a biography of the rise and fall of King Rao, from India to America, from coconut

farmer to Shareholder CEO; second, Athena's recollections of her childhood with King Rao, completely isolated from humanity in the Blanklands after his very public fall from grace; and finally, the narrative of the novel's present moment: Athena, incarcerated and accused of the murder of her father, awaiting the final judgment of the Algo.

If it sounds like the novel is trying to accomplish quite a lot, it is because it is. *The Immortal King Rao* is stuffed to the brim with grand, sweeping questions about the state and fate of humanity: what can be done as the world stares down the barrel of climate collapse? What are the possibilities for hope or resistance as corporations collude with, and at times surpass, the power of the nation-state? How do we navigate the vast interconnected networks of oppression (and privilege) as the world is made smaller by technology? How is the way that people relate to themselves, others, and the world itself shaped by the technological advancement? What truly counts as "advancement?" Is it actually possible to dismantle the master's house without the master's tools? The novel's dizzying philosophical and narrative scope has been met with some critical ambivalence, with one reviewer expressing that it has "the uncomfortable feeling of three novels crammed into one."[93] The reviewer is not entirely wrong; each one of its narrative threads is rich and interesting enough to constitute its own novel—but I contend that the discomfort or disorientation of experiencing these distinct narratives within a singular work is precisely the point.

The Immortal King Rao is narrated by Athena and her first-person "I," not by the "we" of a community as in *On Such a Full Sea*. However, I argue that Athena's narration is deceptively singular, revealing an indecisive yet vital relationship to plurality as Athena explores the physical and virtual space of the world. Through Athena's distinctive narration and the novel's episodic

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[93] Nina Allan, "The Immortal King Rao by Vauhini Vara Review – the Rise and Fall of a Tech Giant," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2022, sec. Books, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/08/the-immortal-king-rao-by-vauhini-vara-review-the-rise-and-fall-of-a-tech-giant.

and “unflaggingly industrious”[94] commitment to its crowded form, *The Immortal King Rao* vigorously pushes the boundaries of the relationship between—and, by extension, obligation to—individuals and society, the constellation of interconnected and interdependent systems that shape our collectivity, from the all-encompassing scale of the supranational corporation to the intimacy between a father and daughter (and every relationship in between). Like the voice of B-Mor, Athena must confront a collective identity imposed upon her without her consent, formed under multiple layers of colonialism and capitalism that too “may be of a design unsustainable;” unlike the voice of B-Mor recounting (and revising) communal myths, the collectivity imposed upon her lives in her very mind, written into her genetic code.

Like her Greek namesake, Athena Rao is her father’s brainchild. As the Greek myth goes, the goddess Athena was born motherless, springing fully formed and fully-armed from the head of Zeus. Another popular variant tells a less miraculous tale: Zeus, believing a prophecy foretelling his demise at the hands of his children, consumes the pregnant Metis (who may or may not have been impregnated without consent). Athena, already quickened in her mother’s womb, bursts from Zeus’s head. Having technically been born of Zeus rather than Metis, the prophesied threat is circumvented and Zeus’s continued reign secured.[95] To some degree, both versions of Athena’s mythological birth play out in the novel. Athena Rao is not only King’s genetic daughter, but also the apex of his programming career. As CEO of the Shareholder Government, King Rao is informed by climate scientists that the rest of humanity’s existence will be to endure environmental catastrophe until inevitable demise; Hothouse Earth is

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[94] Mark O’Connell, “Total Recall,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2022, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/11/24/total-recall-immortal-king-rao-candy-house/.
[95] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Athena.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 20, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Athena-Greek-mythology. For more on the significance Metis in the myth of Athena, see Norman O. Brown, “The Birth of Athena,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 83 (1952): 130–43, https://doi.org/10.2307/283379.

irreversible and past prevention. Horrified by this bleak vision of the world's future, King vows to develop "the Harmonica:" a neural link delivered via injection that would connect all people's brains to the Internet, declaring it "humanity's only chance of having a future," to "preserve some record of who we were."[96] When deaths in early Harmonica trials lead to King's downfall and exile to the Blanklands, he smuggles out an embryo created with his late ex-wife, injects it with a modified Harmonica code, and commissions a surrogate to carry the embryo to term. Athena is born—or engineered—to serve as King's human test subject, the living and breathing embodiment of his genetic and technological legacy.

The modified code—nicknamed "the Clarinet" by Athena—activates in her youth, and opens her mind not only to the vast breadth of the Internet but also directly to King Rao's mind. It is this connection that shapes the novel's narrative form, Athena recounting not only her memories, but her father's as well, as seen through his own eyes. This manifests in the novel as interjected commentary and digression:

> It was the advertisements on the radio and billboards, promising that Pears could turn bad skin good, that had made her so desirous. [...] What Radha wouldn't have realized—*but I can't help but remark upon*—is that Pears had been selling its soaps across the British Empire for a long time. In 1899, at the height of British colonialism, one advertisement had read, 'The first step towards lightening The White Man's Burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness...'[97]

Athena's aside (which we do not yet know is Athena's) goes on to explain the history of Pears Soap and its navigation of the decline of the British Raj, the rise of the Swadeshi movement, and the series of transnational business maneuvers that ensured its production and sale in post-Independence India. This digression demonstrates how Athena's Clarinet connection works, allowing her to weave in and out of her own memories, King's memories, and all the information available on the Internet in an instant. In another narrative detour, Athena's thoughts become a

[96] Vara, 307.
[97] Vara, 5-6, italics mine.

chain of related web searches as she hurriedly hides her pubescent body from her father, beginning with "that image of Marilyn Monroe on that grate in New York, the pleated skirt of her dress opening like a great white flower in some rain forest, and the rain forest in general" and cycles through "the desertification of Beijing, Phoenix, and Malaga, the submersion of Miami and the Mekong Delta, and the flooding of London."[98]

This narrative style not only forces the reader to experience Athena's rapid train of thought, but also furthers the novel's engagement with the relationship between the individual in the present and the collective in the grand scheme of history. Radha's intensely personal desire for the soap and the independence it symbolizes for her is positioned within the variously overlapping systems of casteism, colonialism, and capitalism that cross boundaries of time and place; and, as the theft of the soap is what ultimately leads to King Rao's birth, it by extension places his rise and fall within this context as well. King's mortification at Athena's changing body becomes connected to the climate disasters that ravage the Earth, put in the sequence of planetary events that led to her creation.

There are echoes of the deceptively harmonious "we" of *On Such a Full Sea* in the rhetoric of unified humanity with which the Coconut Corporation frames its technological research in *The Immortal King Rao*. The Harmonica is marketed by Coconut as a "way for people to communicate more authentically than ever," which is the ethos that drives Coconut from its humble origins in a professor's cramped basement to algorithmic overseer of the world. "*We* started out as scattered tribes, and then became feudal societies, then nation, then this grand collective of Shareholders," King Rao declares in his farewell speech as outgoing CEO of the Shareholder Government. "All this time, *we've* been pursuing the same human project—to become more and more connected with one another…*we* could use computers, these supposedly

[98] Vara, 67.

cold, calculating, heartless devices, to bring people together in a way that no one ever had before."[99] Through this sweeping, royal "we," King Rao speaks as the voice of technological progress, of the corporation, and of the global public, all at once. But as the novel reveals, this fusion of voices allows Coconut to erode distinctions between corporation and government, private profit and public good, individual choice and collective control.

Through King Rao's "we" that pushes for an increased Coconut presence in the everyday person's mind, boundaries between the Board, the Shareholder Government, and the Shareholders themselves are continually blurred to the point where no one can quite remember when Coconut went from being contracted *by* the government to essentially *being* the government, or how society got to the point that "Shareholder Government had so fully aligned its citizens with corporate interests that no one cared to call the Board out"—about the lies of meritocracy, the false promise of a scientific solution to Hothouse Earth, and the privileging of corporate growth over all else.[100] King Rao's "we" evokes the real-world legal fiction of corporate personhood where corporations are granted the rights of individuals without corresponding obligations. In the American context, the very "abstractions of human will, intention, and belief" that underwrite corporate personhood have been historically "manipulated and used to justify slavery, inequality, corporate indifference, limited liability, and judicial activism." The stakes of this personhood are not just abstract, but deeply material and linked to denials or exclusions from full personhood; Emily Apter, reading Lisa Siraganian's monograph, *Modernism and the Meaning of Corporate Persons*, notes that the "messy imbrications of

[99] Vara, 307, 309.
[100] Vara, 245.

slavery's 'person-as-property logic' with 'corporate personhood logic'" have had real consequences in the ways in which "reparations are adjudicated (or not)."[101]

This manifests in the narrative of technological advancement used by Coconut; for example, when forced to account for the Shareholder fatalities during the Harmonica trials, King Rao uses the "collective language of the corporation to disavow any individual responsibility for sixty-four people's deaths."[102] The explicit "we" in *The Immortal King Rao* thus functions as both shield and weapon: rhetorically unifying, and legally disaggregating. In a reversal of how Athena's apparently singular "I" is made collective through her neural connection to King Rao, the Internet, and others, the "we" of the Shareholder Government becomes less a genuine collective than a single voice masquerading as a crowd. In his alleged desire to preserve a record of all of humanity, the only one King Rao really saves is his own—which he imposes upon his daughter without her knowledge or consent. This further emphasizes the individualism that fuels the corporate privatization and colonialism operating by ventriloquizing a unified collectivity. It is precisely this pronominal inversion of meaning and revision of what constitutes the individual and the collective—and the dynamics of power between them—that the novel seeks to disentangle.

King Rao's identification with corporate personhood is his connection to the late-20th century manifestation of the model minority figure. As the Cold War progressed, the US fought to establish the primacy of American capitalist democracy over the Communist authoritarian regime of the Soviet Republic; underwriting this quest for global dominance was a domestic

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[101] Emily Apter, "Corporate Personhood as the New Leviathan," *Critical Analysis of Law: An International & Interdisciplinary Law Review* 9 (2022): 31-2.
[102] Vara, 238.

agenda to suppress racial discord to bolster the image of a truly *United* States.[103] Racial liberalism claimed that racialized Others could be managed by the state through their integration and assimilation into the national polity in order to project the image of a racial democracy; that is, in their transformation from a foreign "them" into the national "we" that is now capacious enough for (a carefully regulated) racial plurality. As Ellen Wu explores in *The Color of Success*, Chinese and Japanese Americans enthusiastically participated in the recasting of their racial identities towards what would become the model minority, eager to turn the narrative away from the treacherous spy toward something less threatening and more productive.[104] Attentive to the midcentury immigration legislation that allowed large numbers of Asians into the US, Madeline Y. Hsu reveals a key shift in US immigration policy from the goal of restriction to strategic selection. Much scholarship on Asian migration to the US focuses on the governing principle of restriction, that until 1965 certain populations of people (primarily Chinese and other Asian populations) were completely barred from entry, thereby becoming through their exclusion racialized "outsiders and threats against whom the United States ideologically, legally, and institutionally defined its boundaries." However, Hsu notes that immigration law in this period strategically opened to allow certain kinds of Asians entry regardless of their racial identity, revealing how "considerations of class, political and economic pragmatism and individual attainments mitigated Asian exclusion" and made them more "assimilable."[105] Many of these newly selected immigrants were students, like King Rao in Vara's novel, who "settl[ed] on the

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[103] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 4.
[104] Wu, 5.
[105] Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 25.

margins of college campuses rather than in the tenements and shantytowns peopled by the previous waves of migration."[106]

Key to the entrenchment of the figure of the model minority is the racial positioning of the Asian American relative to the Black American during the late 1960s through to the 1980s. In the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, liberals, threatened by Black activists' calls to overhaul American capitalist democracy and radically redistribute institutional power, sought to prop up an ideology of Japanese and Chinese Americans as exemplars of "successful" assimilation; they were the "solution" in an attempt to disprove the "problem" that non-white racial status was a significant barrier to full political belonging and socioeconomic mobility in the US.[107] Much contemporary scholarship on Asian American racial formation focuses on the racial liminality of the Asian in America, caught between the binary opposites of Black and white. Through an exploration of the political and cultural discourses that have racially defined Black and Asian American identities in relation to one another, Helen Jun in *Race for Citizenship* demonstrates how Asian American and African American claims to citizenship were developed as mutually constitutive, each using the other to articulate its own positionalities.[108] The emergence of Asian American model minority aligns with this historical trajectory, exploiting discourses of anti-Blackness to prop up Asian Americans and ultimately maintaining white supremacy. Asian American and Black studies scholars have rigorously explored this sometimes coalitional and often vexed racial relationship at various points of U.S. history;[109] this vein of

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[106] Vara, *The Immortal King Rao*, 87.

[107] Helen Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (NYU Press, 2011), 93; Wu, *The Color of Success*, 6.

[108] Jun, 5.

[109] See Seulghee Lee, *Other Lovings: An AfroAsian American Theory of Life* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2025); Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt3z3; Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk*; Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Duke University Press, 2010), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw3bs.

comparative scholarship provides a valuable foundation from which we can understand the process of racial formation as historically and relationally contingent. It critiques the binary understanding of race and demonstrates its insufficiency in accounting for the complexities of racialization in multiracial societies.

The problem of anti-Blackness has become increasingly important to Asian American studies, comparative race studies, and indigenous critiques of settler colonialism. While scholars such as Jared Sexton offer trenchant critique of analogies in which the figure of the immigrant is comparable to the racialized Black American,[110] Day turns away from analogy as the model for comparison. Rather than race, Day highlights labor as the pivot on which capitalist logic of settler colonialism turns and demands that we think beyond the black/white/yellow triangulation that often pits racialized populations against each another. Day's transnational framework of Asian labor within North American capitalist enterprise destabilizes the historical and intellectual claim of racial slavery as a foundational principle, "contradict[ing] an understanding of anti-Asian racism [and racialization] as solely derivative of a prototypical racialization of blackness."[111] The heterogeneously racialized alien subject status, occupied first by the enslaved African and subsequently by the indentured Asian migrant, allows for a more capacious and complex analysis of the ways various racial subjectivities form in accordance to the needs of the capitalist state and ultimately demonstrates how "racialized vulnerability and disposability supports a settler colonial project."[112]

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[110] Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions Journal*, no. 5 (Fall/Winter 2011), 18. For a thorough and thoughtful response to Afro-Pessimist and Indigenous debates about race and settler colonial critique, see Iyko Day, "Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2015): 102-121.
[111] Day, *Alien Capital*, 23.
[112] Day, "Being or Nothingness," 107.

In the aftermath of internment, Asian American labor underwent a resignification, shifting from disposable alien labor marked by a treachery that undermined U.S. global dominance to an admirable and profitable productivity.[113] This transformation from the embodiment of yellow peril to model minority is process Day calls "colonial elimination through assimilation," invoking Wolfe's logic of elimination in a socioeconomic context.[114] The absorption of Asian Americans into the settler state via performance of the model minority figure likewise fits into Spitzer's metapolitical theory of settler colonialism, in which the threat of the collective "them" of Asian America (and their labor and wealth) is incorporated into the national "we," and touted as the very success of liberal individualism.

In the wake of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and the various radical ethnic activist movements of the 1970s, the model minority figure became even more entrenched in racial discourse as the U.S. saw a huge influx of Asian immigrants previously excluded on the grounds of race and nationality but now welcomed based on education and profession. The 1980s and 1990s heralded the rise of neoliberalism, the economic ideology premised on capitalist accumulation, possessive individualism, and a deeply anti-statist sanctification of the free market across the globe. Underwriting neoliberalism's economic project was the racial ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism, which deploys "an ethic of multiculturalism to be the spirit of neoliberalism and posits neoliberal restructuring across the globe to be the key to a post-racist world of freedom and opportunity."[115] After the discourse of equal assimilation and inclusion that underwrote racial liberalism's projects of blunting and stymieing radical calls for national

[113] Day, *Alien Capital*, 123.
[114] Day, *Alien Capital*, 148-149.
[115] Jodi Melamed, "Reading Tehran in Lolita: Making Racialized and Gendered Difference Work for Neoliberal Multiculturalism," in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, ed. Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 79.

reform,[116] neoliberal multiculturalism goes a step further, offering "colorblindness" and the fantasy of the "postracial" as the new racial regime.[117] It is with this gesture to the future—its possibilities and constraints—that I move to the following section, considering how each novel's exploration of shared pasts bears on what is to come.

On Time (and Time Again)

Strange Loops in On Such a Full Sea

To consider the complex relationship between temporality and history, I would like to consider two (admittedly very distinct) studies on the topic: Mark Rifkin's *Beyond Settler Time*: *Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* and Amin Samman's *History in Financial Times*. Rifkin frames temporality as an extension of settler colonialism, offering the formation of "settler time"—"notions, narratives, and experiences of temporality that de facto normalize non-native presence influence, and occupation"—to open new ways to conceptualize indigenous ontology, resistance, and refusal.[118] *Beyond Settler Time* considers various moments of US history in which the historiographic process oriented the national narrative away from indigenous dispossession and conflict, and toward a settler narrative of democratic progress,

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[116] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (Routledge, 2014), 211-212.
[117] While there is a growing body of scholarship that addresses colorblindness and postracialism, both terms have yet to be concretely defined. Colorblindness, examined prominently in Omi and Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States*, is the natural heir of 1970s and 1980s conservative practice of "dog-whistling," using code words to refer to racialized social, political, and economic issues without explicitly invoking race. The definition of the postracial is more difficult to pin down, but is largely traced to the rise of liberal optimism in the wake of the election of President Barack Obama; see Sumi Cho, "Post-Racialism," *Iowa Law Review* 94 (2009): 1589–1645; and Roopali Mukherjee, Sarah Banet-Weiser, and Herman Gray, eds., *Racism Postrace* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2019). In Asian American literary study, some scholars have deployed "postracial" to refer broadly to the rise of Asian American writers consciously writing about explicitly non-Asian subjects; see Yoonmee Chang, *Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011); Stephen Hong Sohn, *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (New York: NYU Press, 2014). For my purposes, I associate colorblindness with the *political right* and its endeavors to deny the extension of state powers and resources to address variously racialized inequalities through the wholesale denial of racial difference as structurally facilitated. Conversely, I take postracialism to embody the *liberal* ideal that racial difference itself can be transcended or rendered inconsequential through inclusion into and representation within the state (an evolution of the politics of "melting pot"-style liberal multiculturalism).
[118] Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Duke University Press, 2017), 9.

rendering indigenous peoples "temporal aberrations" with "no proper role within the unfolding of time."[119] In *On Such a Full Sea*, the historical narrative inherited by the narrating B-Mor—the settler memory—is recounted in settler time, taking the dispossession and displacement of indigenous peoples as a given and thereby making them a vanished relic of a distant and relatively unimportant pre-history.

Where *Beyond Settler Time* interrogates temporality as an aspect of settler colonialism, Samman's *History in Financial Times* limns a philosophy of time and history within the dynamics of contemporary capitalism.[120] Against prevailing economic thought that neatly equates chronological time with historical time, Samman argues for an understanding of the ways that "time folds back on itself, such that the present takes shape through a vista of imagined pasts and projected futures."[121] Rather than flow linearly, past to present to future, this "strange history" is produced through a series of recursive "strange loops" that "[cross the] boundaries between the imagined and the real."[122] The conceptualization of the strange loop is "a way of giving shape or figure to this process [of history-making], suggesting a form of feedback that makes every attempt to imagine history a potential input back into it." History is produced not only through the historical narratives written by historians, but through the "variety of everyday operations" of historical imagination; that is, history itself is shaped by attempts to use historical discourse to make sense of the present. Rather than simply *explain* history, historical narratives

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[119] Rifkin, vii, 67.
[120] Amin Samman, *History in Financial Times* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 135. *History in Financial Times* focuses specifically on the rise of financialization, a development of capitalism that I do not explore here. However when it comes to the way history becomes narrativized in the event of crisis, Samman posits that "the age of financial capitalism is less unique than commonly thought. Despite various transformations in the money form and the myriad instruments no traded on financial markets, historical change is still imagined and produced through narratives…and the futures onto which these open out."
[121] Samman, 5.
[122] Samman, ix.

provide "individuals and groups with practical means of navigating temporality in specifically historical terms," thereby feeding back into itself and contributing to the process of history.[123]

Is it possible to find, between settler time and strange history, the historical and temporal condition of the racialized alien within the system of settler colonial capitalism? If settler time marks indigenous peoples as "temporal aberrations," where is the alien laborer left? Repeating the labors of community building performed by "antique" communities that have since been exiled, the voice of B-Mor is stuck in its own strange loop of a simultaneous repetition and denial of the "generations deep" past, futurity foreclosed by the series of "later presents" as dictated by its collective history.[124]

Time is a tricky thing in *On Such a Full Sea*. While the novel is set in a future dystopic evolution of the United States, the narrator is constantly turned toward the past, from the arrival of the New China originals to the collective discord brewing in the wake of Fan's departure. The reader's sense of time is further disoriented by the novel's general lack of detailed worldbuilding. Details that would allow the reader to construct any kind of coherent and concrete linear timeline of events per the conventions of the dystopic genre are left largely unspecified or mentioned so quickly in long, circuitous prose that they are easy to miss—what precisely was the apocalyptic event that led to this iteration of the United States? How far into the future are we in this novel? How far back into the past does Fan's narrated life exist in relation to the moment of narration? The narrative arc of the novel provided by the we-narrator embodies what one review describes as a kind of "mundane globalism," representing the ordinariness of daily life in a postapocalyptic dystopia rather than reveling in the adventure or thrills that such a setting might lead one to

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[123] Samman, 16-17. I am also indebted to John Macintosh for his clear elucidation of the finer points of financialization and Samman's central claims; see Macintosh, "The Past Is Now: On Amin Samman's 'History in Financial Times,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 9, 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-past-is-now-on-amin-sammans-history-in-financial-times/.

[124] Samman, *History in Financial Times*, 16.

anticipate.[125] A far less generous explication of the novel's sparse worldbuilding comes from Ursula K. Le Guin, who declares such omissions as "irresponsibl[e]" and "superficial," wondering: "A good many things in the novel were inexplicable to me, such as how and when North America came to be like this, what happened to nation and religion, how raw materials are produced and how… In a broken, sporadic civilisation, where does all this stuff come from?"[126] Le Guin's frustrations with the novel's relatively scant worldbuilding privilege expectations of generic conventions over the ontological and epistemological questions posed the novel, which crucially engage with history and memory as historically contingent processes that are adjusted over time.[127] The novel does not limit itself to the idea of a singular and accessible "official" history as a given, mirroring the ways in which the real-life "official" record is strategically engineered to include and exclude minority subjects to preserve racist and colonial systems.

The novel engages with temporality not in terms of precise dates or carefully plotted timelines, but through the ways that time itself is controlled and utilized for purposes of control. Returning, for example, to the story of B-Mor's founding demonstrates how the past is constantly reflected back to the residents' present:

> [F]or whatever was in question when the originals landed long ago is by now for us a set of curiosities, like the crank on an ancient automobile, or the virtual keys on a computer screen, the inconvenient or tiresome having been steadily engineered away. We labor hard for certain but the work is rote and *our tomorrows are mostly settled* and the way we love one another is *cast by the form of our excellent contiguity*, a rigorous closeness that only rarely oversteps its bounds.[128]

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[125] Philip Leonard, "Mundane Globalism," *American Book Review* 36, no. 5 (September 23, 2015): 14–15, https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2015.0091.
[126] Ursula K. Le Guin, "On Such a Full Sea by Chang-Rae Lee – Review," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/30/on-such-full-sea-chang-rae-lee-review.
[127] For another Asian Americanist rebuttal of Le Guin's review, see Jenn Fang, "Book Review: 'On Such a Full Sea' by Chang-Rae Lee Is Engaging & Deeply Relevant," *Reappropriate* (blog), February 17, 2014, http://reappropriate.co/2014/02/book-review-on-such-a-full-sea-by-chang-rae-lee/.
[128] Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 88, italics mine.

Though the questions of the originals are mere curiosities to the narrator, the motions of their labors continue to structure daily life in B-Mor, having been so "steadily engineered" that "tomorrows are mostly settled," and even affect is determined by the "form of our excellent contiguity." The past of B-Mor dictates its present, which is its very identity as a dutifully laboring community in harmony with the directorate; and because this harmony is maintained by "the knowledge of…what it used to be like here before the originals landed," the idea of a new tomorrow is already out of the question.

Perhaps because so much of life in B-Mor is strictly plotted out, from the cityscape itself to the rigid life path structured by exams and labor—the tomorrows being "mostly settled"—the voice of B-Mor is constantly posing rhetorical questions, dipping its collective toe into the realm of the unknown. Most of these questions address some aspect of its constitution over the years since its communal founding:

> Yet to go back to that moment [of B-Mor's founding] would be a sentimental journey. We have grown up now, generations deep, generations strong. And have we not lasted long enough to dare say all the hopes of our forebears have come true?
>
> Have we not done the job of becoming our best selves?[129]

The we-narrator traces the multiple layers of labor that the originals undertook to perform model minority belonging: first, the original labor as contracted by directorate; second, the labors of community building, literally breaking down the homes of dispossessed natives to put together their own properties; and third, by continuing to grow "generations deep, generations strong." The voice of B-Mor is uneasy with this story, distancing itself from the originals twice over: first by excluding "them" from its own narrative "we," and second by disavowing the act of historical remembrance as "sentimental" due to the passing of time. The voice of B-Mor's collective identity crisis is inextricable from the historical narrative that has produced it, and therein lies its

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[129] Lee, 21.

conflict. The narrator's numerous putative dismissals of history—the opening question, "Why bother?" and the "sentimental journey"—reference history as it knows it; that is, history as it has been dictated to them, history scripted and repeated for the purpose of their endless obedience and labor. Rather than remain fixed in the past, B-Mor's history continues to impose upon the present, dictating a future focused single-mindedly—true to its name—on being *more*: more generations, more labor, and more "we."

Explaining settler memory, Bruyneel makes an analogy that feels particularly appropriate for *On Such a Full Sea*: "Like fish who do not know they are in water," Bruyneel writes, "we breathe collective memory every day, habitually, without giving it much thought."[130] Fan's departure disturbed the peace of B-Mor's pond, and now the fish must confront its surroundings and what sustains it. This is a we-narrator that is deeply frustrated with its we-ness, unable to see past the narratives of its history to imagine something beyond it. Trapped narratively by the history of the originals built into its "we," economically by the precarious class system of the directorate that values them only for their labor, and physically the by facility walls of B-Mor, the narrating voice wonders the ways that "as conceived, as constituted, we may in fact be of a design unsustainable."[131] How does a community move forward having ostensibly completed the "job" of becoming its "best selves?"

Feeds and Futures in The Immortal King Rao

For all the Shareholder Government's supposedly "unprecedented" expanse and grandeur, Athena wryly notes, it is really not so exceptional in its reification of socioeconomic hierarchy in order to expand markets and create consumers: it is preceded by American Empire, globalization, and so-called free trade, which itself was preceded by the British Empire, which in

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[130] Bruyneel, *Settler Memory*, 13.
[131] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea,* 104.

turn was preceded by the East India company, and so on. Vara's novel also draws the caste system of India into this genealogy, tracing the Rao family's socioeconomic ascendency in spite of casteism. Athena comments on casteism explicitly in one of her digressions, explaining the British Raj's exploitation and entrenchment of the caste system to divide and manage their colonized subjects; the implication of this digression is much like the others, with an unspoken question of how history might have progressed if colonialism had not "cement[ed] the role of caste in a society that might have otherwise dispensed of it."[132] This question, too, has implications for the continued settler dominance of the United States—caste was a key point in early 20th century demands for South Asian inclusion into the United States as naturalized citizens. In 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind asserted before the Supreme Court that he should be granted citizenship—and therefore, the right to settle in the United States—because his "high caste Aryan" heritage situated him as more proximate to "Caucasians" than to Black, Indigenous, or other excluded racialized populations; though he was unsuccessful, his case illuminates that logics of caste supremacy too are entangled with settler colonialism and racial capitalism.[133] And by naming the British Empire as an antecedent of the Shareholder Government, the novel also highlights the ways in which what is promoted as technological progress serves to buttress existing hierarchies rather than undermine them.[134]

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[132] Vara, 257.

[133] Ian Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, 10th Anniversary Edition (NYU Press, 2006).

[134] Technological advancement, especially related to the Internet and artificial intelligence, tends to be viewed as inherently egalitarian because the user's embodied and material reality—such as race, sex, nation, class, et cetera—is supposedly rendered irrelevant. However, there is a robust body of scholarship that indicates otherwise, variously explore the ways that the Internet exacerbates problems of sexism, racism, and coloniality through the biases built into the extraction and classification of data and the development of algorithms. See Wendy H. K. Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* and *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition*; Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*; Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*; and Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. It is also worth noting that many scholars (including some who I have just mentioned) also explore the ways the Internet becomes a site of generative representation and resistance for variously marginalized groups.

The past violently imposes in the present not just in the corporations, but in Athena's own body and mind, exemplified by that "gift" from her father, the Clarinet. The Clarinet is not initially a blessing that enriches her experience of the world—once it connects to her father's mind, it is the traumatic opposite. By linking Athena's mind with his, King floods her consciousness with his own memories. Athena's experiences of these memories are at first intensely vivid and extremely disorienting, unleashing a "succession of foreign images" so overwhelming that she repeatedly fails to "regain ownership" of her own mind.[135] Athena experiences this memories not as mere spectator, but as a participant in the scene: "Once, King's uncle Chinna appeared to me, dead in King's House…. I stood over him—*in King's form*—in terror."[136] In a perverse reversal of the mythological Athena's story, King Rao ensures his immortality by implanting himself in his daughter's head. Athena describes this as a most intimate violation, "It now seemed inevitable that his consciousness would not stop oozing through me until he dropped dead. By then he would have overcome me altogether. I would be his host."[137] That Athena experiences King's encroaching memories from his perspective, *as* King, muddies her narrative "I;" where does she end and King begin?

The Athena who narrates the story from her prison cell is inseparable from King himself; indeed, it is directly from his memories that she relives his life and occasionally interjects. Here the novel plays again with scale, developing an intensely intimate link between father and daughter out of an attempt to preserve humanity's legacy in the face of extinction. King's memories and the presence of the Internet are so entrenched in Athena's understanding of herself that upon running away to the Blanklands and encountering a person other than her father for the first time, she becomes intensely aware of and unfamiliar with her physical body. Athena is

[135] Vara, 102.
[136] Vara, 104, italics mine.
[137] Vara, 104.

stunned by the experience of severing the link with her father and the Internet, contemplating her new singularity in a moment of startling self-recognition, paraphrasing Frantz Fanon's embittered desire for a subjectivity unburdened by racial, colonial, and temporal overdetermination: "There I stood, becoming a person among people."[138] In this moment of disconnect from everything she ever knew, Athena finds herself paradoxically connected to humanity in a way she never experienced even with the Clarinet at her disposal.

Through Athena's non-chronological tracing of multiple histories and the collision of Athena's consciousness with her father, *The Immortal King Rao* interrogates the cyclical manner by which systems of capitalism and colonialism sustain their dominance through the distortion and disruption of the individual, the interpersonal, and the collective. Just as Athena's relationship to her father and herself is distorted and dictated by systems larger than herself, so are countless others in the novel. Intended to incentivize increased output and profits on the family coconut farm, the Raos swap from a collective living and working system of the extended family to one that divides them into smaller nuclear households, with pay for the men proportional to their productivity on the farm. The pay for their wives and daughters, who do the household labor, is nonexistent. The Rao family splits into factions, and the once-booming business declines.

Under the Shareholder Government, the individual is wholly subsumed by the collective through the endless "extracting and profiting from its users' personal information, while claiming its goal was to bring people together in harmony."[139] The readiness with which the people of the novel unquestioningly embrace the increasing corporate intrusion into their lives is a result and manifestation of colonialism. In their conceptualization of data colonialism, Nick Couldry and

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[138] Vara, 136. In Chapter 5 of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon describes being an "object among objects," and desiring to be simply a "man among men."
[139] Vara, 312.

Ulises Mejias argue that a key legacy of historical colonialism is the "normalization of resource appropriation, and *its redefinition of social relations so that dispossession came to seem natural*."[140] Extraction is, as Matt Hooley notes, "not something humans do to resources; it is how the categories 'human' and 'resource' are made and managed."[141] In its extreme focus on individual life and data as the resource to be extracted to serve the greater global collective, the Coconut Corporation and the Shareholder Government's redefinition of social relations protects and perpetuates the hierarchy of power upon which it depends.

Conclusion: Towards Inscrutable Futures

To conclude this chapter, I would like to consider the ostensible protagonists of both novels: Fan, in whom the voice of B-Mor seeks meaning and whose flight from B-Mor comprises most of the narrative action of *On Such a Full Sea*, and Athena, who narrates the multiple narrative strands of *The Immortal King Rao*. Bruyneel argues that the "radical political cure" to the persistence of settler memory is not simply a revised historical knowledge "but rather a direct and antagonistic encounter with the commitments, interests, and forms of domination that maintain white settler societies." Against the problem of disavowal, Bruyneel continues that "alternative memories need to be posed to reimagine the meaning of the past so they can be a source for radical and liberating interventions, lessons, and possibilities."[142] Through Fan and Athena, both novels not only reimagine the past but gesture towards future possibilities.

Before her departure, Fan was as a diver in the B-Mor's tanks, tasked with raising, monitoring, and harvesting the fish that would feed the wealthy Charters. She embarks on a quest

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[140] Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias, "Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject," *Television & New Media*, 2018, 5, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476418796632.
[141] Matt Hooley, *Against Extraction: Indigenous Modernism in the Twin Cities* (Duke University Press, 2024), 11.
[142] Bruyneel, *Settler Memory*, 16.

through the violent and lawless counties and the metropolitan Charters to reunite with her boyfriend Reg, who may have been taken from B-Mor by pharmaceutical companies who believed him immune to the mysterious "C-illness"—which one might read as capitalism and/or colonialism—that plagues the people across the country regardless of class status. From the moment she leaves B-Mor the "official record" of her story ends, and her subsequent travels are ostensibly made up of gossip, hearsay, and speculation—perhaps an exercise in Bruyneel's liberatory alternative memories. The voice of B-Mor's suggests its fixation on this story is not in itself distinctive, explaining that "we invest so much of ourselves—often totally beyond reason—in particular figures and performers, both fictive and of flesh." What is unique about Fan is the prolonged fascination she inspires in B-Mor. Previous "unsettling or notorious" displays have resulted in B-Mor "collectively wring[ing] our hands and wail[ing]," resolving only when B-Mor can assure itself that "This Is Not We"—but what do we mean, *We*?[143]

The novel's title—and first of two epigraphs—is delivered by Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, after he participates in regicide: "On such a full sea are we now afloat; / And we must take the current when it serves, / Or lose our ventures." In Shakespeare's play, the line signals a moment of decisive opportunity; in Lee's novel, it evokes a quieter gesture, but one no less important. The "full sea" does not promise transformation but suggests the possibility of futurity if one is attuned to the shifting current. Rather than bold action, the novel imagines change emerging through patience, attentiveness, and the slow, collective work of narration and memory. Fan, though the catalyst for the narrator's journey, is not the central focus of the novel. It is not her story, but rather the quiet shift she sparks within the narrator. In the novel's conclusion, the narrator gently assures Fan that her return is unnecessary because the knowledge that she is out

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[143] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 185-6.

there, imagining, is enough. This subtle acknowledgment affirms the novel's conception of futurity—not defined by grand gestures, but by the quiet possibility of imagining and being.

Fan is a curious heroine for an adventure story. She is silent (she has no dialogue in the novel), diminutive, and "one of the ranks, perfectly ordinary."[144] She is stunning in her opacity even to the we-narrator who notes that "we can't be certain [of what Fan thought]. We know much about her daily life but that still leaves a great deal to be determined. She was perhaps brighter than most, certainly less talkative, but otherwise, in terms of character, not terribly distinctive."[145] In spite of Fan's impenetrability, the we-narrator does not distance itself from her the way it does with B-Mor's originals, "think[ing] of her still as one of *us*."[146] Her departure does not drive B-Mor towards the superficially comforting "final hopeful notion that This is Not We," but opens spaces for B-Mor to consider what its "we" even is. It is precisely her inscrutability that the we-narrator returns to over and over again, speculating endlessly why Fan left, what and how much she knew, and what her intentions were.

What Fan lacks in interiority she makes up in exteriority. The we-narrator returns several times to her physicality: how it contributes to her work in B-Mor's tanks, how it allows her to move through the counties and Charters, and how its reproductive function is concealed and revealed along her journey, as well as the possibility that her unborn child is "C-free." Fan's body is not the ornamented object produced by Orientalist discourse; in fact, her "mere, lone body" is starkly unornamented and strikingly functional.[147] Her physicality captivates the voice of B-Mor, who describe her body against the desire to give it meaning: "And that's one of the funny things about Fan, as we think about her now, which is that when it mattered most she was

[144] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 198.
[145] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 3.
[146] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 10.
[147] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 6.

an essentially *physical* being, rather than some ornate bundle of notions, wishes, dreams."[148] Rather than attempt to narrate her as possessing a knowable interiority or as a puzzle to be solved, the voice of B-Mor allows her to remain as *surface*. She is seen, narrated, imagined, speculated about, but not definitely owned by or legible to the narrator or the reader; her performances of inscrutability are not a deception, lack, or osbtruction, but are, in Vivian L. Huang's words, "flickering forms of the illegible [that] occasion other modes of relating…as an intervention into liberal narratives of sexual and racial progress through assimilation."[149] Critiquing the privileging of depth in the depth/surface binary, Huang argues that surface should not be treated as a mask hiding "real" meaning, but as a site in and of itself of affective, aesthetic, and political significance. The voice of B-Mor's narration foregrounds sensation over intention, speculation over recognition. In this view, the we-narrator's narration of Fan's surface—and the questions of how accurate, true, or reliable any of it is—is not a limitation or failure of access, but a refusal of extractive reading practices that demand legibility, self-disclosure, or psychological depth from racialized and gendered subjects. What results is a character who is not passive, but *resistant* to incorporation—into state logics, sexual or domestic roles, and even the narrative's own frameworks of understanding. It is a rejection of the "we" imposed upon it to remain in perpetuity the transparent and compliant model minority subject of a settler capitalist state.

Where Fan is completely opaque, narrated by the "we" of B-Mor without access to her interiority, Athena is laid completely bare to the reader, plumbing the depths of her mind and her father's throughout the novel. Unlike the voice of B-Mor, who imagines without knowing, Athena knows too much—she is saturated with her father's memories, his ambitions, his

[148] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 243, emphasis original.
[149] Vivian L. Huang, *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (Duke University Press, 2022), 5, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2z6qfff.

traumas, and the total archive of the Internet. Her voice—her "I"—becomes a vessel for the past's overdetermination; the novel itself structurally mirrors a feed-like logic: fragmented, data-rich, chronologically nonlinear, but ultimately dominated by King Rao's algorithmic imprint. Even her moments of resistance—such as her connection to the Exes free of the Clarinet or her fleeting use of the neural link for authentic relationality—are unable to escape the closure imposed by the Shareholder regime. She is most transparent in the novel's closing, in which her attempt to fight back against the Shareholder Government with the Exes has failed, her father has died, and she is vivisected in front of an audience of Shareholder authorities, her death as "some scientific specimen" a grim parallel to her birth as King's test subject for the Harmonica, one final extraction for corporate capitalism. As they carve into her flesh, Athena's launches into a third-person narration, repeating in anaphora all the ways the dissection "accomplishes nothing" until she loses consciousness: "It accomplishes nothing for a dissector to grasp the dissectee by the scruff of her neck, murmur, "Scalpel…. It accomplishes nothing for the dissector to pull apart the flaps of skin formed by his scalpel's cut at the dissectee's neck, and mutter, "Drill."[150]

As the dissection proceeds, Athena "wakes up" under the coconut trees at the Garden, where King grew up. Against the pristine scene—"just as it is in King's memories, not a single tree out of place"—she hears in the distance a news report that the Blanklands have been bombed on "the Algo's recommendation."[151] The novel ends with Athena directly addressing the reader in the collective "we," questioning the purpose of human existence:

> One day, this will all be over. Yet the fact will remain that we were here once, beneath all that lace. The fact needs no proof. We were here. What great fortune. For what? we kept demanding. For what? For what? For what? For what? But when a tree sprouts from the ground, it doesn't demand answers; when its blossoms grow tired and heavy, it lets them drop. After all our trouble, is that it, then? Did it all mean nothing but itself?[152]

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[150] Vara, 369.
[151] Vara, 370.
[152] Vara, 370.

In her moment of dying, King Rao's immortality makes itself known—he has ensured his future by robbing hers, condemning her to his past. This is not just the end of her life, but the end of her narrative and subjective autonomy. The narrative turn to the first-person plural "we" is not a moment of genuine collectivity or relationality, but an eerie ventriloquism of King Rao's corporate "we" as he cajoled the masses to sell their individuality, rejected culpability in the deaths he caused, and decided that the best way to face the future is to preserve the past. If *On Such a Full Sea* leaves us an optimistic ambivalence towards a future that cannot yet be known, *The Immortal King Rao* leaves us with a future already scripted by the self-sustaining and reproducing settler colonial logics that animate the supranational technocratic global Shareholder Government —a future beyond repair.

The voice of B-Mor itself develops notions and dreams, through the life Fan's story takes on in the collective imagination—and in so doing, it finds a current that just might serve:

> Whenever we tell the story of Fan, details are apt to change. You don't mean to alter anything; in fact, your intention is the very opposite, you want nothing more than to be an echo of the previous speaker, who, you decide, did a perfectly super job. And try as you might to match the very tone of the telling, the bellow of certain episodes and the half-breathed whisper of others, isn't it the truth that, despite your fealty to the story, a moment will arise that compels a freelancing, perhaps even rebellious, urge?
>
> Of course, those moments will vary depending on who you are. […] We can't help but add a little of our own special imprint, a tiny re-marking here, a slight miscoloration there, and sometimes even more than that if the feeling is intense enough.[153]

If Fan is a catalyst for transformation, she is not one by virtue of heroic action or disruption. Rather, her quiet, sustained presence—and the narrator's careful, almost reverent relation to that presence—models a form of subjectivity and temporality that breaks with the dominant logics of settler time and neoliberal agency. Here, change does not arrive through visibility or voice, but through a quiet practice of relation that refuses both possession and abandonment—in, as the

[153] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 210.

narrator says, "keep[ing] our attention to the small."[154] Rather than return to the past and to the facts of history to resolve its ontological crisis, the voice of B-Mor finds hope and possibility for the future in the ever-changing story of Fan, with as many versions and variations as there are retelling the story. "Our telling becomes an irrepressible vine whose hold becomes stronger than the originating stock," exclaims the narrator, "and sometimes even topples it, replacing it altogether."[155]

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[154] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 62.
[155] C. Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*, 185-6.

Coda: Looking Up?

Towards the end of *On Such a Full Sea*, the we-narrator of B-Mor mulls the ways in which Fan's errant departure has inspired uncharacteristic deviations from their collective character that has been established over generations of carefully managed life defined by labor:

> It's in the tilting and thrashing that we wangle our luck. Otherwise, as a wise man once said, we'll be bound in shallows and in miseries. For the truth is that we can't help but envision what may well come…
>
> Or will this capacity be a part of us now, inform from this point forward how we view these long, runway-straight streets, these heartening low-shouldered homes, and our modest and well-meaning brethren, who have worked assiduously all these years in the grow houses and tanks and treatment ponds, hardly looking up? […] [T]here's a rankling in the belly that makes you want to grab the person by the ears and bark, No more![1]

This irruption of awareness and the new perspective it provides the narrator when approaching the most mundane aspects of everyday life—aspects that would have previously gone unnoticed—and refusing to go back to prior consciousness is one way to describe what I hope I have achieved in this dissertation. By bringing together Asian American novels that do not explicitly stage encounters with or represent Indigenous peoples, and scholarship from Native and settler colonial studies (among many other fields), I have aimed to exercise an approach to Asian American literature and study that accounts more robustly for the ways in which settler colonialism is an active structural force in Asian American racial subject formation. In doing so, I hope to have even inspired such an approach to "be a part of us now" and "inform from this point forward" an orientation "looking up" towards the settler state and the cacophonies it produces.

Each of the novels read in this dissertation present variations in narrative strategy, thematic scope, and temporal orientation. In Chapter One, I read *The Sympathizer*'s relentless

[1] Chang-rae Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* (Riverhead Books, 2014), 295.

scrutiny of the past as it explores questions of recognition, representation, and truth as they manifest in the narrator's fragmented confessions. Against hegemonic temporalities that entomb Indigenous peoples into a fixed and distant past and cast Asian Americans as without a past entirely, *The Sympathizer* is unrelenting in its insistence that while the past can be oppressive in the erasures and obfuscations it contains, returning to those gaps and lacunae is itself a practice that can help us better understand the ways in which systems of power materially and ideologically seek to oppress us. Through a simultaneous inhabitation and revision of the confessional form, *The Sympathizer* provides a critical lens through which the past need not foreclose the present or future, but enable them to unfold.

In Chapter Two, *Tropic of Orange* forces through its heterogenous cast of narrating characters who traverse the time and space of the Americas alternative cartographies of colonialism and a firm anchoring in the here and now. Between the polyphonous narrative form of the novel and the diverse proliferation of scholarship it has inspired, *Tropic of Orange* uniquely attunes us to the multiple horizontal relationships amongst racialized and colonized peoples, as well as of the discourses developed to analyze them. The novel's attention to racialized geographies, affective connections, temporal elasticity, and coalitional solidarity produces a climax that redefine the very notion of movement through physical stasis. In doing so, it makes visible a method in which marginalized peoples can resist and refuse the totalizing power of the settler state without succumbing to the reductive politics of recognition or deferring to a future freedom that may never materialize.

In the third and final chapter, I turned to two examples of first-person plural narration to explore what possibilities of futurity. Much like the previous chapters, this temporal orientation is similarly vexed, and accordingly, each novel produces a different vision of futurity. In *The*

Immortal King Rao, there is a cautionary tale of the future being foreclosed by the weight of the past, as exemplified through the neural link that consumes Athena's consciousness against her will, and ultimately results in her bodily death. Collectivity, in *The Immortal King Rao*, is appropriated as a shirking of responsibility—everyone made transparent—rather an acceptance of it. In *On Such a Full Sea*, on the other hand, rejects this vision outright, turning to inscrutability, quietness, and seemingly small repetitions with a difference in refusal of settler logics of capitalism that would demand nothing but sameness in perpetuity.

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