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**The Crossroads We Make:**

Intergenerational Trauma and Reparative Reading in  
Recent Asian American Memoirs (2018-2022)

An Honors Paper for the Department of English

By Josh-Pablo Manish Patel

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## Introduction

I hope my writing has many layers, as human beings have layers.

— Maxine Hong Kingston, “Cultural Mis-Readings”

Many sacrifice the past for an idealized future that never comes. A future dreamt out of a past that has ceased to be. We, as the children of those dreams must eke out an existence in a very peculiar present, in a strange and uncomfortable gap between nostalgic memory and hopeful dream. A present that denies history, one that at its surface claims equality for all, even as it uses the notion of equality to perpetuate the injustices of the past often blandly and sometimes violent, but with a coded sort of violence that is not seamless but has the full weight of capital behind it. It is into this bizarre, unhomely space-time that we have the task of writing.

— Larissa Lai, “Corrupted Lineage”

In her classic essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You” (1997), feminist queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes on the state of cultural criticism in the wake of the AIDS epidemic and the general state violence of the mid-1990s. She puts forth that critique of that era monopolistically privileges “paranoid” theory—facilitated by scholars’ habitual “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a term coined by Paul Ricoeur to describe a Marx-Freud-Nietzsche-influenced lineage of literary interpretation—with non-paranoid critical stances often regarded as “naïve, pious, or complaisant” (Sedgwick 124-126). Drawing on the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, Sedgwick argues for an alternative “reparative” reading practice. The reparative motive, as Sedgwick puts it, is less interested in solely demystifying systems of oppression to *forestall pain* (Sedgwick makes it clear the reparative position already acknowledges the existence of these regimes); rather, reparative criticism is interested in how critics can *seek localized pleasure* within texts written out of an unjust reality. Where paranoid theory dismisses reparative frameworks as “merely aesthetic” and “merely reformist,” Sedgwick proposes

this method of criticism as a productive way of knowing because it enables engagement with different and positive affects in the same world full of grief and injustice (144).

My project extends Sedgwick's reparative reading practices to recent Asian American memoirs, specifically trauma memoirs from the past five years (2018-present) that detail personal trauma and communal, intergenerational trauma. This exploration of the reparative turn in Asian American memoirs is equally indebted to bell hooks' frameworks on pedagogy and love. To (re)turn to love, which is for hooks a "surrender [to] our attachment to power," is to actively *seek pleasure* (*All About Love* 221); Sedgwick herself suggests that an alternative name for "the reparative process is love" (128). As Cathy Park Hong posits in her memoir *Minor Feelings*, which brings the work of affect theorist Sianne Ngai into the realm of Asian American race studies, Asian Americans have historically and predominantly been defined by "minor feelings"— "the racialized range of emotions that are *negative*, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed" (55; emphasis added). Hong's book expresses the fruitfulness of affect studies for understanding both Asian American experiences *and* Asian American self-writings of those experiences. In the additional context of immigrant families' intergenerational traumas that both precede and overflow into America, minor feelings often exist alongside trauma-induced ones. Motivated by the affect theories of Sedgwick, hooks, and Hong, my reparative reading model aims to push back against the exclusive dominance of overwhelming negative affects such as shame, guilt, and anger that saturate Asian American lives and life-writing, seeking instead love, pleasure, positivity, and repair within texts and within authors' own lives, while also exploring the methods through which the memoirists themselves embody the reparative in writing and self-analysis.

My project pursues this goal via three chapters. The first chapter addresses the ways Stephanie Foo and Esmé Weijun Wang adopt the illness memoir to engage in alternative methods of

care to heal from trauma and mental illness and to move away from systems that enforce psychological, psychiatric, and racial othering. In the second chapter, I elaborate on the ways Phuc Tran and Cathy Park Hong restage literature and language politics to reshape their own personal narratives on trauma and race. Finally, drawing on hooks' idea of communal love, my third chapter delineates how Nicole Chung's adoptee memoir proposes new ways of crafting communities of care following the traumatic rupture of one's families and/or communities. By engaging with a reparative framework, I describe how this recent cohort of Asian American authors are seeking out novel forms to heal from personal and communal trauma while simultaneously considering the impact of their racial and minoritized status on the recovery process.

Historically, Asian American literature has served as a site to reexamine literary conventions in self-writing and the collective writing of ethnic communities. More recently, James Kyung-Jin Lee points to a genre "boom" in the Asian American trauma memoir and illness memoir (9). This (historical and contemporary) turn towards self-writing, while long acknowledged by Asian American and diasporic literature scholars such as Rocío Davis, has largely been disregarded in the "mainstream press" (Lai 40). In her essay "Corrupted Lineage," Larissa Lai speaks to the overwhelming power of capital to erase present Asian realities in the West. While Lai is referencing the Canadian publishing industry, the publishing trends she notes transfer to a discussion of Asian American race narratives as well, where there is a "taste for particular kinds of narratives": an interest in *past* injustice or the "brutal histories of 'over there'" rather than the here and now (42)<sup>1</sup>. The depiction of the historical Western nation or colonized homeland as unjust or brutal implies "a

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<sup>1</sup> Although Lai is speaking on the narratives of the Asian diaspora, hooks attests that these trends are true of other minoritized groups. In *Teaching to Transgress*, she suggests "that we may learn from spaces of silence as well as spaces of speech, that in the patient act of listening to another tongue we may subvert that culture of capitalist frenzy and consumption that demands all desire must be satisfied immediately, or we may disrupt that cultural imperialism that suggests one is worthy of being heard only if one speaks in standard English" (174).

mainstream atonement for past wrongs, while the injustices of the present remain unaddressed”

(40). While these texts have “merit and political value,” Lai defends that

there is a danger in the promotion of certain types of work to the exclusion of others, and that danger is this: that unless a wide range of work from marginalized communities, including those narratives that don’t easily fit within a dominant sense of history and/or national identity, is widely promoted and read, the equation of our bodies and our very being solely with histories of violence and exclusion ensures our continued marginalization within mainstream culture, sanctioned by the voices of “our own,” unwittingly co-opted by the editorial power of capital. (43)

Lai concludes that the paradox of multiculturalism is that for acknowledgement of racist “histories of violence and exclusion,” atonement is required; yet, in rooting texts exclusively in national and colonial histories, present racial injustices are left untouched—and thus arises the repetition of the “same kinds of injustices over and over again” (44). As Hong scathingly declares, “the outlying forces that cause [Asian Americans] pain—Asian Patriarchal Fathers, White People Back Then—are remote enough to allow everyone, including the reader, off the hook” (49). (Re)turning to the memoir—a text that both roots the author as a minor, diasporic subject speaking out of a collective struggle *and* an individual narrating their personal journey through trauma—uncovers a survival method to write oneself into a “history of violence and exclusion” while exposing the racist pitfalls of a (supposedly) postracial nation.

My project, then, contributes to and furthers existing scholarship by analyzing new, critically successful, and popular Asian American memoirs—which remain notably under-researched texts in a notably underrepresented literary field—and staking out the academic importance of personal writing within Asian American literary studies. Contextually, my project also arrives at a tumultuous time for Asian Americans, as the surfacing of racially charged, anti-Asian attacks during the COVID-19 pandemic has made the historical erasure of the Asian American experience more visible. My project responds to this discrimination through spotlighting voices that work against



racist regimes and communal oppression. Hence too, rather than separately analyze the memoirs in solely individual contexts, the chapters will blend thematically and textually. In portraying a range of healing perspectives and an array of diasporic identities, I use this project to metatextually conjoin a healing community of Asian American writers across ethnic lines.

Notably, some scholars maintain that the “reparative turn” can be read through the US neoliberal empire and its capitalist ideological machine. In the introduction to her book *The Rise of Repair*, Patricia Stuelke—citing the psychoanalytic work of David Eng—argues, “Eng teaches us to read ... reparation as a disavowal of ‘responsibility in a history of colonial war and violence that preserves and extends life to some while simultaneously withholding it for others’” (10). Furthermore, she writes that reparation enforced under structures of racial neoliberal capitalism “[enacts] ‘a closed circuit of injury and repair,’ one that equates ‘justice’ with the ‘liberal redistribution of love and life,’ rather than ... the abolition of racist settler colonial capitalist institutions” (10). Stuelke foregrounds how, while the language of repair was employed for social justice, it was equally employed for justifying the US’s imperial projects.

In contrast to Stuelke, affect studies scholars are simultaneously discussing the value of the reparative turn, or alternative textual strategies that exist in tandem with a paranoid critique. Feminist queer scholar Robyn Wiegman delineates that “the current attraction to reparative reading is about repairing the value and agency of interpretative practice itself” (7). Wiegman affirms that reparative reading as a critical practice is itself a praxis of repair: one that understands the critical necessity of “interpretative practice” but recognizes the “increasingly damaged authority” of a hermeneutics of suspicion (7). More so, quoting Ellis Hanson, Wiegman attests, “reparative reading is ‘grounded in disillusion rather than infatuation’ and arises from ‘the obvious fact that our world is damaged and dangerous’, but instead of ‘repeat[ing] the bad news’, it, seeks to ‘build or rebuild some more sustaining relation to the objects in our world’” (11). Following the trails of Wiegman and

other reparative scholars, my project proposes that the reparative turn and reparative analysis is not absolutely resisting paranoid critical models and interpretation, nor is it equally about uplifting “reparative reading as a proposed counter to the hermeneutics of suspicion” (Wiegman 19). My arguments, rather, insist that a reshaped model of repair is politically present and privileging “what the object of study needs or knows”—hence, encouraging alternative interpretative practices and realizing the inherent scholarly power that arises from this reshaped reparative model (7).

My research, then, insists that marginalized writers and activists of color turn towards reparation to reclaim models of care and healing for *themselves*. Concurrently, I reason that the reparative turn, as my project suggests in its exploration of historical traumas, does not have to be exclusive or evasive of structures of power, much less tied to a “closed circuit of injury and repair.” Asian American memoirists are emphatically *not* naïve about racist institutions—as Sedgwick’s hypothesized “paranoid critics” might suggest—but are instead writing in a tradition where trauma and its effects are localized, unraveled, and brought to the surface. Wiegman validates the localized “affective binds” of reparative criticism: “that is, the way this scholarship makes claims on the political landscape of the present by taking the present as an affectively resonant scene for ongoing debate about politics, agency, temporality, and the value and utility of criticism itself” (6). Where a paranoid model of critique is consistently theorizing and anticipatory of a foreboding, yet unseen and unknown, injustice, the reparative turn encourages a willingness to be surprised through active engagement with the memoirists’ *present* lived experiences: moving away from paranoia as a “strong theory of negative affects,” reparative engagements enable an unpacking of the “weaker” or “localized” moments which grant a more sensitive understanding of the authors’ healing journey, sense of belonging, and racial identity. This attuned engagement “rethinks” and “resists” the “interpretative practices founded on the symptom”:

Whether generated through Marxist or psychoanalytic traditions, symptomatic reading is taken to confer epistemological authority of the analytic work of exposure, honing left critical conceptions of power as repressive, mystifying, and occluding. Its primary rhetorical genre has been referenced as *critique*, which gives the critic sovereignty in knowing, when others do not, the hidden contingencies of what things really mean. In recent years, symptomatic reading has come under assault by literary critics who express a desire for intimacy with objects of study they neither master nor disdain. (Wiegman 6-7)

Moving towards a “*desire* for intimacy” and studying trauma memoirs of the present racial moment, my project exposes the “affective resonance” of self-writing for Asian Americans and uplifts these texts as active agents in the “ongoing [political] debates” surrounding race and trauma. Thus, empathetic readings of “repair” are not wholly antagonistic to a state of paranoia, and a positioning of paranoia and repair as antithetical or dichotomous performs reverse scholarly work. Instead, the work of healing narratives can and often does occur in a parallel manner to the work of uncovering and critiquing oppressive regimes, and the combination of these two methods of thought has provocative, reparative effects in self-writing and beyond.

This project and my own critical approach encourage and adopt Wiegman’s affect theories to consider an expanded model of race-based reparative critique that, turning to hooks’ pedagogical texts, “transgress” present methods of reparative scholarship. For hooks, transgressive teaching is “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students... to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (*Teaching to Transgress* 13). Transgressive frameworks of pedagogy are rooted in intimacy (language employed in Wiegman’s empathetic interpretative practices) and bound to hooks’ parallel writings on the healing power of love. In *All About Love*, hooks asserts, “Only love can heal the wounds of the past... To open our hearts more fully to love’s power and grace we must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice” (xxix). hooks implores that “we”—whether that be academic literary communities or general American readerships—are not only lacking in love-based studies but also

disengaged from studying love's seminal power. So, a methodological crux of my project is to delineate the healing power of love within the memoirs alongside a justification of love-based models as both scholarly and active (both for Asian American studies and beyond). As I will elaborate upon below, there is good reason to read Asian American memoirs alongside hooks' Black frameworks in so far that white supremacy has historically pitted Asian and Black communities against each other, so I seek to read these minoritized voices in tandem to repair these scholarly schisms.

Following hooks' assertion on love's ameliorating power, I ground myself in the multitude of ways love and a reparative ethics can arise by engaging with an interdisciplinary range of scholarship: psychiatry, psychology, pedagogy, intersectional theories of identity, reparative reading and criticism, and affect studies. This range of scholarly perspectives enlightens the ways love is not a naturalized pure term, and how love and healing intersect within Asian American communities. hooks' theory of love is complicated by the social reality of Asian Americans, however, so I further draw on melancholic and grief-based models within Asian American literary criticism—most notably Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race* and David Eng and Shinhee Han's *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*. These critics argue that, for Asian American subjects, a history of diasporic loss and racial exclusion embeds a melancholic engagement with lost “racial objects”—including, but not limited to, racial and national identity, a homeland, or parents/family figures—where the subject polarizes racial love and hate as entirely antagonistic states of being. Eng and Han put forth that, in contrast to affect polarization, a movement towards a distinct *racial reparation* “loosens the polarizing dichotomy of love and hate” and allows the subject to rework and reframe negative affects into positive affects (97). Thus, with the intent of depathologizing racial melancholia, my project employs a reparative engagement with trauma studies, specifically the work of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, with the intent of pushing beyond the pathology of trauma. A racialized and localized

engagement with the psychiatric work of van der Kolk enables me to discern the ways personal and intergenerational trauma leaves psychological *and* physical footprints within traumatized individuals. More importantly, however, in moving away from a paranoid understanding of trauma as all-encompassing and immovable, I locate ways memoirists explore non-traditional, everyday methods of care and “intergenerational healing” to reshape their relationship, and a societal and cultural relationship, to trauma. Extending preexisting models of melancholia, this project also excavates the way a productive melancholia—an active grappling with the lost object that arises from a loving embedding into the ego—can unfurl a path towards both intergenerational healing and self-love.

To accomplish this reparative project, I have selected and clustered memoirs from across the Asian American diaspora to repair the collective, emphatic force of identity classification. The appellation “Asian American” was invented by politically motivated UC Berkeley students in the 1960s, inspired by Black power and anti-colonial movements. The term, which communalized a host of diverse diasporic identities, was synthesized as what Hong describes as “a refusal to apologize for being who they were” (190). Strikingly, Hong puts forth that, in contrast to its resistance origins, the present “Asian America” has lost its radical presence; instead, “the moniker is now flattened and emptied of any blazing political rhetoric” (190). In metatextually and literally conjoining an Asian American writerly community, I hope to re-spark the political blaze of the Asian American “moniker” by, to leverage the work of filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, “speaking nearby” a variety of ethnic and diasporic identities. For Trinh, “speaking nearby” is built on “[acknowledging] the possible gap” between the author (or filmmaker) and the other, so “by not trying to assume a position of authority in relation to the other, you are actually freeing yourself from the endless criteria generated with such an all-knowing claim and its hierarchies of knowledge” (qtd. in Hong 103). Inspired by Trinh and by Hong’s extension of Trinh’s work to “[speak] nearby’ the Asian American condition” (a thread followed in detail in Chapter 2), I argue for a repairing and reclaiming

of “Asian America” as a collective—where experiences are not equated or hegemonically pedestaled but rather read *in relation* to one another. Trinh evokes that in “speaking nearby” one gets “very close to [their] subject,” a move reminiscent of Wiegman’s ethical relationship that surfaces what the author “knows” and what their experience reveals.

This bundling of cross-ethnic diasporic experiences also responds to Lai’s question surrounding race narratives:

The question becomes how the racialized writer can break the silence of the past without empowering the media machine to replicate the same trope in a new, more virulent... form... Who can actually live in these blank spaces, these oppressive shadowlands? What kinds of homes can we build for ourselves on these dark paths, in these dank hallways? (44)

In collecting a variety of diasporic voices, I am resisting the “media machine’s” homogenization (or the “flattening” and “emptying”) of the Asian American experience. This approach resists a “self-erasure”—losing the personal, self-written voice within a capitalistic, reductive meshing of experience—without disavowing the inherent radical power of a race collective in constant conversation, working synchronously towards a common reparative goal by “speaking nearby.” All the more, this concentrating of voices substantiates another essence of Lai’s diasporic linkages: the “crossroad.” Reading my project as a “crossroad”— “a site of recurrence” and overlapping histories—heeds the reparative power of claiming a larger diaspora, especially within the repressive nation-state. On her own racialized experience, Lai insists: “I nevertheless crave a sense of rooting ... the unquenchable human need to belong... The inheritor of too many imagined lines like waves squiggling across a waveform monitor, I can not claim any one wave but can claim only the moments when waveforms cross, only the nodes of resonance, recurrence, reincarnation” (48). Within a history of violence and exclusion, Lai finds herself drawn to these nodes where parallel but *not equal* histories collide. In these rippled “crossroads,” Lai finds a “sense of rooting,” for, at this intersection, messy histories are unraveled and additive—indicating the need for a communal

political project—but the marginalized, racialized subject can also find a sense of belonging. Hence, in pairing self-writing and scholarly texts from Malaysian Chinese American, Taiwanese American, Vietnamese American, and Korean American authors, this project uplifts a racialized reparative turn by constructing a “crossroad”: a site where the simultaneous traumas *and* ameliorations of diasporic members can be read not as one, or as equal, but as “recurrent” and “resonant” for a larger racial community. As an Indian American, I also find myself and my scholarly voice to be most active at this crossroad. My active surfacing of diasporic wave interference is neither claiming or speaking for other ethnic identities but engaging a reparative vision of an Asian American collective—one which also involves a shifting relationship between the critic and author.

In parallel to an assemblage of Asian American voices, I also turn towards bell hooks—a momentous African American feminist and critical race theorist—as a key scholar for this project. I turn towards hooks with multiple motivations. First, her ideas of freedom and love enrich the reparative turn and the critical basis on which it stands: love *can* be an analytical affect and can resist an “ethnic literary project ... in which nonwhite writers must prove they are human beings who feel *pain*” (Hong 49; emphasis added). Her logic around a freeing pedagogy maintains that same loving attitude but also submits that working beyond the capitalist “ethnic literary project” through “alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies” allows for counter-hegemonic and anti-racist writings to persist in a new cultural locale (hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* 171). Secondly, alongside an Asian American collective, I use this project to resist traditional racial models of Black/white binaries and Black/white/Asian racial triangulation and move towards reworked anti-racist scholarship. Asian/Black scholarly relations are especially in need of repair given that the two racial groups have been historically constructed as oppositional and pitted against each other via white supremacist discourse of the model minority myth. Race scholars posit that “the model minority label serves to undermine positive relationships between ethnic groups... This rhetoric can

be divisive, because it can be used as a tool to reinforce the subordinate position of other minority groups... and prevent cooperation between Asian Americans and other minorities” (Caliendo and Charlton 175). Going towards hooks’ affect scholarship is consciously reparative as it both validates a reparative turn while repairing racial lineages and crossovers in Black and Asian scholarly thought. This parallel is, akin to the construction of Asian American linkages, not an equalizing of conditional experiences or ranking of racial traumas. It is instead an engagement with race as impure and *relational*, an academic commitment that Hong (among others) deems irreconcilable in today’s “‘stay in your lane’ politics” (101). Following Hong, I negotiate ideas of reparation alongside (“speaking nearby”) non-Asian critical race theorists, and also queer feminist theorists, to spark the innovatory, activist power of cross-cultural and intersectional academic dialogue.

My first chapter materializes the ways Asian Americans are exploring alternative methods of trauma therapy and healing through an analysis of Stephanie Foo’s *What My Bones Know* (2022) and Esmé Weijun Wang’s *The Collected Schizophrenias* (2019). Foo, a Malaysian Chinese American woman, and Esmé Weijun Wang, a Taiwanese American woman, write on their lived experiences of racialized trauma and mental illness and the non-conventional treatment models they seek out in order to push back against psychological, psychiatric, and racial othering within mainstream biomedical institutions. Other common threads that I follow are the way “success” has unintended blanketing effects of trauma representation and exposure, and the way intergenerational traumas of immigration, war, assimilatory pressures, and racial oppression manifest in Asian American individuals and communities. I choose these texts and authors because they both embody a reparative turn in how they analyze and represent their own trauma and mental illness. Furthermore, within the texts themselves, both Foo and Wang address non-conventional psychiatric and psychological paradigms such as van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), an introductory text to trauma neurology therapy; mulling over these models, I make connections rooted in psychiatry to



justify the way these reparative and alternative care methods have neurological implications beyond these authors. I conclude the chapter by turning to hooks' *All About Love* and arguing that a hopeful look at healing is, ultimately, justified by encouraging self-love.

My second chapter, inspired by hooks' motto of "Education as the Practice of Freedom," focuses on how an engagement with literature and language politics, especially practices of renarration or recontextualization of classic stories within personal and familial contexts of intergenerational trauma, can serve as tools of reparative transition and freedom. My extension of hooks' motto places her in conversation with Trinh Minh-ha and Asian American pedagogical scholar Matthew Salesses; I argue that hooks' liberatory education (and writing) allows for a reconciliation of racial identity and personal agency within the white-centric literary canon and hegemonic literary schools of thought. To explore her argument in relation to my literary texts, this chapter first analyzes Phuc Tran's *Sigh, Gone* (2020). Tran organizes his memoir according to canonical texts he read at particular points of his life and probes the embedded themes and characters to develop his sense of self and excavate meaning in his own life. I then turn to Hong's *Minor Feelings* (2020)—focusing in particular on her chapter "Bad English"—to meditate on the role of the English language in minoritized healing and identity exploration. Where Tran retells the Western literary canon through his own experiences to (re)define his identity, Hong more closely embodies a postcolonial language politics of deconstructing English to create a new understanding of her diasporic position—resisting what Salesses deems "literary imperialism." I focus on language and stories as these are important cultural objects. As the two authors' relationship to culture is potentially enshrined by the love/hate binary of traditional models of racial melancholia, writing becomes an important way to depolarize negative and positive affects, a method to work through reparative practices that enable healing from trauma and a reconciliation of racial identity. More so, in writing and thinking against academic modes alongside other scholars of color—and in my active

pairing of Tran and Hong with hooks, Trinh, and Salesses—I perform the work of uniting *dis*united racial groups. This chapter exemplifies how a racial reparative transition can solidify and unite writers of color, even within the destructive social boundaries of a white “literary imperialism.”

My final chapter again draws inspiration from hooks, here her theories of community and love in addition to pedagogy, and pairs them with the racial melancholia models of Anne Anlin Cheng and David Eng and Shinhee Han. I simultaneously organize my critical ideas around hooks’ affect theories and the racial melancholia model to examine how Nicole Chung, a Korean American transracial adoptee, is (re)building literary, familial, and imagined communities in her memoir *All You Can Ever Know* (2018). The family unit is an essential motif of Asian American literature, and its disruption is a common source of tension in contemporary memoirs. Contemporary adoption scholars such as Arissa Oh and Eleana J. Kim argue against the modern academic rigidity in examining transracial adoption-induced familial disruption. Rather than focusing on the intense process of adjustment, assimilation, and racial reparation into a colorblind and discriminatory community, there is sustained interest in the dichotomy between pre- and post-adoption psychic states. I question in what ways reparation occurs if this familial community is lost—specifically through the closed adoption process, as well as through the severing processes of the adoptive parents’ colorblind love and religious nationalism. In turning to the self-writing of a transracial adoptee, this final chapter enlivens an author voicing her own healing process, ultimately culminating reparative themes that extend across chapters. Building on canonical Asian American psychoanalytic frameworks, I localize ways that Chung both textually reshapes her racial melancholia and sparks the salving potential of a productive ethical melancholia. In attaching herself lovingly to the Freudian “lost” object, Chung rebuilds her bygone family bonds and synthesizes new filial narratives—*intra*subjectively reconstructing her own sense of community. Chung ultimately opens the capacity for repair by reconnecting with and loving the “lost” object, her biosisters, enabling the

release of adoption-induced paranoia. Hence, in highlighting expanded reparative ideas formed out of positive affect and reshaped productive melancholia, this chapter highlights the healing possibilities of Chung's own intracommunal acts of reparation.

My project helps shape the reparative turn for Asian America and illuminates the productive ways reparative reading and criticism, and its resultant ethics of living, can push back against lived racial oppression and pain as well as decades of cultural erasure and intergenerational trauma. Framing my work within Sedgwick's and hooks' foundational studies, the ultimate assertion of my project is that a varied engagement within love-based and reparative frameworks allows Asian American authors to begin healing from trauma, and this is evidenced through non-traditional psychiatric healing methods, literary methods, and strategies of communal formation. In my own critical analysis, I subscribe to Sedgwick's call to "[extract] sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (151). Yet, why just "[extract] sustenance" (a potential marker of a critic-author displacement)? Beyond advocating for a reparative ethics and writing, this thesis embodies the ameliorating, reconnecting power of (objects from) a reparative "*culture*." It is in this culture where Hong's words become alive: "We were always here" (203). This space is an ecology where minor writers are not subject to a saturation of negative affects, or the capitalist desire for "mainstream atonement of the past" by "native informants" which Lai proclaims. I desire to include myself in tandem and in conversation with the vulnerable and loving writings which I present, composed by revolutionary authors who I admire. My words are indebted to and sustained by the metamorphized environment of an Asian American self-writing culture. I am, hence, writing into this culture's affectively vibrant atmosphere where diasporic voices—the *authors'* voices, *my* voice, *our* voices—are politically present *and* seeking pleasure.

## Chapter 1: Beyond Pedagogies of Paranoia

What if our community invested in the individual transformation that could give way to communal and collective healing? I eagerly wait for this day, though I know I probably will be long gone when that day comes—which is why I hope you will join me in this journey of metamorphosis. Because this work of inner healing, relational reconciliation, and identity integration has the power to transform generations after us.

— Jenny T. Wang in *Permission to Come Home*

### Introduction

Conditions of trauma and mental illness tend to become all-encompassing, especially for Asian American communities. Because of the many cultural, biomedical and political hurdles, a path towards communal healing can seem insurmountable. In the prologue to her memoir, *What My Bones Know* (2022), Stephanie Foo recounts that she “suffered from anxiety and depression since [she] was twelve years old,” but it was not until she was thirty that her therapist officially pronounced her diagnosis. Towards the end of a Skype session, Samantha, her therapist, first discloses to Foo that she has “complex PTSD from [her] childhood, and it manifests as persistent depression and anxiety.” She further asserts that “there’s no way someone with [Foo’s] background couldn’t have it” (xi). Following the therapy session, Foo probes the internet to understand her diagnosis and finds lists of symptoms on Wikipedia and a government page directed towards veterans. Ultimately, the symptoms coalesce into her life, and she connects the listed markers of C-PTSD to her negative actions and her affective disorders:

I read the list of symptoms... And it is not so much a medical document as it is a biography of my life: The difficulty regulating my emotions. The tendency to overshare and trust the wrong people. The dismal self-loathing. The trouble I have maintaining relationships. The unhealthy relationship with my abuser. The tendency to be aggressive but unable to tolerate aggression from others. It’s all true. It’s all me. (xii)

Foo herself has not changed, but the diagnosis and its endless list of demoralizing symptoms shift the framework through which she views herself—in her eyes, the trauma has a viral persistence and has completely infected her, rendering her “broken.” Moreover, her trauma is inseparable from her person, and her selfhood is no longer defined by her character attributes but rather by her perceived psychological defects.

Foo’s feelings of irreparability are not singular but rather a result of neurological changes rooting from trauma. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk explains: “While we all want to move beyond trauma, the part of our brain that is devoted to ensuring our survival (deep below our rational brain) is not very good at denial” (2). He explains that even slight endangerment can set off the brain’s coded requirement to survive, resulting in the traumatized individual expressing negative posttraumatic reactions (like those Foo noted in her self-psychoanalysis). Reading Foo’s experience from a neurological perspective underscores that her connection of diagnosis to experience is not just subjective or impressionistic but physiological: the brain irrationally refuses to forget the trauma to prevent further harm. In van der Kolk’s eyes, these uncontrollable reactions to any degree of danger can lead “survivors of trauma... to fear that they are damaged to the core and beyond redemption” (2). And yet, while the neurological foundation to understanding trauma is essential for psychiatry and research, this knowledge could lead to additional dismay for someone, like Foo, living with C-PTSD—the trauma still feels deep-seeded and irreparable.

Although trauma therapy works by psychiatrists such as van der Kolk provide structures of medicine through which we understand trauma—and serve as the basic trauma theory models upon which this chapter is built—their methods of pathologizing mental illness can reinforce feelings of shame that arise from the proposed boundlessness of trauma and the ubiquitous feeling that a *person* with trauma will always be marked by their diagnosis over their *humanity*. The perception of trauma, and the resulting mental illness, as an all-consuming force has negative effects on how survivors are

perceived by both themselves and society. Foo herself even narrates the experience of reading van der Kolk's most famous work, *The Body Keeps the Score*: "the most disorienting and upsetting idea that emerged from my reading: the idea that C-PTSD was baked into my personality, that I didn't know where my PTSD stopped and I began" (81). If the remediating books themselves fail to provide a sense of support by emphasizing the inseparability of trauma and person, these "healing" texts then isolate the traumatized individual through a false portrayal of the individual as incurable.

This understanding of trauma is further muddled when considering the present realities of traumatized Asian Americans who exist with both personal lived trauma and inherited historical trauma. As Cathy Park Hong highlights, "For many immigrants, if you move here with trauma, you're going to be doing what it takes to get by. You cheat. You beat your wife. You gamble. You're a survivor, and like most survivors, you are a god-awful parent" (34). Hong is not criticizing immigrant parents here but pushing for a reparative reading by recognizing their complicated humanity as subjects of historical cycles of imperialism and war. Using van der Kolk's findings, one might also put forth that abusive parental actions are often epigenetically encoded responses, emphasizing that physiological responses to trauma extend across generations. Modeling Hong's attestations, I would like to extend a reparative model to the subsequent generation of Asian Americans. Although second-generation Asian Americans, unlike many of their parents, grow up and live in a supposed peacetime with all the benefits of neoliberal society, they too are continually exposed to traumatic cycles via modes of abuse and inheritance as well as everyday racialized stresses such as those captured by Hong's "minor feelings" framework—where the trauma is that of "a racist capitalist system that keeps the individual *in place*" by belittling and casting doubt on Asian Americans' racial experiences (56). While I understand a recognition of these cycles is imperative, I raise several additional questions: how then do Asian Americans living with trauma exist in a social and medical landscape that pushes them to the margins or absolutely erases their traumatic reality?

In what ways can Asian American authors write reparatively and write for healing in the same landscape? And, by extension, how can one live beyond the intergenerational traumatic realities that are written in the body?

James Kyung-Jin Lee partially answers these questions in his recent monograph *Pedagogies of Woundedness*, where he declares “that, to know with some fidelity the truth of our differently marked bodies, it is necessary to learn the narratives that have overdetermined them—history, discourse, ideology, policy—and listen to what these marked bodies say: anger, resignation, protest, suicide, assimilation...the pursuit of justice calls for a tenderness toward our wounds, not their cosmetic removal” (8-9). Indeed, Asian American female writers have long considered this lineage of (the lack of) “tenderness.” Maxine Hong Kingston’s canonical *The Woman Warrior* (1976) is exemplary of this consideration: she uncovers the way her unnamed aunt—the No-Name Woman—is disregarded and forgotten upon her double suicide-murder of herself and her newborn child, and she addresses the deterioration of her aunt Moon Orchid’s mental well-being due to pressures of assimilatory traumas and cultural displacement. *Pedagogies of Woundedness*, which arrives during a moment of illness memoir “boom,” translates this lineage to the terrain of Asian American self-writing (9). Lee accounts for self-writing’s ability to reshape the political project of Asian American studies to explore and affirm the convergence of Asian American studies, race and gender studies, and disability studies. He explores how the structure of the Asian American illness memoir befits a healing paradigm. Citing Christine Lee’s *Tell Me Everything You Don’t Remember* (2016), Lee illustrates that a writing for care reorients the Asian American writer “toward a different relationship to her body based on attention, not disavowal...to relations based on earnest intimacy, not acerbic wit...and....with her Asian American origins based on reckoning with her parents’ historical connection to warfare, displacement, and trauma rather than reliving this connection” (20-21). For Lee, when scholars

pause on, account for, and absorb this internal shift—where the Asian American author reckons with racialized ableism and family histories of trauma—it allows the site to function as literary repair.

While Lee advocates for reading and writing for “repair,” his argumentative claims remain unexpectedly ambivalent about the power that reparative reading and writing has in disrupting white supremacist structures of model minority myths, a discourse which he delineates is “internalized by Asian American communities and families as values around which to mobilize” (10). He denies the reparative power of Christine Lee’s idea of “narrative resilience” and cautions against the “potential treachery” of Asian American illness memoirs:

The threat of illness stories best exemplified by former model minorities waylaid by their broken bodies, yet no longer exempted from the imperatives of productivity, comes in the form of a narrative of affective recuperation. In coming to terms with this different-abled body, Lee proffers a desire that shows, and thus reinforces rather than challenges, the very logic of value that pushed someone like her toward bodily collapse. The model minority is a haunt that is awfully hard to exorcise. (21)

Lee finds that a “narrative of affective recuperation”—which I uphold as a reparative writing model that seeks pleasure, healing, and solace in one’s traumatic and ill reality—is rather indicative of the model minority’s desire for showcasing “value” and neoliberal success. Similarly, he questions the affective capabilities of Chinese American psychologist Angela Duckworth’s notion of “grit”—“this combination of passion and perseverance that [makes] high achievers special” (Duckworth qtd. in Lee 4). He writes that there is a “profound [limit] of communicability when an Asian American daughter, formed in the pedagogy of the model minority, can’t imagine a language beyond the ones that imagine both ultimate success and indefinite health via grit” (5). Thus, Asian American restitution and affective transformation is, for Lee, constantly “haunted” by the model minority myth, and the “success” of healing and self-repair is marked, in a paranoid and depriving fashion, as the product of “internalized values” engendered by white supremacy discourse.

In contrast, in this chapter, I argue that Asian American trauma and illness memoirs have reparative power, and that Asian American self-writing can simultaneously expose the institutional



paranoia of biomedical and racial hegemony while narrating journeys towards healing and repair. I consider this paradigm by pairing Foo's *What My Bones Know* with Esmé Weijun Wang's essay memoir *The Collective Schizophrenias* (2019). This coupling calls attention to the voices of Asian American female authors who are pushing back against the psychologically othering models of the American healthcare system and racially othering model minority myths of white supremacy while simultaneously championing alternative models of healing. Foo and Wang are also both strategizing writerly methods of inserting themselves into, and seeking narrative agency within, biomedical systems. In a recent interview, Foo cited Wang's essay memoir as an inspiration: "[Wang], you know, inserts herself as... the character doing the research in the story... She's trying to figure out... what do these scientific facts mean for me? How do I feel about having learned them? It's a sort of hero's journey" (Interview by Kong and Patel). Focusing on the authors' textual "journey" and reading both memoirs as effective "narrative[s] of affective recuperation," I reveal how Foo and Wang themselves are moving towards a reparative position and using alternative methods of healing to repair relationships to themselves, their community, and their illness.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that Asian American illness memoirs emerge precisely as a *response* to the politics of paranoia surrounding mental health and the model minority, rather than a product of "success" to showcase the author's "value." While Lee views the model minority as a foundational and uninterrupted force within Asian America, he sensitively pleads that "when bodies fail, whether those in one's professional care or one's own, they demand an accounting and a hearing that implores, begs even, at least a pause—and, I would urge, a bit longer than that—in the critical reflex" (25). He draws upon the work of disability studies scholar William Cheng, who asks, "What if we regularly upheld care not just as a bonus activity or a by-product of scholarship?... In a world where injuries run rampant, what if care *is* the point?" (qtd. in Lee 25). In using the reparative reading model to "account" for and "hear" the voices of Foo and Wang, I propose that the illness

memoir is a model of “care writing” that (re)grants agency to Asian American writers alongside an invigoration of the healing process. In doing so, I affirm how self-writing itself serves as a method of writing towards healing and care—a praxis which unveils and resists the personal and communal effects of intergenerational traumas.

### **Moving Beyond Biomedical and Self Paranoia**

In recent years, therapists have become far more aware of the high rates of intergenerational traumas in Asian American families and communities, as diasporic groups with this racial subgroup “have been subject to various atrocities throughout history” (Patel, “Intergenerational Trauma”). Intergenerational trauma comprises of the trauma(s) that are passed down between generations. Brina Patel lays out that intergenerational trauma occurs “as a result of adverse experiences that pose a threat to survival, such as genocide, racism, and sexual abuse,” and it can “also be transmitted to younger generations from immigrants, forced migrants, and refugees who experienced traumatic stress, acculturation stress, resettlement stress, and isolation” (Patel). The symptoms of intergenerational trauma can manifest in a similar fashion to post-traumatic stress disorder—where the individual exhibits “mood dysregulations, hypervigilance, and impairments in quality of life.” More so, traumatized refugees and immigrants “may pass down their anger, anxieties, emotional stress, and maladaptive coping strategies to their children and grandchildren,” both epigenetically and through physical and psychological abuse (Patel).

In *What My Bones Know*, Foo presents her traumas as arising from lineages of intergenerational struggle. Foo communicates that her father was met with assimilatory struggles upon arriving to America and “pulled himself and his family out of poverty” (16). She also illustrates her father’s familial past of war and genocide. His family lived through and survived the “Malayan Emergency” conflict, and Foo portrays his childhood in Malaysia as being saturated by ethnic and

religious discrimination, the result of his family's Chinese ethnicity: "When my father was a kid, his uncle, mother, and eldest sister were living in Kuala Lumpur when a race riot broke out, and hundreds of Chinese people were massacred," writes Foo, who further reveals that "children on school buses were slaughtered on their way to school" in the streets outside of her father's neighborhood (4). Regarding her mother's trauma, Foo recapitulates that her mother was an orphan adopted in infancy and never knew her biological family, so her adoptee traumas might compound her immigrant life traumas. Foo recounts how her mother's trauma arises in mood swings and panic attacks, which often led to repeated child abuse. More so, because of her mother's adoptive history, many life experiences and potential traumas remain unknown and bring about Foo's paranoia. She questions, "why had her birth mother given her up for adoption? Were they too poor to keep her? How had her family come to settle in Malaysia?" (206). She also considers her mother's own intergenerational trauma and asks, "Was she the result of rape?... Was my mother's mother affected by negative prenatal hormones; could her emotional instability be traced to the anxiety of a woman who knew she was carrying a daughter she could not keep?" (206).

Wang similarly scripts that mental illness runs in her family and she delineates her mother's struggle with "psychiatric issues" engendered by immigration and assimilation—potential prenatal stressors that can give rise to schizoaffective disorder, the mental illness which Wang is diagnosed with (17). She subsequently details that her mother refuses to label herself as such, and that the family members with mental illness are all hushed over: "When asked point-blank by my first psychiatrist...whether there was mental illness in the family, my mother said no, there was nothing" (17). Thus, as with Foo, Wang presents the intergenerational silencing of and confusion surrounding lineages of mental illness. These feelings compound the erasure of historical traumas and illness and simultaneously begets feelings of self-paranoia, muddling the intergenerational and genetic reasoning for their lived traumas.

The language of paranoia is not exclusive to Foo and Wang's memoirs but inundates the discourses and politics surrounding mental health. In the introduction of *Pedagogies of Woundedness*, Lee contends that his book

limns the incommensurabilities of reading for exposure and reading for repair. It understands that memoirs about illness and death by Asian Americans are, of course, expressions and effects of biomedical discourse and of the political economies of a medical-industrial complex. Memoirs to this extent are certainly symptomatic of the contemporary impulse to make the individual bear the burden of experiences better shared and addressed in the collective... (25)

Following Lee, I claim that both Stephanie Foo and Esmé Weijun Wang narrate their traumas, and their resulting self-paranoia, as a response to wider “biomedical discourse” and popular psychiatric discourses. Both authors are attuned to the fact that trauma books and general psychiatric dialogues adopt paranoid readings of serious mental illnesses, depriving those diagnosed of agency and personhood while foreclosing trajectories of healing. So, within their self-writings, the two authors turn towards a self-narration of mental illness before moving towards epiphanies of agency and self-healing; they reflect the ways in which, as Lee exposes, the “individual bears the burden” of “the political economies of the medical-industrial complex” and are then unable to reparatively seek pleasure and healing. In this narrative technique—writing for “exposure” to *enable* writing for “repair”—they illuminate the individual and communal consequences of paranoid discourse from mainstream culture, biomedical institutions, advocacy groups, and other informational hubs.

In the Author's Note of *What My Bones Know*, Foo extends a symbolic hand to her readers living with trauma—whom she protectively deems her “complex PTSD darlings”:

For my fellow complex PTSD darlings: I know that trauma books can be triggering and painful to read. I've struggled through a number of them myself. But I felt that it was necessary for me to share my abusive childhood in order for the reader to understand where I'm coming from. Part I of this book might be tough for you, though I ask that you at least give it a shot. (vii)

Foo's prediction is unsurprisingly accurate: Part I of *What My Bones Know* is a heavy read. Foo begins her self-narrative by elaborating in detail upon her scarring childhood, describing both her mother's and then father's abandonment and the physical and psychological abuse she endured as a child. She recounts her mother's and father's frequent "severe" beatings and verbal abuse; she also points out the open secret of her traumatic childhood and describes how her extended family knew of the abuse, yet no kin member ever intervened. While Foo presents a range of traumatic and distressing experiences, she thoroughly illustrates one torturous moment from her middle school years. I present this scene not to sensationalize or dramatize Foo's childhood; rather, this memory carries a synecdochic power in Part I and is indicative of the depth and scope of the author's abuse and trauma. In this scene, upon finding pornographic images on her father's computer, young Foo decided to seize control of her parent's internet access: "I made myself the primary account holder on AOL and changed [her father's] parental controls. Now he could only look at content appropriate for a thirteen-year-old boy" (18). When her parents discovered her act and asked for the password to unlock the impounded email, with her mother still ignorant of her father's pornographic surfing habits ("*Why couldn't my father access his online bank account? What had I done?*"), Foo was met by an assault of abusive strikes: "'All you are going to do from now on is study instead of *wasting*'—she slapped me across the face again—'your *time*'—she kicked my knee in so I collapsed—'on *stupid bullshit*'—she kicked me in the stomach as I lay on the floor" (18). Stating she would "rather die than have [her] only comfort [the internet] taken from [her]," Foo refused to concede her internet authority, upon which her mother "lands blows...on [her] body, [her] face, the top of [her] head" and her father "picked [her] up and threw [her]" (19). Upon repeatedly ignoring her parents' intense demands—"TELL. ME. THE. PASSWORD!"—Foo was met by her father's final act as he swung a golf driver towards her head, luckily missing. Following this frightful instance of near blunt trauma, Foo finally retreated and went to bed with a "knife under [her] pillow"—an

image that is indicative of both her fear in the moment and also a future paranoid fear that equal or greater trauma can ensue whensoever.

Nonetheless, although she recognizes that other traumatized individuals might struggle reading this section, Foo's intention is clear—"for the reader to understand where I'm coming from." In reconstructing her childhood, Foo is highlighting the complexities of her own experienced trauma and illuminating its consequences on her own state of paranoia. Her decision to begin her memoir with a recounting of traumatic experiences illuminates her book-long goal to reveal her humanity. This is an act of individualization—a movement away from being defined by her diagnosis of C-PTSD and its symptoms and instead to define her self by her own lived accounts.

While this structural choice enables a reparative narrative, it does not negate the fact that Foo's childhood was, foremost, a time of violence. Like many memoirists, Foo uses anecdotes to perform self-analysis; however, the analysis in Part 1—which takes place partly during her early childhood—rarely alleviates pain but rather also allows Foo to exhibit the overwhelming abuse within her childhood and force readers to see how trauma continues to stain the memories of her adolescence. For instance, in the text's opening chapter, Foo describes one of her weekly "Dear Diary" assignments that were assigned by her mother. In this entry, six-year-old Stephanie wrote about a trip to Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, youthfully boasting how the "Cave Train ride... was not scary," and how she did several flips "on a thing called trampoline thing" (7). She even began the memo with "Hiya, folks!" instead of the standard "Dear Diary," citing her desire to be "voicely" (7). There is an excitement and purity in Foo's former voice, which is only enhanced by her "voicely" alterations and grammatical mistakes. Nonetheless, Foo discloses that her mother was not just unimpressed, citing her repeated grammatical mistakes as failures, but rather distressed—she marked Foo's diary assignment with a large C-minus and proceeded to hit her open palm with a ruler. And while I want to resist solely blaming Foo's mother, for the pressures of assimilatory expectations

have compounding effects, her violent response transforms this once joyful moment into a moment of pain for Foo.

Foo continually notes that abuse—and the ensuing trauma—envelops all memories of pleasure. Objects of happiness, like the diary, lose their memorial value as a direct result of physical trauma. She recites, “as I read through it [the diary] now... I have no recollection of the Santa Cruz trip...the only thing I remember vividly is that clear plastic ruler on my palm” (8). Until she reread her diary, Foo had forgotten the jubilation of trampoline hopping and riding the Cave Train, yet she clearly remembers the physical details of the ruler and the ensuing strikes. Memories of trauma, however, do not just authoritatively imprint themselves within Foo’s memory disk; the actual memories of abuse exist in fragmented shards, bloodying her childhood with moments of pain. In one of the memoir’s more harrowing passages, Foo discloses, “Here is what I *have* kept from my childhood: my whippings” (12). For Foo, these whippings—and confrontations with her mother’s rage—are marked by their somatic details: she remembers her mother’s weaponry (“hands, chopsticks, my toys...a plastic ruler...a bamboo cane...a cleaver”) and its imprint on her body (“its [the cleaver’s] cold edge pressing into the softness of my skin”; 13). In his chapter on trauma memory, van der Kolk discerns that memory creation is determined by “arousal” and the high arousal induced by a traumatic experience causes a neurological misfiring that prevents proper storage of memory: “As a result, the imprints of traumatic experiences are organized not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces: images, sounds, and physical sensations” (178). As Foo herself notes within her own memory bank, the prioritized details are of the weapon’s texture and temperature. Thus, traumatic memory not only retains itself for longer periods of time, consuming the landscape of the traumatized individual’s mind, but is also preserved in a highly sensory fashion.

Examining Foo's fractured memory reveals the long-lasting effects of how trauma seizes and manipulates memory down to the neuronal level and renders the traumatized individual unable to "move on" beyond their grim history. She further elucidates that the accumulation of these somatic moments is what develops into "triggers"—re-exposure to any somatic details lodged in the memory when "you are traumatized that many times" enables the "world itself to become a threat" (78). The "threat" that Foo describes is not just a psychological risk but a physical risk, one which can express itself through debilitating symptoms such as panic attacks, blackouts, and nightmares (78). Trauma, especially repeated instances of trauma, thus appears overwhelming and seemingly irremovable. Everyday occurrences render Foo's world a minefield of triggers and transform PTSD into complex PTSD. It is crucial, however, to recognize that Foo's memoir, while dealing with sensitive material, is constructed from a reflective and self-analytical rather than sensationalist perspective; she is employing her own agency to relay anecdotal experience which renders a complex and human image of the traumatized individual for her audience.

For Esmé Weijun Wang as for Foo, representations of trauma and mental illness as a personhood-abolishing force can lead to irreversible authoritativeness over the body by greater power structures of medicine. Wang's memoir *The Collected Schizophrenias* is a series of essays about living with schizoaffective disorder—what Wang describes as the "fucked-up offspring of manic depression and schizophrenia...because schizoaffective disorder must include a major mood episode, the disorder may combine mania and schizophrenia, or depression and schizophrenia" (10). Throughout her essay memoir, Wang testifies that a global understanding of the traumatized and mentally ill as "possessed"—where the illness becomes a malevolent spirit that ravages the person and deprives them of personal and bodily autonomy—has defacing and ableist consequences. Within the collection, she presents the belated diagnosis of her disorder and the accumulated misdiagnoses, the result of medical practitioners misidentifying her illness. Furthermore, she parallels



her lived experiences with commentary on the discourse and policies around schizophrenia and mental health in medicine, higher education, and popular culture to create larger arguments about the paranoid politics of mental health.

In her essay “The Pathology of the Possessed,” Wang pairs a narration of her reality with research on the social representations of her illness through an analysis of public policy, a famous murder trial, and several interview-based case studies to holistically portray depictions of schizoaffective disorder. In her research, Wang meets a woman—a National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) member referred to as Beth—whose family member lives with schizoaffective disorder. Wang describes Beth as an active defender of mental health policy because of her intimate relationship with her ill family member; Beth explains that upon developing schizoaffective disorder, her kin had “rage attacks,” forcing Beth to hospitalize him and provide care for him under great financial and emotional burden (32). As Beth notes, there is an overwhelming load to being a caretaker. Wang puts forth, and I agree, that it is hard to not feel sympathy for Beth, and it is unsurprising that relatives such as Beth seek out grassroots organizations such as NAMI and support involuntary treatment and hospitalization.

Wang describes, however, that both Beth and NAMI’s system of care are driven by depictions of possession. In her interview, Beth declares that the schizophrenic mind has been “taken over” and “lost the ability to make rational decisions” (38). NAMI members—or, “NAMI parents”—like Beth stockpile in California committee meetings and have historically advocated for the passing of crucial laws such as California’s Assembly Bill No. 1421 (AB 1421): “the involuntary treatment of any person with a mental disorder who, as a result of the mental disorder, is a danger to others or to himself or herself” (31). AB 1421 sounds like a respectable law and a policy that protects both the mentally ill and their family members; despite that positive assumption, Wang denounces this law regarding “crucial issues of autonomy and civil liberties,” for it “makes the

assumption that people who display a certain level of mental disorder are no longer capable of choosing their own treatment” (31). These policies, although supported by good intentions, ultimately lack nuance—especially for the suffering patients. They tend to be family-first and result in a loss of bodily autonomy for mentally ill individuals who are marked by their diagnosis rather than their discrete circumstances. The concluding result is a further loss of personhood as the “possession” deprives them of the civil right to choose.

Under these policies, people living with mental illness lose the agency of choosing not only *when* to heal but *how* to heal, and ultimately how to live. As Wang laments, “For those of us living with severe mental illness, the world is full of cages where we can be locked in” (110). The “cages” are literal—hospitals and institutions—but also represent the metaphorical trappings of othering policies and portrayals. These methods of institutionalization, rather than dispelling conceptions of possession and irrationality, reinforce these stigmas and enable them to spread voraciously. Subsequently, while caretakers like Beth and organizations like NAMI push for politics in the name of their marginalized communities, their discourse surrounding mental health succumbs to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick deems as paranoid practices. Sedgwick’s illustration of paranoia contains multiple theses, and within these subsections she elucidates paranoia as 1) anticipatory and 2) mimetic and reflective. As Sedgwick explains, “The first imperative of paranoia is *There must be no bad surprises?*” (130). These policies actively *disable* an ability to heal because they consistently propose that negative, overwhelming symptoms will always arise; there is little grey area, and no room for “good” surprises—whether that is defined by professional success or seeking solace in non-traditional methods of care. Additionally, by mimetic and reflective, Sedgwick proposes that paranoia is a compounding phenomenon: while NAMI’s methodologies suggest a reform of mental health politics, their underlying, othering language is absorbed by volunteers, like Beth, who themselves mimic and imitate a paranoid discourse surrounding mental health.

Paranoia, however, is not just a practice but can also manifest as a literal, psychological symptom. A crucial motif throughout the essay is the paralleling of schizophrenia, and schizoaffective disorder, with Alzheimer's. This comparison occurs because schizophrenia is, per author Andrew Solomon's words, "an illness not of accrual but of replacement and deletion; rather than obscuring the previously known person, this disease to some degree eliminates that person" (qtd. in Wang 28). This accepted delineation of schizophrenia as an "eliminating" malady reinforces a common belief that schizophrenia removes personhood as well as installs a sense of terminality—that the person is deleted, and the illness is all that remains. This popular representation (Solomon himself is a National Book Award winner) has predictable outcomes on how the general social sphere views schizophrenia—and, as aforementioned, on practices of care—but can also have damaging consequences on people's lived reality. Accounting for her own experience with forced treatment, Wang describes the "horror of being involuntarily committed," where she was stripped of all personal goods, the choice of cuisine, and deprived of any social interaction (39). Then, not only does the traumatized and ill individual's body become bound to a magisterial system that restricts their autonomy, but paranoid thinking itself becomes a diagnosis: beyond psychiatric symptoms, does paranoia itself manifest as the experiential fear of detention?

Diagnosis further propagates cycles of paranoia through reinstating symptoms as negative, othering markers. In another of her critical essays "Diagnosis," Wang notes that a diagnosis can be "comforting because it provides a framework—a community, a lineage—and if luck is afoot, a treatment or cure" (5). Yet, within a paranoid medical system, certain diagnoses become a marker of and reinforcement of a patient's "possessed nature," hindering their ability to seek proper treatment and care. Additionally, marginalization occurs where the fear of preventing potential danger surmounts the desire to push for healing. In *What My Bones Know*, Foo extends this idea of

hindrance. In Chapter 11, where she details her internal reaction to being diagnosed with C-PTSD, Foo recites her feelings of being pathologized and absorbing lists of C-PTSD symptoms:

More than symptoms, these felt like accusations. The scientists and doctors might as well have written, *People with complex PTSD are awful human beings. Okay. But now you know*, I tried to tell myself. *Knowing is good. Now you can fix things. Healing always begins with a diagnosis.*  
But then again, so does dying. Oh God. (69)

Like Wang, Foo initially depicts diagnosis as an access point to healing, but she ultimately settles on a bitter acknowledgement of her mortality. While Foo acknowledges “knowing is good,” her perusing of symptom lists seems to acknowledge her illness through a paranoid self-reading—she is aware of the symptoms’ reflective qualities (“these felt like accusations”) but also anticipatory of the symptoms’ eventual path to death. Sedgwick, referring to the affect theories of Silvan Tomkins, deems that the paranoid position relies on being a monopolistic theory of strong negative affects—where the act of “anticipating negative affect can have...the effect of entirely blocking the potentially operative goal of seeking positive affect” (136). It is not just that paranoia predicts and reenacts a cynical outlook, but this state actively prevents the trapped individual from seeking pleasure. In existing in a vaguely paranoid position, Foo surfaces the potential hope of diagnosis—a treatment—but instead anticipates death due to autocratic effects of paranoia as strong theory.

Despite this presumed position of paranoia, the final segment of Chapter 11—which closes Part I of Foo’s memoir—reveals a dynamic change in her character. Having failed to find any celebrity stories of C-PTSD on the internet, Foo reaches out to the twitter-sphere and asks if anyone in her circle is diagnosed with C-PTSD. Through this online interaction, she reconnects with a past workmate Lacey, a now successful writer, who recounts that although “the road would be long and difficult,” Foo had to learn to “take good *care* of [herself]” and “Treat [herself] kindly” (71). From Lacey’s guidance, Foo subsequently quits her job and declares, “Healing needs to be my job now” (71). For Foo, the paranoid position is no longer a feasible option—whether this epiphany results

from a moment of interpersonal connection, a self-realization, or both is unclear, but nonetheless Foo has decided to seek an attitude of healing. She is, in essence, seeking the antithesis to Sedgwick's paranoid position. Citing the work of Melanie Klein, Sedgwick proposes that the human mind can move between two positions—the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive position:

the depressive position is an anxiety-mitigating achievement that infant or adult only sometimes and often only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting: this is the position from which it is possible to turn to use one's own resources to assemble or "repair" the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though, I would emphasize, *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*. (128)

The depressive position is a compelling position because it is not a stagnant position marked by negative affects but a model that leads towards repair, and a position that encourages the reshaping of one's pre-existing parts into a whole that is, at least somewhat, new. For Foo, this reparative state is the essential component that ignites her aspiration for healing. Rather than let the negative affects colonize her mind in repetitions of paranoia, she needs to care for herself and lend herself the space to recover. In the depressive position, however, she is also enabled to take the "murderous part-objects"—such as the fractured memory of her adolescence—and reshape them to form a new version of her memory, and possibly herself.

### **Scripting "Success" and the Model Minority**

Within both *What My Bones Know* and *The Collected Schizophrenias*, Foo and Wang delineate how success for those living with severe mental illness is a seemingly positive attribute: under the guise of achievement as a state opposite to mental illness, they can push back against the stereotypes of psychosis. Yet, both Wang and Foo challenge discussions of success as the opposite of or absence of mental illness, and I contend this opposition is the authors' method of surfacing a racialized critique of white discourses of model minority success which hide, erase, promote, and

exacerbate mental illness for both Asian American individuals and communities. They discuss how their inherited traumas overlap with social and parental pressures and further engender cycles of trauma. As a result, the trappings of success that both Wang and Foo elaborate upon are not, I argue, just symptoms of social, medical, and capitalist pressures but also the results of racial pressures unique to Asians in America.

Association with the stereotype has a multitude of implications: in addition to the dangers discussed in the previous section, there is a risk of being marginalized at the clinical level. Wang elaborates upon this idea in her essay “High Functioning,” where she discusses how attributes of academic and occupational success have enabled her to exist in upper tiers of what she deems the psychiatric hierarchy. She insists that, in hospitals, patients with schizophrenia often “[land] at the bottom” and are “excluded from group therapy, seen as lunatic and raving, and incapable of fitting into the requirements of normalcy” (48). Wang, who is deemed “high-functioning” because of her professional achievements, does not receive this demeaning treatment: she details how a “nurse who respected [her] would use a different cadence” (48). Because of her academic standing, Wang receives a completely different model of psychiatric care: she is treated with reverence and her humanity is respected. Success thus also becomes a defense mechanism—Wang can wield her accomplishments in situations where her autonomy is at stake, such as being psychiatrically hospitalized. The concept of psychiatric hierarchy, then, extends beyond a categorizing of illnesses. As Wang expresses, “Rarely did I experience such a radical and visceral imbalance of power as I did as a psychiatric inpatient amid clinicians who knew me only as illness in human form” (57). In these distinct moments of power disparity, where Wang’s autonomy as a patient is in question, her resumé becomes a symbol of her humanity: in saying she is Ivy League educated, an entrepreneur, or a distinguished researcher, she is reshaping her image away from the typecast stereotype formed in representations and models of psychology.

While Wang effectively deploys her success to reshape her personal image, she notes that this posturing can have fracturing effects on how she views herself. For Wang, there are significant social drawbacks to being reduced to her mental illness:

With such unpleasant associations tied to the schizophrenias, it is no wonder that I cling to the concept of being high-functioning. As in most marginalized groups, there are those who are considered more socially appropriate than others, and who therefore distances themselves from those so-called inappropriate people, in part because being perceived as incapable of success causes a desire to distance oneself from other, similarly marginalized people who are thought to be even less capable of success. (49)

While these symbols of great accomplishment allow Wang to label herself as “high-functioning,” she herself notes that her social value (her ability to be “appropriate”) is a result of her existence as a capitalist subject. Wang deems that schizophrenics are typecast by the media as “some of the most dysfunctional members of society: we are homeless, we are inscrutable, and we are murderers” (50). Additionally, she informs readers that psychiatric researchers use employment and productivity as a key characteristic of a “high-functioning person” (51). It is evident that, in the broadest terms, a capitalist society expects productivity and assistance in generating profit; however, Wang makes clear that those with severe mental illness, and symptoms that are somatically expressed, are “less likely to be productive in ways considered valuable” (51). Wang—who as a bestselling essayist, Yale attendee, and Stanford graduate, is *highly* successful—finds herself uncomfortable around “those who are visibly psychotic and audibly disorganized” but feels “uncomfortably uncomfortable because I know that these are my people in ways that those who have never experienced psychosis can’t understand, and to shun them is to shun a large part of myself” (51). There is no easy conclusion here: it is only human to want to associate with what society deems as “normal,” especially when the consequences of being marked by mental illness are so extreme. Yet, she also feels deeply connected to others with schizophrenia because of their shared realities of being othered and marginalized, and through that

she has an enriched sense of community. For Wang, exhibiting success can be a crucial tactic to protect herself from losing autonomy in dire moments, but it does not render her free from this sense of liminality.

In *What My Bones Know*, Foo considers the way she has dealt with the curative implications, and trappings, of success through what she deems her *resilience*. Like Wang, Foo implores that there is a perceived synonymy between success and healing, and success and a return to “normalcy.” Foo puts forth that the extent to which a resilient individual has overcome and dealt with adversity is not marked by their ability to find inner peace but is rather marked by their success. As she explains, popular representations of resilience and healing do not draw upon everyday people but highlight “sparkly members of society” such as “doctors, teachers, therapists, motivational speakers” (48).

Foo even explores how, in her search for healing, she assimilated these beliefs:

When I told people this story about my life—that I was abused and abandoned when I was a child, but I was all better now—they always believed me. Why wouldn’t they? Everyone loves a happy ending, and my résumé was superb: I had friends, a nice apartment, a cute wardrobe, a 401(k). And, of course, my career. Nothing lent more credibility to my healing than my career. (47)

She is successful; thus, she is healed. There seems to be a finality to this “treatment.” Foo, who was a producer on the critically and commercially successful podcast *This American Life*, even proposes that no one would question her because of her exterior demonstrations of professional and financial stability. Yet, when Foo narrates her interior state “post success,” she details a more complex view of how her professional accomplishments affect her. Foo herself presents the complex, and sometimes contradictory, struggle to seek healing and on how she continually exists with a feeling titled “the dread.” Foo’s “dread” is not a constant state of being, nor is it a fixed affect, but rather a combination of shame, terror, grief, guilt, and the feeling that she “was on the precipice of fucking everything up” (52). Although the dread was an all-consuming force, Foo “dealt with it” by working late nights, constantly checking emails and texting friends, or consuming bottles of alcohol; only



when “[she] woke up and there would be a new accolade on my shelf, a new accomplishment I could never have dreamed of, and then—finally—it *would* be fine” (54). Foo seems to be elaborating upon, and inherently complicating how her career, and general success, is serving as a method of healing, evidentially declaring that earning accolades is a short-term healing process. Her dread-less existence occurs not when working, but working *tirelessly*, keeping her in a loop of needing validation to relieve physical and emotional pain. She confesses: “Maybe work was not salvation. Maybe it was a symptom” (70). She herself avows that had she not quit work and continued to live with the assumption that it was okay to have “things you never get over,” she would have never sought out a reparative position or put healing as a definitive priority.

To examine her complex and contradictory relationship to C-PTSD and understand the source of her trauma, Foo returns home to San Jose—a place she deems as the “majority minority city.” Her childhood community, at least in her memory, was a hub of intersectional identities but also a community ridden with trauma. She writes that San Jose was a “city of immigrants” and details:

But we also knew that as this unit, we were allowed to borrow from one another: You can bring chana masala to school even if you weren’t Indian; I was vice president of the Japanese Club. Sometimes we wore each other’s lip gloss or denim miniskirts at homecoming, but we always knew to put on a long skirt when we left the house and change in the bathroom once we got to school. Some of us drank, some of us smoked, a few of us had sex. None of us snitched. We knew what the consequences would be. (145)

Foo’s described San Jose youth scene is a communal space of cross-ethnic solidarity, where cultural food objects—like “chana masala”—are shared and there is varying cross-cultural representation—Foo was surprisingly “vice president of the Japanese club.” This solidarity further extends into the rebellious acts of “drinking,” “smoking” and “having sex,” for, importantly, no one ever “snitched.” In this community of immigrant children, abuse was both widespread and normalized. Foo describes the “consequences” of “snitching”—the harrowing, shared communal abuse—as both a shared fear

and experience of her San Jose immigrant and second-generation cohort. While “plenty of parents were reasonably easy to please,” Foo recounts, “in general, our parents were not taught to take slow breaths when they were upset to calm themselves down. And many of our parents were not taught to spare the rod” (145). In “snitching,” Foo and her friends were exposing themselves to “the rod,” for Foo casts the parents of San Jose as “generally” tending towards abuse as “consequence.”

Abuse, in Foo’s memory, was so widespread that she remembers a game titled “Who Had it Worse?” She narrates:

I remember one boy’s mother burned him with cigarette butts. Another’s locked him out of his bedroom and forced him to sleep on the couch because, she said, he was so worthless that he didn’t deserve his own space. My close friend’s mother chased her around the house slapping her and telling her she was nothing, and she once woke her daughter up by choking her. I talked about the welts on my legs, about how I’d curled into a ball when I was thrown down the stairs. We would debate the logistics of our abuse: Was it better to be whipped with something narrow like a cane or be hit by something large and solid? Was a welt more painful, long-term, than a bruise? Was it more demoralizing to be belittled or simply ignored? (146)

Foo suggests that traumatic physical and psychological abuse became a recurrent and familiar point of conversation, so much so that discussing abuse had a strategic quality: aware of the unavoidable “consequences,” she and her classmates thought through the “logistics” of how to lessen the physical repercussions.

Although Foo has clear recollection of communal abuse, her diagnosis of C-PTSD forces her to question her memory. As aforementioned, traumas implant themselves in distinctive and dissociated ways, muddying the narrative of memory. This neurological misshaping gives rise to feelings of doubt in Foo, as “[she’d] been losing faith in [her] own mind” (150). She asks, “How much of that [memory of communal trauma] was truth—and how much of it had been the equivalent of running a picture through a copier too many times, degrading my memories until they became a grainy blur?” (150). The tension here is whether Foo’s memory is genuine (and her remembrance of widespread abuse is indicative of systematic issues) or if her own experience of

writing and recounting childhood pain is skewing her assumptions. That is, it is unclear whether her trauma is personal or shared. As van der Kolk outlines, “If the problem with PTSD is *dissociation*, the goal of treatment would be *association*: integrating the cut-off elements of the trauma into the ongoing narrative of life” (183). A return to San Jose is, thus, a rehabilitating journey which will determine the truthfulness of Foo’s memory and grant the necessary perspective and context to engage with a holistic depiction of her past.

In Foo’s exploration of San Jose, she depicts inherited cycles of abuse and recognizes that the parents of San Jose “did not talk about loss” and concealed their “pain” (147). The children—who were ethnically varied Asian Americans—absorbed this pain through abuse: “We offered ourselves as conduits for their anguish because they had suffered so we wouldn’t...We excused all of it, absorbed the slaps and the burns and the canings and converted them into perfect report cards to wipe away our parents’ brutal pasts” (147). Cathy Park Hong would argue that this conditional state as a “conduit of anguish” might be an extreme extension of Asian American indebtedness:

If the indebted Asian immigrant thinks they owe their life to America, the child thinks they owe their livelihood to their parents for their suffering. The indebted Asian American is therefore the ideal neoliberal subject. I accept that the burden of history is solely on my shoulders; that it’s up to me to earn back reparations for the losses my parents incurred, and to do so, I must, without complaint, prove myself in the workplace. (139)

For Hong, the capitalist neoliberal pressures to perform are a result of peacetime living. The second-generation Asian American is indebted because of the historical sacrifices their parents made. Being exposed to a multitude of (perceived) economic possibilities, they push to better their productive value as a display of filial affection.

Foo extends Hong’s indebted framework and argues that her San Jose community is not just the ideal neoliberal subject but also a traumatized subject. Larger burdens of historical suffering exude themselves physically and psychologically through these cumulative micro traumas:

So when the hands came, we offered our cheeks. We offered ourselves as conduits for their [immigrant parents'] anguish because they had suffered so we wouldn't, so we could watch Saturday morning cartoons and eat sugary cereal and go to college and trust the government and never go hungry. We excused all of it, absorbed the slaps and the burns and the canings and converted them into perfect report cards to wipe away our parents' brutal pasts. We did the work, as they like to say now. We got into good colleges, got internships and postdocs, and eventually moved on to successful, rewarding careers in big cities that paid us enough money to buy high-end audio gear for our modernist apartments. We achieved the American Dream because we had no other choice. (147-148).

Indebtedness within second-generation Asian Americans—which Foo terms as a state that arises from an innate understanding of the immigrant parent's sacrifice and "anguish"—facilitates the transformation into both a "conduit" for abuse and Hong's "ideal neoliberal subject." Foo uses the collective "we" to illustrate her San Jose community, which both conjoins this cohort as victims of abuse who "excuse" and "absorb" *and* surfaces the unspoken agreement that chasing success is the only "choice." In their seminal text *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, David Eng and Shinhee Han question whether "children of immigrants 'repay' this sacrifice only by repeating and perpetuating its melancholic logic—by berating and sacrificing themselves" (50). Foo would seemingly say yes, as she implicitly notes that to not "achieve the American Dream" is to reject the immigrant parents' "suffering" and, in Hong's language, fail to "earn back reparations for my parents' losses." This failure to achieve success enhances the melancholic states of shame and guilt. Foo's "we" does "the work," which only recreates cycles of psychological and physical trauma and further purports the model minority myth. As a result, academic and professional success for this specific body of individuals—sons and daughters of Asian immigrants—is not a prideful accomplishment but a symptom of abuse, and a possible precursor to both personal intergenerational trauma.

Yet, when Foo begins to reexplore contemporary San Jose, she discovers that her past does not align with modern day racial experiences. She returns to her high school, which she remembered "as a breeding ground for immigrant intergenerational trauma"; yet, upon interviewing her old educators, all of them white, she is told that while her alma mater is still majority Asian, these

students are the offspring of wealthy, accomplished parents and whose only stresses are AP courses, SAT scores, and college acceptance (157, 159). Foo is led to believe by her former teachers that the new generation's motivation for excellence is not a survival tactic but the indisputable result of "tiger moms" and "pushy, helicopter-hovering, model-minority anxiety" (159). The outcome of these findings is unsurprisingly a return to a paranoid position. She asks, "How much of my understanding of immigrant trauma was fabricated by a narrow reading of my own experience... I was casting abuse and bad parenting as a central theme across my community—was this perpetuating a negative, unhealthy stereotype?" (150). Although Foo's personal trauma is wholeheartedly real, she believes that her *perception* of communal trauma is a result of absorbing false stereotypes about Asian America, not reflective of genuine systemic issues.

Foo is, however, reaffirmed in her critical suspicions by Yvonne Gunter, the high school's therapist. When Foo meets Gunter, she describes her as "breathless," indicative of her tireless efforts to provide therapeutic care. Gunter asserts that she has "about 230 referrals right now, a lot of them for anxiety, but I have everything from cocaine addiction, pregnancy, incest, major depressive disorders, ten kids with psychotic episodes, self-harm, and homelessness" (171). This revelation—an exposé of the range of symptoms which this generation faces—challenges Foo's teachers who had cited educational trappings, or cultural expectations around academic success, as the only source of Asian American student stress. As a result, Gunter and Foo expose that these psychological stresses are not just misunderstood but completely obscured by these educational trappings—which are in turn couched in the discourse of the model minority mythos: "The model minority stereotype is a myth because it homogenizes widely disparate Asian American and Asian immigrant groups by generalizing them all as academically and economically successful" (Eng and Han 41). Gunter's diagnoses reveal the complexities of this community: the "rich-Asian narrative" is unraveled as Gunter brings to the surface issues of homelessness and class struggles, and she also

delineates the addiction and self-harm that ensue when students are pressured to succeed. Akin to Gunter's observations, Eng and Han attest, "Those Asian Americans who do not fit into the model minority stereotype are altogether erased from—are not recognized by—mainstream society" (46). A continuation of this myth then enables "success" to have a dual effect, as it blankets physical and psychological struggles under the guise of achievement while also enabling cycles of trauma to renew themselves as both old and new generations are not granted the space to heal.

Wang, in her writings, likewise mulls over how systematic erasure embeds itself in her family history. In "Diagnosis," Wang details how prenatal, genetic stresses can lead to mental illnesses such as schizoaffective disorder. She questions whether her absorbed traumas—physical traumas like her own birth complications and inherited traumas from her mother's experience with mental illness and war—led to the development of her own illness. Yet, on a train ride with her mother where she requests to learn more about her great-aunt, who she "knew had been insane," her mother details that, in her eyes, exactly *three* people in their family tree lived with mental illness (17). Wang explains that she is interested in not those marked with mental illness but rather the empty, blank spaces of the unknown. She observes that neither her mother—who has a history of "suicidal ideation, panic, and hiding in closets"—or her father's family—who have a history of addiction—are marked. Her mother instead remarks, "No one talk about these things'... 'No one wants to question what genetic legacies might lurk in our bloodline'" (17). For Wang, this is a moment of hesitation, for she is aware that she has inherited a variety of traits, including a tendency for mental illness. And although Wang details the biological and psychiatric implications of these inherited characteristics and traumas, her mother proposes a practice of erasure: past traumas are in the past, and there is no need or desire to resurface what is history.

Yet, who is this “No One”? Is it just Wang’s family or a representation of larger cultural ideologies? In an interview with Stephanie Foo, sociologist Russell Jeung extends ideas introduced in Wang’s self-narrative:

Well...the Western approach is ‘We’ve got to heal, we’ve got take control.’ And I think that’s a privileged position...Most of the world expects trauma and suffering. Most people live through it. It’s not an exceptional, one-time experience. So even if you get health issues as side effects from trauma, it’s like, well, yeah. People suffer, people get sick. And so it’s only privileged people who think of it otherwise. (qtd. in 194-195)

Foo surprisingly responds to Jeung’s comments in a cynical fashion. In hearing these comments she “withered in shame,” and she maintains that “something about this didn’t sit right with me—if my desire for accountability and acknowledgment was entitled, did that mean disempowered people did not deserve justice?” (195). Foo interprets Jeung’s comments from a critical, and possibly paranoid, standpoint: she shamefully views his ideas as exclusive of the “privileged” (second generation) Asian American and reads Jeung as disabling her search for social and racial justice. And while Foo is more than entitled to this response, I would reread Jeung’s comments through a reparative lens, extending Jeung’s own devotion to social justice through the Stop AAPI Hate movement. I propose Jeung is challenging a tendency to culturally other psychiatry—the stereotyped “Eastern approach” is to surrender control and swallow grief. He exposes that many Asian immigrants have not been granted the space to heal, for sequences of imperialism, war, dictatorship, and exile have rendered coping with trauma impossible. Furthermore, when arriving in America, immigrants are faced with an array of racial pressures and legalized discrimination and exclusion. As Eng and Han elaborate:

Yet, in our multicultural and colorblind age, few people remember this history of racially motivated discrimination against Asian Americans that laid the legal foundation for the emergence of the figure of the “illegal immigrant” and of “alien citizenship” preoccupying so much of political debate concerning immigration today. This history of exclusion is barely taught in US universities or high schools—indeed, colorblindness and the model minority myth demand a forgetting of these events of group discrimination in the name of abstract equality and individual meritocracy. (39)

Eng and Han bitterly expose that dominant American assimilatory pressures—specifically the societal enforcement of the Asian immigrant as the model minority—requires a purposeful deletion of systemic disempowerment. As a result, Jeung’s “privileged position” is rendered unattainable under the pressures of assimilation, for the act itself embodies methods of erasure. As Hong writes, “By not speaking up, we [Asian Americans] perpetuate the myth that our shame is caused by the repressive culture and the country we fled, whereas American has given us nothing but opportunity” (78). Returning to Wang’s mother through the lens of Jeung and alongside Eng and Han, I question whether her response, one that proposes a practice of historical negation, is not just the result of a cross-cultural and generational fissure but also the product of how minoritized subjects living in racist regimes are under constant pressure to fit in and survive. As the model minority myth persists, an erasure of experience—here, an erasure of mental illness and historical mental illness—is a central method through which oppressive institutions are enabled and reinforced.

In reading *What My Bones Know*, I noted that Foo actively resists historical erasure and is openly indebted to the Ghanaian concept of Sankofa—returning to the past is embraced, not rejected. Foo contends that a negation of family histories not only prevents an understanding of intergenerational trauma but also blocks all possibility of intergenerational *healing*. Her sole understanding of her family’s history and their generations of trauma is through her Auntie, who shared with her moments and anecdotes for generations of family stories. Yet, Foo is aware that these stories, although unknown, are embedded within her: “My family tried to erase this history. But my body remembers... I want to have words for what my bones know. I want to use those gifts when they serve me and understand and forgive them when they do not” (202). Foo is embracing Sedgwick’s reparative position and pushing for intergenerational *healing*—a curative framework through which Asian Americans can both heal themselves and heal for a generation that was not



granted that opportunity. Foo is aware that to achieve this ambitious goal, she needs to not only record and pass on the stories lost at both the personal and communal level but also resist the paranoid generational narrative that Sedgwick proposes: “it happened to my father’s father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me, it will happen to my son, and it will happen to my son’s son” (147).

### **Heterodox Healings**

Healing from trauma and trauma-related illness is not an effortless or linear task but requires several interwoven paths of treatment. As Van der Kolk explicates:

There are fundamentally three avenues: 1) top down, by talking, (re-) connecting with others, and allowing ourselves to know and understand what is going on with us, while processing the memories of the trauma; 2) by taking medicines that shut down inappropriate alarm reactions, or by utilizing other technologies that change the way the brain organizes information, and 3) bottom up: by allowing the body to have experiences that deeply and viscerally contradict the helpless, rage, or collapse that result from trauma. Which one of these is best for any particular survivor is an empirical question. (3)

Although the practices are there—a need to process, a reshaping of one’s neurological processes, and an embodiment of pleasures—van der Kolk himself notes there is no set methodology: every patient is highly different in both the severity and longevity of their trauma. Foo herself details that she read healing books “in search for hope,” but the therapeutic programs “provided so little” (81). The unstructured nature of trauma healing leaves Foo feeling demoralized. Yet, she is determined to find solace despite her pain. As a result, she seeks out a multitude of healing processes. While Foo—and Wang too in her memoir—seeks out a variety of therapeutic methods, I specifically engage with her use of EMDR, and later Wang’s use of psychic therapies. These two moments of therapy are microcosmic representations of larger, reparative shifts within the authors’ writing and showcase how each author is attempting to embody a healing position.

Although social and racial pressures could deem why Foo is trapped in cycles of paranoia and a neurological rewiring could explain her fractured memory, one crucial question for Foo remains unanswered: why have her past therapeutic healing practices failed? When she quits her job to supplement her healing process, Foo discloses that she had been in therapy for ten years (this switch to newer, focused therapeutical practices occurred *after* she quit working to focus on recovery). Her past experience with therapy had been, in her mind, highly desensitized: she would unflinchingly recall moments of abuse, a therapist would tell her “the abuse was not [her] fault,” and she would respond “Yeah, sure. I know that” (110). Foo possesses the indisputable understanding that she is not responsible for the trauma she endured. Yet, this comprehension (Foo defines it as “rote memorization”) did not provide a full perspective because she had “smoothed perfect white layers of spackle over gaping structural holes” (111). Although the architecture of Foo’s childhood had been littered with pain and remnants of this pain endure into her present reality, she had, in essence, left the memories unaddressed because of past advice and knowledge based on mainstream psychiatric therapy.

Because of this, Foo sought out a novel method of psychotherapy known as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). EMDR is a curative process that was discovered in 1987 by psychologist Francine Shapiro; after discovering on a distressing walk that rapid eye movements helped to release negatives feelings, Shapiro relayed this strategy to her patients and noted that they felt greater relief when confronting harrowing trauma (98). And while psychiatrists like van der Kolk praises EMDR’s success rates, Foo affirms the rarity of this treatment. She deplors that, under her insurance, there was only one EMDR clinic in New York City:

[The therapist] was located in the financial district, near Wall Street, but her office was the size of a large gas station bathroom, with about as much appeal. There was paper everywhere. Hastily stuffed manila folders stacked several feet high formed a ring around the entire room. Her air-conditioning was spotty and tremendously loud, so she had a couple of

pink plastic dollar-store fans, about six inches tall, on the floor, swirling hot air around our feet. (97-98)

In Foo's language, there is a sense of skepticism: her imagery, while quirky and humorous, is indicative of EMDR's evident novelty. Even in highly developed metropolises, these clinics do not resemble the stereotypically pristine and sterilized therapeutic clinics of conventional medicine; rather, this office is chaotic and littered with stationary. As a result, even though psychiatrists such as van der Kolk promote EMDR, Foo's tangible experience tends towards the non-conventional. The obscurity of this alternative therapeutic model, and Eleanor's own unusual office space, only exaggerate the alternative nature of this method and further engender Foo's feelings of hesitation.

Regardless of her skepticism, Foo delineates how the practice of EMDR enables her to galvanize the healing process. Foo's particular EMDR experience involved the recollection of one distressing memory from her childhood—a time her mother beat her with wire hangers. In the session, Foo describes how *real* the abuse felt: "I didn't just understand the weight of my abuse logically. I actually felt with searing clarity, the horror of what happened to me—maybe for the first time ever," she narrates (110). Rather than logically pathologizing herself through symptoms or prodding her memories, Foo engages with the memory in a palpable manner, reminding herself of her childhood "horrors." In embodying her younger self, she revisits her traumatic past but also leaves with a newfound empathetic perspective. Additionally, what marks Foo's EMDR experience is how divergent her therapist's methods were. Her caregiver, Eleanor, has her envision her younger self in the moment and then metaphorically send in a "savior"—in this case, Joey, Foo's partner, and then adult Foo—to comfort "Baby Stephanie." When adult Foo "enters" the memory, she says, "I just want you to know that you haven't actually done anything wrong. Just remember that eventually you *will* be loved, I promise... And, I want you to know how *powerful* you are" (109). Here, EMDR enables Foo to provide comfort to her younger self by praising her strengths and ultimately allows

her to counterbalance the abuse with a display of interpersonal affection. EMDR practices “[loosen] up something in the mind/brain that gives people rapid access to loosely associated memories and images from their past. This seems to help them put the traumatic experience into a larger context or perspective” (255). Hence, the essential element of EMDR is *understanding* and *processing* memory. Where Foo’s older therapists were the ones reaffirming her (“the abuse was not your fault”), in using an EMDR process, Foo can instead reaffirm herself. She embeds a quality of temporality to this memory, denoting this not as a disconnected moment of suffering but an obstacle that young Foo will inevitably overcome.

EMDR is a potent tool for Foo because it not only enables a reshaping of memory but allows herself to embody the reparative position. As aforementioned, the paranoid position which Sedgwick details is a posture of negative affect, and, in said paranoid position, one will rarely seek to maximize positive affect. In detailing how to engage with a reparative position, Sedgwick returns to the psychological theories of Klein:

Similarly, in Klein’s writings...it again represents an actual achievement—a distinct, often risky positional shift—for an infant or adult to move toward a sustained *seeking of pleasure* (through the reparative strategies of the depressive position), rather than continue to pursue the self-reinforcing because self-defeating strategies for *forestalling pain* offered by the paranoid schizoid position. It’s probably more usual for discussions of the depressive position in Klein to emphasize that that position inaugurates ethical possibility—in the form of a guilty, empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care. (137)

The juxtaposition between *seeking of pleasure* and *forestalling pain* is compelling. Both strategies promote a negation of pain but in opposing ways—where forestalling simply delays an inevitable pain while seeking pleasure emphasizes a desire for healing. I also propose that Sedgwick’s methodologies can be extended to a model of self-care and self-healing. Although healing is an enigmatic process, the goal for many is the same: pleasure replaces the pain. Even so, the seeking of pleasure is not an idealist’s position. As Sedgwick proposes, the repositioning of oneself into the depressive position

requires a confrontation with a variety of “ethical possibilities.” To seek out a healing position, one must complicate the “other”—or in the case of trauma recovery, one must complicate one’s past or current selves—through a lens of compassion.

Reexamining Foo’s experience through Sedgwick’s reparative notions, it is evident that in pursuing an EMDR strategy, she is embracing a pleasure seeking ideal. Prior to discovering strategies like EMDR, Foo “forestalled” her pain, whether that be indicative of her “dread” or other maladies, by succumbing to the trappings of success and symptom-induced paranoia. By simultaneously communicating across a liminal plane with her younger self, praising her courage and fortitude while realizing the tactile results of abuse, Foo is able to paint a holistic portrayal of herself that is not defined by trauma. As she discloses,

I felt how courageous I must have been to endure that torture, day after day for so many years, by the people I trusted most in this world. I felt a sense of love and adoration for my childhood self that I’d never been able to summon before. (111)

Ultimately, in providing her formative, memorialized self with “a sense of love and adoration,” Foo is rereading the memory through a positive affective lens. It is not that she disregards her own struggle, but rather she considers her past through a paradigm of empathy: while a logical, therapeutic understanding that she is “not at fault” is crucial, she also transforms into a positive maternal figure and presents affection to youthful Foo, who is both “good” but “damaged.” She is then able to empathize *with herself* and recognize her instinctive humanity, kickstarting the healing process. To erase her past would be to erase her trauma but also positive qualities that Foo carries, as the title suggests, in her bones. By contrast, to productively admire her endurance is to occupy the reparative position where a traumatic history does not exclusively define Foo or her childhood self but is rather a hurdle which she overcame.

Wang also elaborates on her experience with moving away from being negatively characterized by her diagnosis—both by the medical system and by herself. To do this, however, she

not only seeks out psychiatric care (she notes that EMDR had partial successes) but seeks out *psychic* care. Late into her healing process, Wang meets Brianna (Bri) Saussy, a spiritual mentor. Bri tells Wang that her experiences with psychosis are unusual, not in an othering fashion, but rather because she believes she is “thin skinned.” Wang, as a thin-skinned individual, has perceptions that are “wide-open” and can “perceive what is happening in the other realm.” Moreover, “thin-skinned...individuals will start to think they’re crazy because they see, sense, and feel things outside of the regular scope of experience” (193). Bri, although working under highly non-traditional structures of sacred arts, is reshaping Wang’s experiences of psychosis from a label of “crazy” towards a supernatural diagnosis. Wang recognizes that this method of understanding schizoaffective disorder is not a remedy; she has no desire to quit therapy or reduce her medication doses because “[she’d] suffered greatly during psychosis and was not interested in turning face-first, again, into the storm of bleak and blustering insanity” (194). Rather, she wants to “make sense of [her hallucinations]” (194). Thus, where medicine and traditional methods of psychiatry help to reduce the pain and intensity of psychosis, psychic treatment is a way of rereading symptoms of mental illness as psychic *tools*—ways of accessing various spiritual realms.

To engage with the sacred arts, Wang is encouraged to consider her liminality. Wang describes liminality in both a spiritual and psychoanalytic fashion. For the spiritual reading, liminality is the state of crossing spiritual realms into the “otherworld,” also described as “fairyland” or the “imaginal realm”; for her psychoanalytic definition, Wang cites scholar Clarissa Estés who, in Jungian fashion, defines the liminal as the “locus betwixt the worlds” and further denotes the locus as “the place where visitations, miracles, imaginations, inspirations, and healings of natures occur” (196). Liminality, whether framed through a psychic or psychoanalytical framework, relies on questioning beyond what is known and understood—whether that be one’s consciousness or existence in the bodily realm. To be liminal is to be what Bri deems as non-rational. Where

irrationality exudes a complete lack of reason, non-rationality insists that there is reason if you can push beyond traditional symbols of understanding:

[Bri] judges psychosis by its utility: “If there’s something of use there, then you take it. And so even if it’s a scary vision, if there’s something of use there that you can take and you can apply to your life, I wouldn’t consider that schizophrenic. I would consider that liminal.” (197)

The reshaping of symptoms of schizoaffective disorders as possibly advantageous, and even prophetic, counteracts the traditional models of psychosis as wholly irrational. In “Scripting ‘Success’ and the Model Minority,” I discussed Wang’s use of the term “possessed,” where a societal fear that psychotic disorder overrides personhood leads to paranoid practices of policy and care. The non-rational quality of embracing one’s liminality pushes back against these practices of care as well as paranoid self-readings. Like Foo’s experience with EMDR, Wang’s psychic self-reading, where the hallucination could be a message from the otherworld or unconscious, allows for a complex rendering of psychosis as both frightening and constructive.

While Wang makes it clear that psychic treatment is not a cure, she marks her acceptance of liminality as an important step towards healing in that she can now choose to reinterpret her unavoidable symptoms. She recalls her first hallucination where, while showering, a clear voice called out “I hate you”; her roommate, upon hearing about this strange experience, said Wang was “crazy” (198). Post-psychic illumination, Wang returns to this moment and asks, “But what if the voice held some sort of function... Perhaps the voice was saying that if I didn’t find a better therapist, my self-destructiveness would eventually sink me in grave danger” (198). Although she is skeptical in giving her mind—which is prevailingly deemed as “possessed” by the public sphere—a source of agency, Wang is embodying a self-caring stance.

I subsequently propose that psychic re-readings are for Wang, as EMDR is for Foo, a reparative method of healing. Rather than judge the voice and herself, Wang accepts that the psychic

(or psychoanalytic) possibility of a liminal communication engenders a feeling of hope rather than shame. Sedgwick defends hope as

among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (146)

Sedgwick suggests that a reparative stance enables a reframing of past traumas through a lens of possibility. An understanding that the past could have differed empowers the reparative “reader” to enact change on their future realities, for the reparative position, unlike the paranoid position, proposes that how it is now is not always how it will be. So, embodying a reparative healing practice empowers Wang because it shows how a rereading of her past hallucinations could have altered her choice of care, and also how in future moments of psychoses, even with the most harrowing visions, she need not accept hallucinations as solely neurological aberrations. In the final moments of her memoir, Wang concludes, “I tell myself that should delusions come to call...I might be able to wrangle sense out of the senseless. I tell myself that if I must live with a slippery mind, I want to know how to tether it too” (202). Expressing her “thin-skinned” liminality, Wang can accept that forces others deem irrational can be unraveled. If that task is impossible, actions of tethering enable her to understand that the trauma of psychotic episodes is not an all-consuming state but a phase that she can endure.

### **“Love begets love”**

Healing is, at its core, fueled by self-love. Foo details how her EMDR strategies extend to all forms of healing—especially mindfulness. When meditating, she soothes herself into a calming state and imagines a multitude of Stephanies to heal: “little twelve-year-old me, little college me, me in my



early twenties” (229). She further articulates, “as I flipped through all of these Stephanies, I kept repeating this sentence again and again: ‘You are suffering, but you are trying so hard’” (229). For Foo, this expression is a transcendental self-love, where she crosses barriers of time and space to reconnect with past and future selves. She is excavating the remains of her past and nurturing her younger selves, using the uplifting motto to embed a sense of bittersweet pride. More so, a self-love model allows Foo to rewrite the epigenetic, self-punishing code that is embedded within her; she remembers, “I was taught that punishment and shame were the logical and necessary reactions to screwing up” (287). Her childhood had been marked by a specific kind of abuse—one that caused pain motivated by punishment. Likewise, living in contemporary Asian America, she absorbed the shame of having her racial struggles belittled or disregarded, and she puts forth that minoritized subjects

internalize the blame for their failures. They tell themselves they are awkward, lazy, antisocial, or stupid, when *what’s really happening* is that they live in a discriminatory society where their success is limited by white supremacy and class stratification. The system itself becomes the abuser. (292)

These recycled feelings of Foo (and other Asian American “victims,” like the students discussed in “Scripting ‘Success’ and the Model Minority”) chastise themselves through emotional, psychological, and, in severe scenarios, physical self-punishment. The issue, as Foo boldly advocates, is that punishment *is not* love and *cannot* ensure healing. In *All About Love*, bell hooks insists, “Love and abuse cannot coexist. Abuse and neglect are, by definition, the opposites of nurturance and care... Too many of us need to cling to a notion of love that either makes abuse acceptable or at least makes it seem that whatever happened was not that bad” (6). Rather, as Foo likewise insists, “*Love begets love*” (307). hooks continues her defense of love and claims:

Love heals. When we are wounded in the place where we would know love, it is difficult to imagine that love really has the power to change everything. No matter what has happened in our past, when we open our hearts to love we can live as if

born again, not forgetting the past but seeing it in a new way, letting it live inside us in a new way. (209)

Punishment forestalls pain in a Sedgwickian manner but also (re)embeds a sense of suffering.

“Maybe I had not really been broken...Maybe I had been human...Perhaps the only real thing that was broken was the image I had of myself—punishing and unfair, narrow and hypercritical,” professes Foo (306).

Healing, in conjunction with love, brings about feelings of hope. The authors acknowledge that for the traumatized Asian American and those living through mental illness, to heal is to self-provide tools that encourage an ethics of hope. The proposed theories of hope here are indebted to Sedgwick but also bound to the love-driven writings of hooks. On redemptive love, hooks postulates, “Breaking our sense of isolation and opening up the window of opportunity, hope provides us with a reason to go forward. It is a practice of positive thinking. Being positive... renews the spirit” (219). Yet, while positivity looms as the ultimate desire, there is an ease in and tendency for paranoia when traumatized subjects are ostracized and dehumanized and “success is limited by white supremacy and class stratification.” I contend that Foo’s and Wang’s hopeful writings emerge in response to my epigraph’s question, which arises from Jenny T. Wang’s *Permission to Come Home*. In her book, a therapy text that “reclaims mental health” for Asian Americans, Wang asks: “What if our community invested in the individual transformation that could give way to communal and collective healing?” (x). To extend Wang’s question in relation to Wang and Foo, I subsequently ask: What if our community could see, read, and engage with the individual transformation that could give way to communal and collective healing?

Asian American illness memoirs, then, end up being a locus for reworkings of the paranoid and hegemonic paradigms that encapsulate psychiatric and biomedical institutions towards models of care and healing. These memoirs link trauma and mental illness to race, gender, immigration, and

diasporic histories—an intersectional web in which not all racial groups live, at least to the same degree. And, of consequence, the act of writing itself (where the authors explicate the triangular journey of reliving traumas, moving beyond paranoia, *and* seeking pleasure) has healing qualities. On her own self-care techniques, Foo declares “Writing actually does help me. It’s sort of meditative. It’s sort of the way that I can talk most kindly to myself because it does... get me out of my trigger state and into an intellectual state, and ... helps me think about ‘Why am I feeling *this* way, exactly?’” (Interview by Kong and Patel). In “writing for exposure” and publishing their own journey towards “repair,” Foo and Wang testify that Asian Americans—specifically those healing from and overcoming mental illness—exist in a specific, contemporary racialized predicament that at once requires assimilation and Hong’s neoliberal “success” while erasing *and* reproducing intergenerational forms of trauma. So, it is precisely in their trauma memoirs that these quests for unorthodox healing would emerge as a response to institutionalized forms of paranoia, and it is their care writing that engages the potentiality for Asian American intergenerational healing.

## Chapter 2: Literature and Language as Reparative Transition

I felt a connective and humanizing resonance in books: I wasn't alone in my aloneness. I wasn't alone in my longing for love. I wasn't alone in my fear of being rejected, my fear of never finding my place, my fear of failing. The snarl of my journey was untangled and laid out clearly by books.

— Phuc Tran in *Sigh, Gone*

It was once a source of shame, but now I say it proudly: bad English is my heritage. I share a literary lineage with writers who make the unmastering of English their rallying cry—who queer it, twerk it, hack it, Calibanize it, *other* it by hijacking English and warping it to a fugitive tongue. To *other* English is to make audible the imperial power sewn into the language, to slit English open so its dark histories slide out.

— Cathy Park Hong in *Minor Feelings*

### Introduction

This chapter is engaged with and indebted to bell hooks' motto of education as freedom.

Education, in hooks' writings, is a simultaneously freeing force and disruptive force. hooks is writing in a tradition that encourages interdisciplinary study and promotes the critical power that comes with holistic teaching and learning practices. In her pedagogical text *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks indicates:

My pedagogical practices have emerged from the mutually illuminating interplay of anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies. This complex and unique blending of multiple perspectives has been an engaging and powerful standpoint from which to work. Expanding beyond boundaries, it has made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that engage directly both the concern for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways teach diverse groups of students. (10)

hooks' critical foundations—which advocate for a deconstruction of institutions of hegemonic power within education alongside the creation of new teaching methods that support diverse classrooms—parallel and complicate Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's models of reparative reading. Sedgwick argues that paranoid critics of the reparative reading model and the reparative turn insist on the naïve and pious nature of reparative scholars, and they further note that historical ideas of repair are rooted within the US imperial project, opposing repair's ability for social justice (126;

Stuelke 10). hooks delineates that the healing power of education, and the “theory” which is taught, arrives when marginalized individuals, specifically those in Black feminist communities, collectively transcend theory as hegemonic discourse and theory as impractical towards radical action. She attests, “When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two—that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other” (61). Furthermore, hooks’ interplay of theory and pedagogy insists that a freeing education *must* be rooted in models of anticolonialism and feminism. As a result, her pedagogy is not naïve but rather deeply aware of the hegemony that trickles into educational systems. I would argue that *Teaching to Transgress* is a textual, step-by-step guide on how educators can manifest *reparative* education strategies to transgress racially and culturally homogenized structures of education.

In this chapter, rather than draw on her distinct pedagogical instructions, I am extending hooks’ holistic ideas of liberatory education to the practices of reading and writing literature and the language politics within Asian American self-writings. For many Asian American memoirists—including Phuc Tran, Cathy Park Hong, and others—an engagement with literature appears through an exposure to what Matthew Salesses calls “literary imperialism,” which enfolds the white-centric literary canon and dominant literary schools of thoughts. Drawing parallels between hooks and the memoirists, I seek to excavate the ways in which a distinctly transgressive and reparative engagement with literature and language serves as a healing practice. A deeper, empathetic understanding of these literary attitudes will reveal how Asian American authors actively, transgressively, and reparatively think and write against these academic modes to not only disrupt imposed regimes but also to then assess the ways their own racialized, nonconforming writings—both on *and* against white, literary imperialism—allow for a healing from trauma and a reconciliation of racial identity.

To defend literature as reparative transition and freedom with Asian American self-writings, I will analyze two memoirs—Phuc Tran’s *Sigh, Gone* (2020) and Cathy Park Hong’s *Minor Feelings* (2020). While the memoirs overlap in thematic material and racial politics, *Sigh, Gone* addresses reparative transition through renarrations of canonical literature, while *Minor Feelings* approaches similar themes via discussions of language politics. So, I separate my discussion according to what each book engages with most directly. I first explore Tran’s memoir, which employs a peculiar structure in which Tran, a Vietnamese American man, organizes his life experiences according to the Western canonical texts which he read at specific periods of his primary education; I argue that a renarration and recontextualization of canonical texts within Tran’s childhood is a reparative method of excavating and understanding his racial identity and sense of self. In the second half of this chapter, I meditate on the postcolonial language politics of Hong’s *Minor Feelings*, focusing on her chapter “Bad English.” I pair her memoir with the work of scholar, writer, and educator Matthew Salesses to illuminate the ways she is deconstructing and reshaping English to push beyond the limits and boundaries of colonialist language. On the surface, Tran and Hong can be read as writers who employ opposing compositional methods—with Tran seemingly accommodationist of and Hong far more critical of the white literary canon. Yet, my reparative reading model enables a reading of the authors alongside each other, rather than in opposition, and as engaging in a larger common enterprise of Asian American reparative renarration and writing. For both authors, writing beyond traditional and dominant literary traditions becomes a healing strategy that enables a reframing of the negative affects that envelop their relationship to racial, ethnic, and national identities into positive affects. This affective transformation enables a liberation from the white imperialistic structures of literary craft and allows for the authors to define new lineages of writing and storytelling within Asian America.

In my introduction chapter, I introduced the ways racial schisms between Asian and BIPOC communities are constructed and supported by white supremacy and model minority myths, and how Cathy Park Hong, among other outspoken Asian American scholars, are recovering overlapping lineages between minoritized groups across America. Hong, importantly, does not *equate* lineages of racialized groups or speak for other non-Asian ethnic groups. Rather, in lieu of occupying a position of knowledge and authority where one can openly “speak about” all racial histories and linguistic experiences as equal, Hong writes that minoritized writers of color should position themselves as “speaking nearby.” She cites Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, who writes:

When you decide to speak nearby, rather than speak about, the first thing you need to do is to acknowledge the possible gap between you and those who populate your film: in other words, to leave the space of representation open so that, although you’re very close to your subject, you’re also committed to not speaking on their behalf, in their place or on top of them... Such an approach gives freedom to both sides and this may account for it being taken up by filmmakers who recognize in it a strong ethical stance. (qtd. in Hong 103)

Through “speaking nearby,” Trinh recognizes that a literary unity arises out of the “gap” between the writer and the other. Within this gap, the author is able to note solidifying overlap in minoritized experiences without speaking “for” an unequal racial and/or ethnic group.

Due to its ability to construct solidarity, “speaking nearby” can be classified as a distinctly reparative strategy. On the way 21<sup>st</sup> century queer feminist scholars have reacted to Sedgwick’s reparative reading model, Robyn Wiegman writes:

In the name of “reparative reading,” “weak theory,” or compassionate redescription, they seek new environments of sensation for the objects they study by displacing critical attachments once forged by correction, rejection, and anger with those crafted by affection, gratitude, solidarity, and love. Under these affective terms, the critical act is reconfigured to value, sustain, and privilege the object’s world inhabitations and needs. (7)

Speaking *for*—a “critical attachment” that encourages separate racial groups to “correct” and “reject” other racialized experiences, ultimately building to fracturing “anger”—is reshaped under Wiegman’s extension of Sedgwick’s model. Thus, “speaking nearby” as a “strong ethical stance” builds reparative “solidarity”—“you’re very close to your subject”—without overstepping and equating but rather noting the ethical power that arises out of Trinh’s “gap.” To acknowledge this “gap” is neither a sharp separation nor complete binding of experience, which risks enabling the reproduction of intellectual and racial hierarchies. Rather, with reference to David Eng and Shinhee Han’s conceptions of race relations, this “gap” opens up fixed and static racial positions and stereotypes. They denote that

by privileging race as a fixed difference...rather than as ever-changing forms of relationality, the racial stereotype renders authenticity, attachment, and psychic growth tenuous...the ability to play and to (re)negotiate borders is fundamental to an ethics that does not fix or polarize race into static and oppositional categories but rather approaches it as a relational and shifting concept. (139)

Both selected authors analyze and write on Black and Latinx writings (and I myself spotlight the voice of hooks as a key theoretical foundation) not just to push back against white supremacist constructions of model minority discourse but to offer a reparative way of responding to the Black/white dominant discourse. Reading Trinh T. Minh-ha and bell hooks alongside one another elaborates how hooks is herself advocating for “speaking nearby.” In *Teaching to Transgress* (and *All About Love*), hooks promotes for bridging ontological and political divides: “I suggest that we do not necessarily need to hear and know what is stated in its entirety, that we do not need to ‘master’ or conquer the narrative as a whole, that we may know in fragments. I suggest that we may learn from spaces of silence” (174). So, rather than assert an Asian/white dyad, which constitutes a similar erasure of minoritized racial and ethnic groups and pushes out Blackness, this chapter extends and



transforms Eng and Han's racial triangulation model and places Asian in relation to and alongside Black and white.

In providing a more complex portrait of race as *relational*, my work reflects the racial negotiations of the melancholic Asian subjects; simultaneously, it is also a politically conscious and motivated praxis of racial reparation and reparative reading and writing. Through pairing a prominent Black feminist pedagogical scholar with the works of an Asian American pedagogical scholar and two Asian American memoirists, this chapter performs the work of solidifying and uniting writers of color both across the Asian diaspora and across racial and ethnic groups. Hence, I open with bell hooks' essay memoir, contextualizing her anticolonial notions within her childhood anecdotes. Then, I turn to Salasés' scholarship and Phuc Tran's and Cathy Park Hong's memoirs to explore the ways these Asian American authors investigate, reframe, and extend hooks' motto to conjoin disunited racial groups and perform communal and personal reparation within Asian America.

### **“Education as the practice of freedom”**

Throughout her revolutionary writing career, bell hooks advocated for significant changes in cultural and literary theory and critique. As a Black feminist scholar, hooks often considered the ways intersectional identities coalesce and clash within an increasingly multiracial and multicultural US nation-state. While her body of work strategizes new critical methods across disciplines—she engages with affect studies, gender studies, race studies, and more. Throughout her career, hooks wrote several texts on her role as an educator of color and the way effective and thoughtful pedagogy has antiracist, nurturing consequences. In the historical location in which she was raised, what hooks deems as the “apartheid South,” there is a strong, importantly racialized, sense of educational community. In the introduction to *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks elaborates on her

adolescent educational experiences in an all-Black learning community. She declares that her Black female teachers enacted “a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial” and that the students’ devotion to learning was a “counter-hegemonic act” and “a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization” (2). Concurrently, she asserts that, “For black folks teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle” (2). Importantly, hooks also deems schools as an antithetical space to the “home,” for the home was where she was forced to “conform to someone else’s image” and school was where she could “reinvent herself” (3). This specific Black education, as hooks lays out in her childhood recollections, was a revolutionary, liberatory force that enabled the uplifting of a minoritized, oppressed group, and the classroom became a uniquely sentimental place—“School was the place of ecstasy” (3).

Yet, upon racial reintegration, hooks declares that schools and classrooms lost this ecstatic, rebellious quality. Under white-led pedagogy, hooks narrates:

School was still a political place, since we were always having to counter white racist assumptions that we were genetically inferior, never as capable as white peers, even unable to learn. Yet, the politics were no longer counter-hegemonic. We were always and only responding and reacting to white folks. (4)

hooks’ noted shift is most evident in the final sentence. She notes that she and her Black classmates lost the political and countering agency enabled by all-Black classrooms and became subjects forced to “respond” and “react” to the racially hegemonic systems that are deeply embedded in the mid-twentieth-century educational system. Moving through high school, university, and graduate programs only further damaged her relationship to the classroom, for it felt “more like a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility” (4). For marginal writers and thinkers to resist to whiteness and set structures of educational hierarchy was a suspicious act, for there was a sense that Black and nonwhite individuals must prove an equality to

whiteness rather than a sense of individuality. As a critical theorist, a teacher of color (at this point, a teacher of color *in training*), and an individual whose liberatory education had revolutionized her own understanding of learning, hooks crafted *Teaching to Transgress* with the belief that this fixed, hegemonic notion of education *can* be disrupted. The text's subtitle and concluding sentence—"education as the practice of freedom"—engender an innate understanding that altered, radical and/or critical pedagogical practices can (re)instate excitement and liberation within the classroom setting.

### **Renarration, redescription, and the racial transitional object: *Sigh, Gone***

In "Theory as Liberatory Practice," a chapter of *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks presents the liberating qualities of "theory," the overarching writings of cultural studies. Within her reflections, she identifies several scholarly fissures within African American and feminist studies and in radical Black feminist liberation struggles: there is pushback against theory from both elite academics and progressive Black political groups, engendering a split between "theory and practice" (69). The "theory" of late twentieth-century race and gender academic circles is described in hooks' essay as hegemonic and siloing of identities. Concurrently, she also anecdotally refers to the anti-intellectual "putting down of theory" permeating Black feminist liberation struggles, and she fears being deemed "uppity" for promoting critical discussions and intellectual processes *in addition* to revolutionary action. In an attempt to disrupt both of these phenomena in her academic, political, and intimate livelihood, hooks argues that new modes of theorizing must be considered, specifically those that conjoin theory and practice.

Thus, it is all the more powerfully counter-hegemonic, and anti-racist, to bring hooks' ideas of theory and practice into play for an analysis of Phuc Tran's *Sigh, Gone* and the overarching Asian American liberatory struggle. In his memoir, Tran (re)reads texts from the literary canon and

excavates a redefined sense of self through a recontextualizing of the canonical texts within his own life. As hooks proposes, Tran is moving beyond the polarization of theory—here, literature rather than critical theory—and reality. The canonical works, for Tran, serve as “theory” as they both provide and create new frameworks in which he “grasp[s] what was happening around and within [him]” (hooks 59). The act of framing and self-analyzing his lived experience as a Vietnamese immigrant through the universal themes of the canon—a self-analytical approach that I deem as renarration—enlivens his own process of racial “self-recovery.” So, framing Tran alongside Eng and Han’s models of racial melancholia, reading becomes the site of minor agency for Tran. Following Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of a minor literature, Tran is writing as a “minority” within the lines of the oppressor’s language, or the “great literature” of the canon, and burrowing within the literary canon to ignite the “revolutionary conditions” of his writings within a contemporary racialized “political immediacy” (Deleuze and Guattari 16). In renarrating and redescribing the canon, he synthesizes a form of repairing the assimilatory melancholic’s attachment to whiteness, transforming and repairing what has been internalized into the nonwhite ego.

While Tran explores his life through eleven different literary works, each the title of a chapter in his memoir, this section will focus on a single chapter, “The Autobiography of Malcolm X.” This chapter is singular within the larger framework of Tran’s memoir in that race explicitly surfaces and dominates the narration. If race is a “lost” object for the melancholic Asian American subject, an engagement with “minor literature” forces race to become centralized, igniting the reintegration of race. Furthermore, in renarrating and, borrowing Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson’s term, “redescribing” his life through a work of Black self-writing, Tran moves beyond the Black-white racial binary and excavates an understanding of his “relational” racial and diasporic position.

Tran begins *Sigh, Gone* by recalling his childhood in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, a small rural town that he describes as a “slice of American pie á la mode” (3). Tran presents Carlisle as a “slice” of a

small-town life that is representative of larger American small-town phenomena; his Carlisle portrait is described through trucks flying Confederate flags, fast food chains, white racial homogeneity, and blue-collar work. As a minority in this small-town world, Tran asks, “So where did the immigrant Vietnamese kid fit into all of this?” (3). His ethnic identity and immigrant status embed a sense of isolation and marginalization, where he feels a sense of disconnection from this prototypical American town. Tran clarifies that these feelings are not self-imposed but result from targeted taunting and bullying across his early schooling years because of his Asian identity. In the memoir’s prologue, Tran details:

I believed that I was bullied because I was Vietnamese, so I did the math for my survival: be less Asian, be bullied less. Armed with this simplistic deduction, I tried to erase my otherness, my Asianness, with an assimilation—an Americanization—that was as relentless as it was thorough. (3)

The “solution” for Tran is to strike out his Vietnamese identity—his “Asianness.” Although he recognizes the simplicity of this deduction, Tran—at this time a young man trying to survive the harsh, racist landscape of his classrooms and playground—sees assimilation as the only path forward. This “solution” directly ties to Eng and Han’s argument that assimilation engenders racial melancholia; as they put forth:

The suspended assimilation, the inability to blend into the American melting pot, suggests that for Asian Americans ideals of whiteness are perpetually strained—continually estranged. They remain at an unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal. (36)

“Whiteness” is seen as ideal in contrast to the unattractive “Asianness,” a racial state that allows for discriminatory harassment and othering. Yet, whiteness remains “at an unattainable distance” due to phenotypical racial barriers and is internalized and incorporated as an “ideal” into the ego. This internalizing of whiteness as the “good” ideal gives rise to psychic splitting—where Asianness becomes a “bad,” “lost” racial object that is preserved only via a “haunted, ghostly identification” (Eng and Han 37). In assuming a racial object’s “emptiness,” Eng and Han argue that the Asian

American subject might be characterized by, in a Freudian manner, a tendency towards identity suicide. In an attempt to submit to the “good,” internalized ideals of whiteness, Tran himself records that his younger self desired to “erase [his] otherness, his Asianness”—a form of identity effacement as a result of emptiness and the inability to submit to the “good ideal.”

While he cannot alter his race, Tran believes he can Americanize his intellectual qualities through a specific, targeted, and canon-driven education. A class-wide and town-wide recognition of his intelligence is, in his mind, a way to assimilate and find his set place in Carlisle. “I realized that there was *some* prestige in being smart, or at least appearing smart,” writes Tran, and he sharply articulates, “I got zero props for being Vietnamese or bilingual or a refugee” (4). For young Tran, a cultural and linguistic understanding of Vietnam is not indicative of intelligence, or at least not rewarded on an equal scale. Because of this, he turns to literature—specifically reading the “great works”—driven by a desire to gain respect from his classmates in order to survive consistent racialized targeting. Tran details that “[he] read voraciously, studied tirelessly” and “read as much (or at least name-dropped) as much of the Western literary canon as [he] could.” There is a sense that a widespread, surface-level engagement with the texts—a survey that allows name dropping and an intellectual façade—is a distinct attempt to claim some educational agency and lift his minor status. This canonical exploration is further enhanced when Tran encounters Clifton Fadiman’s *The Lifetime Reading Plan*, a guide to the “books that ... educated, cultured Americans should read over their lifetime.” Tran “loves” the guide and it becomes “the most powerful cannon in [his] war for assimilation”—regardless of its “unapologetically American, classist, and white” nature (4). This text, and the literary assimilation it promotes, encourages Tran to weaponize the texts he reads for self-preservation: the militaristic transformation of the canon into a “cannon” highlights juvenile Tran’s survival tendency to push beyond racial oppression yet reinforces his superficial engagement with

the literary objects. A distinct *knowledge* of these “great books” becomes a tool to synthesize an erudite appearance to gain “clout” in a classroom.

Yet, as Tran notes, this knowledge seeking does not disrupt the shame and envy that saturate his education and general Carlisle experience. Tran’s forced assimilation into, or what Homi Bhabha’s calls *mimicry* of white academic structures engenders a melancholic splitting, where he “felt the warmth of [his white classmates’] respect in sharp contrast to [his] cloaked envy of them,” for, as he further explains, “They belonged in a way that I never could, and their regard for me was sweet and sour. How Asian” (4). While Tran feels accepted or at least praised for his seemingly vast knowledge, his “cloaked envy” still encourages a self-separation from his white classmates. Within traditional Asian American models of melancholia, mimicry is a process that affirms and encourages states of Freudian melancholia—where whiteness serves as an unattainable ideal that complicates, lengthens, and harmfully idealizes the process of assimilation. As Eng and Han argue, “For Asian Americans, mimicry is always a partial success as well as a partial failure to assimilate into regimes of whiteness” (45). Tran’s language of sweet and sour, which he marks as distinctly “Asian,” plainly touches on facets of Asian cuisine but also connotes an Asian partial assimilation. His white classmates “sweetly” admire his intellectual capabilities that succumb to an American literary hegemony but “sourly” dismiss his bilingual capabilities, his Vietnamese history, and refugee identity. As mentioned in Chapter 1, and as Eng and Han delineate in their work on racial melancholia, “Those Asian Americans who do not fit into the model minority stereotype are altogether erased from—are not recognized by—mainstream society” (46). Academic success and knowledge are survival tools that garner recognition but still engender a melancholic psychic splitting where, in Bhabha’s defining words, there is a feeling of “almost the same but not quite, almost the same but not white” (qtd. in Eng and Han 44).

Tran experiences revelatory change—a transition away from the melancholic shame and envy that enfold his American experience—in the actual reading process. Through the act of reading, he pleads that a distinctly personal engagement with the canonical works disrupted the notion of performativity that informed his early explorations. He narrates:

But in the course of reading great books, *something* happened. My reading molded me, the tool hammering its hand into shape. By some miracle—and by miracle, I mean great teachers—I pushed past the shallowness and stupidity of my own motivations. I fell in love with the *actual* literature and the *actual* ideas of great literature. As an immigrant, as a Vietnamese kid, as a poor kid, I had collected so many scarlet letters of alienation that I connected profoundly to the great works. (5)

Within this passage, Tran denotes a key transition that is continuously unraveled throughout his memoir: rather than solely and “shallowly” view the canon as objects that enrich a sense of cultural academic agency, Tran (with the help of great educators) notes the thematic overlap between his own life and the books. And while the texts are largely homogenized in their (lack of) discussions of race and ethnicity, Tran suggests that his often shameful and socially stigmatizing existence—exemplified through the “scarlet letter” metaphor of Hawthorne’s classic novel—can be explored and renegotiated through a contemporary, local engagement with the texts. Sedgwick exclaims in her description of reparative reading as “weak theory” that “there are important phenomenological and theoretical tasks that can be accomplished only through local theories and nonce taxonomies” (145). Thus, via Sedgwick’s reading model, the *actual* texts and their probing universal questions can be localized within Tran’s experience “as an immigrant, as a Vietnamese kid, as a poor kid.” Where reading as an intellectual endeavor promotes a distinct erasure of Asianness/submission to Americanization, renarrating and recontextualizing the texts engenders a sense of fullness in Tran as he probes the ways the texts, themes, and characters bleed into his everyday livelihood.

To begin his discussion of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Tran writes, “Imagine if your whole life’s work was squeezed into the blurb of a high school history textbook, into a paragraph



totaling maybe sixty words—your life and its complexities pruned for word count and impact” (235). Tran’s imagined scenario is, as indicated by the chapter title, about Malcolm X: he explains that the “blurb” and “pruning” of X’s life simplified X’s politically active and radical career into a one-dimensional snapshot that was set up to seem antonymic to the work of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Tran, then, explains his concerns with the textbook’s simplicity: “Our textbook had taken a convenient and incomplete snapshot of who he [Malcolm X] was at a particular moment in his life to shoehorn him into the yin-yang paradigm of Civil Rights leaders, reducing his life’s intricacy into a simple paragraph” (236). Tran’s issue with the overt simplification of X’s life is rooted in not only the gaps but the distinct “shoehorning” of X into an ineffective Civil Rights paradigm that revolves around ideological binaries. In Tran’s opinion, the evolution of X’s revolutionary ideas on race and racism during the Civil Rights Era is best expressed through X’s *own writing*. Tran quotes X’s reflections on his infamous letter from Mecca; in his letter, a text that details X’s evolution on American race relations, X pens, “Even I was myself astounded. But there was precedent in my life for this letter. My whole life had been a chronology of *changes*” (qtd. in Tran 236). Tran’s excerpt highlights X’s temporal relationship to his racial identity, a chronological understanding of his own sense of racial-self arrived through intellectual evolution, while also channeling the evocative power of self-writing.

Tran’s inclusion of Malcolm X’s autobiography has a dual effect. Within *Sigh, Gone*, X’s autobiography is both the only text of self-writing and the only text written by a person of color. Tran’s parallel readings are meta, for he questions how the act of self-writing and self-chronologizing allows the complication of a lived history, but they are distinctly racialized. He is creating interracial parallels to excavate and explore his *own* evolution on racial identity politics, and he considers the way his understanding of his *own* race is deconstructed through self-writing.

Tran explains that he discovered the autobiography in 1990, his senior year of high school, and at his “apex academically and socially” (236). Existing at the focal point of the high school environment, Tran avows, “There was no need for me to change my views, and frankly, I didn’t want to change. Everything made sense to me as it was—everything was in its place” (236). Tran, here, feels comfortably fixed: there is neither a desire to alter his viewpoints (whether those be racial or cultural) nor, having a feeling of social power, is there a *need*. The racial pressures of Tran’s childhood life—the targeted, anti-Asian taunting and bullying of the playground—have seemingly evacuated from his high school landscape. Yet, when his teacher Ms. Ganster notices Tran’s interest in X, she recommends *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and asks, “Did the book resonate with you at all, Phuc?” (242). This question confuses Tran, and he implores, “I didn’t know how to answer her question because I didn’t know what her question meant” (243). Tran is perplexed by Ms. Ganster’s question of resonance, which probes whether a high school Vietnamese American senior sees overlap between his own life and the life and politics of a radical African American activist. Was Ganster implying a parallel racialized experience between Tran and X, conflating the experiences of Asian American and African Americans in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century?

One driving force of the confusion is Tran’s high school understanding of racism and racial politics as distinctly defined through the Black-white race binary. He quickly refutes his educator’s idea of parallel, institutional racial oppression: “In the long shadow of the war, I linked my personal travails to the war’s aftershocks and couldn’t see how our struggles were connected to a larger struggle for equality.” He continues by emphasizing, “We [Vietnamese immigrants and refugees] were not descendants of slaves. Our people had not marched, sat-in, or been fire-hosed. It did not feel like our fight” (243). Tran’s personal experiences of anti-Vietnamese rhetoric are localized to the war and its wide cast memory, or “long shadow,” across the States. This relatively contemporary point of tension, in younger Tran’s social understanding, has few connections to larger political

movements, specifically anti-racist discourse working against the longstanding, historical oppression of Black individuals. Eng and Han name this distinct comparative race relation as the triangulation of Asian, Black, and white individuals. Referring to Ellen Wu, Eng and Han state that while this framework moves beyond the Black-white binary, it still delineates Asians as “definitely not white” but also “definitely not black” (qtd. in Eng and Han 41). Eng and Han assert, “Understanding this triangulation is key to apprehending the ways in which racial binaries of Black and white mask complex social relations of race while preventing political coalitions and alliances” (41). Within this framework, institutional racism remains siloed according to groups’ own distinct historical experiences rather than acknowledged as a phenomenon that bleeds across marginal groups, even if this diffusion is remarkably different in both its visibility and acknowledgement.

Returning to *Sigh, Gone*, it is evident that the masking and effacing of shared, yet notably unequal, histories of oppression among marginalized groups further invokes Tran’s skepticism. Tran’s described juxtaposition of his life and X’s, and their respective racial ideologies, revolves around their own flexibilities surrounding the definition of “racism”:

If I were honest, Malcom’s message didn’t immediately resonate with me because his worldview about race and racism was flexible and responsive, and mine was static at best and cartoonish at worst. My understanding of racism hadn’t evolved because I hadn’t allowed it and didn’t want it to. I didn’t want the small, inscribed circle of racists to expand, because if it did, I was terrified it would include more people than just the Klan and skinheads. (243)

In this passage and chapter, Tran seems to script his younger self through the “marginal man” framework: the term “marginal man”—minted by sociologist Robert Park—is used to “describe an Asian American subject who desires to assimilate into mainstream American society at any cost” and then “faithfully subscribes to the ideals of assimilation only through an elaborate self-denial and repression of the daily acts of institutionalized racism directed against him” (Eng and Han 43). Tran’s presented lack of flexibility surrounding race—an assimilated fixture into the American Black-white binary—is importantly self-imposed, for an evolution involves recognizing and

extending racism beyond “just the Klan and skinheads” and including institutional, systematic, and implicit discrimination and bias. Psychologists Stanley Sue and Donald Sue later reframe Park’s foundational work and conclude that the marginal man finds it “difficult to admit widespread racism since to do so would be to say that he aspires to join a racist society” (qtd. in Eng and Han 43). Tran’s self-reflections parallel the Sues’ findings, for he surfaces that to expand the “small, inscribed circle of racists” is, for his younger self, to include seemingly “non-racist” others as racist (“people who made racist *jokes*,” “my *friends*,” “*myself*”) and to acknowledge an overarching oppressive institution (Tran 244; emphasis added). It appears Tran’s view of racism is defined by its outwardness, the vocal and violent actions of white nationalists, but at the same time he stages his experiences as being characterized by Cathy Park Hong’s “minor feelings” framework: shame, anxiety, guilt, or other “minor” affects that arise by dismissed and “weaker,” yet repeated, moments of racial othering, and “the irritant of having one’s perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed” (Hong 55).

Yet, as he mentions in the prologue, the act of reading Malcolm X’s memoir enables a transition within Tran that moves him beyond the youthful “marginal man” assumptions towards a more complicated understanding of his racial position. He parallels X’s political ideals with several key moments in his own life that move him toward this transition—moving beyond the marginal man’s “self-denial and repression” and instead surfacing moments of explicit and implicit anti-Black and anti-Asian discrimination. He is, first, racially stereotyped by a town worker named “Dirty Dan”—“I thought *you people* were supposed to be good at math”—and dismissed by his principal and classmates when he attempts to draft an editorial on this racist encounter. They believe “the editorial isn’t a soapbox for your grievances” and that he should discuss topics that “[involve] the whole country” (245, 247). Later, following a robbery at a local store, he and his friend are interviewed by a policeman, who exclusively shows them pictures of Black men. Despite their

insistence that they did not see the robbery or any possible suspects, the policeman pressures them and dreadfully asserts, “Don’t you want to get another n\*gger off the streets?” (255). Finally, in a college interview, Tran centers a conversation about the universality of literature—implicitly telling the college alum that he “*didn’t* want to see race” (257). Nonetheless, although the interviewer resonates with this thematic universalizing, he notes Tran’s excellent grades and expresses:

“Your transcript is very impressive, but I expect it from students like yourself—your people are very diligent... But I love what you said about literature.” In response to this stereotyping assertion, Tran questions: “Was he complimenting me or seeing me through the lens of some Asian stereotype? Was he making racial assumptions about me? But wasn’t he saying that Asian students were awesome? (258)

There is a general tension among these three scenes that is enlivened in the college interview: race and racism are omnipresent, complex and, importantly, applicable across the elements of Tran’s life.

I would testify that Malcolm X’s autobiography, thus, becomes symbolic of what Eng and Han deem a racial transitional object. Extending psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s ideas of transition and transitional space, they elucidate that a subject’s engagement with a transitional object opens subjects up to a space beyond the inner and outer worlds: a space of “thirdness.” This space is “not a dead-end space of obstacle but one of psychic triangulation, possibility, and potentiality, an intermediate area, a space of creative play” (Eng and Han 89). Eng and Han discern that creatively playing with race, where race is not fixed or stereotyped, enables a redefinition and reimagination of racial meaning as “multiple and varied” rather than constrained by Black-white polarities. For the assimilating melancholic Asian American, use of a *racial* transitional object “opens up a network of once static racist associations and stereotypes” and, furthermore, this “racial evolution marks a kind of psychic coalitional identity politics marked by play—by movement and change rather than intransigence and fixity” (92). In reading and using the autobiography as a tool of excavation (both at a social and individual level), Tran transitions to a new relationship with race and racism. While Tran understands Dirty Dan’s actions as othering and stereotyping of Asian individuals—the work

of “bad apples”—these moments align with X’s arguments that “the whole barrel” is racially corrupt (249). Tran’s accumulated “thick calculus from years of experiencing bigotry” unravels as he notices an expansion of his definition of racism, where people of authority (police) and people within near educational and social circles (principals/classmates) engage in both direct and indirect acts of racial othering and dismissal. He declares:

This was the real lesson I learned from Malcolm X, the one I had been avoiding, and like Malcolm, I had to evolve my own thinking. But for me, that meant confronting a hideous truth about who the racists were. (262)

This “lesson”—the structural embedding of race within Carlisle, and America—enables an evolution *towards* the hideous truth, rather than away.

Beyond the sense of racial transition, I argue that Tran’s engagement with Malcolm X’s autobiography, a notable text among the other white fictional works considered in *Sigh, Gone*, embodies a reparative transition. Tran turns away from his initially fixed, racialized views—marked by a paranoid and suspicious understanding of American racial histories as separate and distinct—towards a rereading of his own life and racial experiences. Yet, one may attest that Tran does not arrive at a moment of noticeable pleasure or positive affect; rather, he concludes this chapter by perspicuously noting, “We all were the racists” (262). An imperative condition of Tran’s self-writings and self-readings is that he opens himself up to moments of fracture and surprise, a key element of Sedgwick’s reparative methods. Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson detail that an opening to fracture and surprise is not a paranoid motive, where dangers are “exposed,” “anticipated,” and “deactivated in time,” but rather an addressing of the “paradoxical nature in cultural objects, experiences, and environments (i.e., being simultaneously harmful and full of potentialities)” (105). Through renarration and redescription (both models of reading/writing reparatively), Tran builds a reshaped personal attachment to the racial transitional object: he uses the autobiography to “reassembl[e] his local realities,” moving away from the presented “marginal man” (a dismissal of his triangulated

racial position) towards an understanding of more complex racial politics and parallels. This paradoxical reading—where Tran uses X’s autobiography to move *towards* a hideous truth—reveals his minoritized position in a systematically racist nation but also extends Wiegman’s idea of solidarity and materializes a literary turn towards a notably *racial* solidarity. This reparative turn towards solidarity reshapes the reading focus towards the present and “also on the histories and resources that may have been abandoned but can still be accessed for creating new ‘positive’ worlds” (Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson 108). Where Tran initially saw civil rights politics as “not our fight”—with “our” indicating Vietnamese and Asian Americans—a reparative reading of X’s autobiography, and renarration and redescription of his own life, open him up to the paradigm of race as relational. His repositioning does not only occur within the chapter, but Tran’s reworked racial and reparative understanding then bleeds into the memoir’s subsequent chapters (which chronologically track his high school years *after* discovering *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*). This movement solidifies his minor and racial position, allowing for racial reparation, but also allows him to bridge gaps between Asian and Black lineages of parallel, but unequal, racial histories. I continue this argument in the following section where I analyze Cathy Park Hong’s reparative model of “bad English” to create interracial, cross-ethnic, and transnational solidarity.

### **Writing against dichotomy: “Bad English”**

In the penultimate paragraph of “Bad English,” a chapter in *Minor Feelings*, Cathy Park Hong quotes writer Jess Row from his book *White Flight*: “America’s great and possibly catastrophic failure is its failure to imagine what it means to live together” (qtd. in Hong 109). In response to this avowal about America’s seemingly segregated state, Hong postulates, “In thinking about my own Asian identity, I don’t think I can seal off my imagined world so it’s only people of my likeness, because it would follow rather than break from this segregated imagination” (109). Hong’s *Minor Feelings*

focuses on surfacing and reckoning with the “minor” feelings that saturate Asian American consciousness while attempting to forge lineages both within the Asian diaspora and across the racially marginalized groups of the United States. In her writings and reflections on her own racialized identity, she finds she must contextualize herself in the social spaces she inhabits—opening her “imagined world” beyond “people of [her] likeness”—and desegregate the linked histories of minoritized American subjects. Yet, Hong reveals that she has reservations about this endeavor. She asks:

But having said that, how can I write about us living together when there isn’t too much precedent for it? Can I write about it without resorting to some facile vision of multicultural oneness or the sterilizing language of virtue signaling? Can I write honestly? (109)

Hong presents herself as hesitant because her radical strategy is attempting to materialize and complicate racial relations that have been previously cast under minimizing structures of “multiculturalism” and “virtue signaling.” The question of writing “honestly” then examines how one can write reparatively—encouraging Wiegman’s assertion that reparative modes can engender feelings of solidarity—to both construct racial linkages and disrupt histories of imperialism and hegemony.

For Hong, one way of enacting this bridge-building and providing minor agency is through reshaping the English language by centering and composing a distinctly “bad English”—which both pertains to a fractured, deconstructed English and also the socially “bad” English of slang and expletives. This work of “othering English” challenges the set structures that envelop ideas of literacy and literary quality, for, as Hong proposes, “To *other* English is to make audible the imperial power sewn into the language, to slit English open so its dark histories slide out” (97). In exposing an “imperial power,” Hong is unveiling how, historically, “bad English” has been wielded in a racially othering and denigrating discourse against Asians and Asian Americans. She proclaims, “Pity



the Asian accent. It is such a degraded accent, one of the last accents acceptable to mock” (99)<sup>2</sup>.

More so, she points to gag sites such as English.com that further “mock” Asian mistranslations of English. On the website,

The images are separated into signs (“Please No Conversation, No Saliva”), T-shirts (“I feel a happiness when I eat Him”), and menus (“roasted husband”). The most viewed image is a cartoon ad of a popular sweet tapioca pearl beverage with the caption “I’m Bubble Tea! Suck my Balls!” (Hong 95-96)

Hong “makes audible” the structural and historical formations of anti-Asian racism which are produced by an imperial English. In “othering” and warping English, she surfaces these erased racist experiences for her readers—positioning her use of “bad English” as a pointed anticolonial stance.

Hong’s political ideologies align with and adopt other anticolonial education scholars such as hooks and, from a contemporary Asian American perspective, Matthew Salesses. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks characterizes the English language as the “oppressor’s language,” a term coined in the poetry of Adrienne Rich, citing that white-dominant academic spaces “silence and censor” marginal vernaculars of English—notably, in hooks’ essay, Black vernacular speech. She attests that Black vernacular (a “ruptured, broken, unruly speech”) shares a connection with the language of enslaved Africans, who reshape the “oppressor’s language” to speak “beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination” and make community that gave means to political solidarity (170, 175). The historical reshaping of language, for hooks, has counter-hegemonic and counter-colonial power as it both resists white supremacy and opens “alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies” (171). Similarly, in his book *Craft in the Real World*, Korean American scholar Matthew Salesses encourages a wariness towards “literary imperialism,” or the “dominance of one

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<sup>2</sup> While historically mocked in both racist, violent discourses and mass media, the Asian accent has also been a target within educational systems (as discussed in *Sigeb, Gone*) and academic institutions. It remains mocked to this day: at Purdue’s Fall 2022 commencement ceremony, Chancellor Thomas Keon of Purdue University Northwest publicly performed a caricature of Asian languages and made racist remarks, muttering “apparently made-up words after taking the podium following a speech from a commencement speaker” (Afshar and Sottile). Although Keon was reprimanded by Purdue, this moment blatantly reifies Hong’s contention.

tradition of craft, serving one particular audience (white, middle-class, straight, able, etc.)” (5). For Salesses, “craft”—here, writings in the MFA workshop but indicative of larger literary productions—is neither “innocent” nor “neutral” (14). He exclaims:

There is no universal standard of craft—this can’t be emphasized enough—but this in no way means fiction can be separated into on the one hand Western realism and on the other hand various exceptions to it (*genre or foreign or experimental* or so on). Instead, we must view other standards as exactly that—not as exceptions but as norms. (101)

Viewing nontraditional lanes of writing as “exceptions” still roots “literary imperialism” as conventional and correct. Alternatively, to disrupt “literary imperialism” is to understand the ways dominant cultural conventions define the “rules” of the literary scene.

During his chapter “An Example from East Asian and Asian American Literature,” Salesses explicitly cites Asian American literature as an object of “literary imperialism.” Under the guise of “craft,” singular writing “traditions” are taught in the workshop. Because of the workshop’s singularity, he implores that the “American writer of color who wants to break free of the white literary tradition might unsurprisingly think her only option is experimentalism” (103). He details that experimentalism and other avant-garde writing traditions are “experimental *with regard[s] to a specific tradition,*” and for Asian American authors that is a white literary tradition (103; emphasis added). For contrast, Salesses emphasizes that “Asian American fiction, for example, has its own tradition and experiments, into which an Asian American writer enters—if she is able to see that tradition as a possibility” (103). Yet, as white craft is centered and Asian American traditions are marginalized, these lanes of writing remain othered and inaccessible—cast as “*genre or foreign or experimental.*” Then, in resisting “white craft,” Hong’s methodology of warping English adopts historical practices from postcolonial anglophone literature (such as the work of Salman Rushdie, for example) and continues long, but less recognized, lineages of deconstructive language play in

Asian American literature—such as Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* (1982).

Hong is, through my readings, in conversation with both hooks’ and Salesses’ frameworks, for she puts forth that an explicitly counter-imperial and counter-hegemonic form of writing confronts set structures of literary domination. However, she also exposes “bad English” as a force that unites minoritized and postcolonial subjects. Drawing inspiration from Gregg Bordowitz’s ideas on radical art, Hong denotes that using “bad English” as a “way of speech,” a *form* that decenters whiteness both in content and craft, allows for cross-cultural communication and an interracial disruption of “literary imperialism.” Writing and centering “bad English,” then, is an exposing and rebellious act, and it is a reparative act in nature. As Sedgwick concludes in “Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading,” an understanding of reparative practices opens readers to “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150-151). Furthermore, on the reparative turn, Wiegman claims, “reparative reading revises the political meaning and affective environment of the critical act” (7). Psychologists Eduard Moreno-Gabriel and Katherine Johnson extend Wiegman’s claim and state, “More precisely, the reparative turn involves opening up analytical strategies so that these become more sensitive to aspects of experience hitherto downplayed by dominant critical practices” (104). Reshaping how reparation extends to practices of literature and language, I argue that Hong’s engagement with “bad English” is an active reading and writing strategy that “extracts sustenance” from the neoliberal lingua franca. Through this engagement, she weaponizes the language to expose dominant cultures and “sensitively” self-analyzes minor and dismissed “aspects of (her diasporic) experience”—both within the Asian diaspora and among other marginalized groups.

Hong openly presents “bad English” as not just a created way of speech—her own deconstruction of English—but a *learned* way of speech that reflects her Korean upbringing. She declares, “Because I grew up around bad English, I was bad at English” (92). Although born in LA, she had an upbringing in a Korean community and thus spoke mostly Korean. Any English heard in “K-town” was “short, barbed, and broken: subject and object nouns conjoined in odd marriages, verbs forever disagreeing, definite articles nowhere to be found” (92). This portrayal of language as “odd” and in constant “disagreement” affirms that this “K-town” English was nontraditional and fractured, and Hong explicates she was “bad” at English because she assimilated these speaking techniques. Because of this linguistic absorption, she affirms her youthful self fell into the binary trappings of educational hierarchies: where mastery is “good” and splintered language is “bad.”

As hooks advances, “I know that it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize” (*Teaching to Transgress* 168). Hong herself notes in later sections of *Minor Feelings* that, as a younger student, she too internalized the values of literary imperialism, as she would cite “modernist heavyweights like James Joyce and Wallace Stevens” as influences instead of Asian American modernist writers such as Theresa Cha (171). Thus, even within her experimental, modernist writings, the limiting regime of English that she tried to fracture and dismantle were defined and inspired by white male canonical authors.

For Hong, who aligns with hooks’ description of an oppressive English, to poorly speak English as a minor subject is to leave oneself exposed and at risk, and she most clearly recognizes this within her own family. On her father’s use of the word “love,” Hong details:

Early on, my father learned that in America, one must be emotionally demonstrative to succeed, so he has a habit of saying “I love you” indiscriminately, to his daughters, to his employees, to his customers, and to airline personnel. He must have observed a salesman affectionately slap another salesman on the back while saying, “Love ya, man, good to see you!” But because there is no fraternizing *man* or slap on the back, his usage has an indelicate intimacy, especially since he quietly unloads the

endearment as a burning confession: “Thanks for getting those orders in,” he’ll say before hanging up the phone. “Oh, and Kirby, I love you.” (93-94)

Hong portrays English as a performative measure of one’s cultural worth and one’s ability to succeed, and she reflects the cultural fissures that arise out of solely assimilating at the linguistic level. She explores how her immigrant father absorbs English to adapt, but the emotional detachment—the lack of “fraternity” or “affection”—renders a sense of “indelicat intimacy.” While she notes “I love you” is one of her father’s tools for survival, Hong emphasizes the awkward fracture that arises out of the “burning confession.” Similarly, she characterizes her mother’s English as “a crush of piano keys that used to make me cringe whenever she spoke to a white person,” in contrast to her Korean, spoken in a “sharp, witty and judgmental, if rather self-preening” fashion (98). She later recounts, “As my mother spoke, I watched the white person, oftentimes a woman, put on a fright mask of strained tolerance: wide eyes frozen in trapped patience, smile widened in condescension” (98-99). Hong depicts the judgmental and patronizing nature of this white woman’s reaction by through face’s “strained tolerance,” painting the woman’s exterior portrayal of intellectual superiority. She presents herself as “cringed” when her mother speaks to a “white person,” presumably by the auditory dissonance but also by the expected white person’s reaction—one of confusion and condescension. Yet, the juxtaposition of her mother’s Korean and English—where a “sharp, witty, and judgmental” voice is replaced by the disagreeable sound of crushed piano keys—illuminates an important psychological change in Hong: she recognizes her mother’s sharpness and emotive abilities and acknowledges the limiting *cultural* expectations of “good” and “bad” English preventing a full expression.

This linguistic discrimination by white supremacist structures—where literary English is hailed as “good” while Korean and “bad English” are hailed as “bad”—engender feelings of racial melancholia in the Asian American child. Employing Kleinian theories of object relations, Eng and Han contend that under regimes of language discrimination, the ideal, “beautiful” mother of infancy

is lost as an ideal object and psychic splitting occurs: the linguistically “unattractive” or “injured” mother is transformed from a “good” to “bad” racial object (58). Hong presents that an accented English engenders minor feelings of shame and embarrassment within her own childhood self, marked by her “cringing.” As a result, “through the shaming of [her] mother and mother tongue,” Hong’s *own* Korean language, culture, and identity become “alienated,” “dissociated” and transformed into a “bad” racial object, encouraging the good/bad polarization of English and Korean (59). She feels that employing English as a connective tool only further alienates her family and avows:

As a poet, I have always treated English as a weapon in a power struggle, wielding it against those who are more powerful than me. But I falter when using English as an expression of love. I’ve always been so protective of making sure that my family’s inside sounds didn’t leak outside that I don’t know how to allow the outside in. I was raised by a kind of love that was so inextricable from pain that I fear that once I air that love, it will oxidize to betrayal, as if I’m turning English against my family. (101)

Speaking in a critical lane—where English is a political and academic “weapon”—Hong feels more than adept. Her “protection” of her family’s sounds casts English as already carrying the weight of othering, shame, and belittling. The “inside” sounds, an auditory image that connotes fragmented or accented language, cannot “leak outside” out of a fear that a white audience will hear the language as deformed or embarrassing. The “outside” sounds, perhaps a “good” English, are separated from her family—polarizing the “good”/“bad” English and her Korean/American identities. Because of this melancholic polarization, Hong presents herself as incapable of speaking English “as an expression of love.” Love’s “inextricability” from “pain” speaks to her family as marked by lineages of trauma,

and “airing love” through a hegemonic English will only enhance feelings of separation and alienation, ultimately “betraying” her Korean family and the heritage of her adolescence<sup>3</sup>.

Importantly, this intergenerational fracture is only enhanced by a displacement of language possession, where the Asian American diasporic subject is disposed of their Asian linguistic inheritance by virtue of English’s dominance in the US. The loss and disavowal of Asian language resulting from whiteness’s denigration of Asian linguistic practices is an additional form of racial melancholia, which is further engendered by the traumas of assimilation. English, the only language left in the Asian American subject’s possession, is exclusively legitimated as “good” when one’s use of language assimilates into white literary regimes of perfect grammar, limited accent, and attention to linguistic context. Thus, wielding “bad English” becomes an important site for repairing this racial effect; as Eng and Han suggest, “The reinstatement of lost and loved objects in a racist world that would not have them encompasses the productive capacities of racial melancholia” (62). Reclaiming “bad English” as a powerful use of language—rather than the shame-inducing exercise that caused the melancholic loss of the mother/Korean identity—allows for a reintegration of the “loved” object/mother. As a result, there is personal racial reparation for Hong, where Korean and American/English are depolarized and resistant to a dichotomy of “bad” and “good.”

This reparative writing, then, provides Hong with a political avenue to push back against cultural hegemony, specifically the judgment engendered by “bad English.” She relays, “I have been partly drawn to writing, I realize, to judge those who have unfairly judged my family; to prove that I’ve been watching this whole time” (99). Beyond redefining a melancholic relationship to English, she uses writing as an authoritative act of redefining power. She takes her gathered “seen” criticisms

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<sup>3</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter 3, Eng and Han melancholic models delineate that love is more fraught for Asian Americans than hooks’ *All About Love* models would suggest (a thread also followed by Hong in “Bad English”). Because of this, I seek out the ways that hooks’ love-based models open the potentiality for movement beyond melancholia as pathological, and how these same models materialize a loving and productive melancholia (a critical combination of hooks’ and Eng and Han’s models).

and reshapes them into tools to “judge those who have unfairly judged my family”—notably, the people who enable racial and ethnic othering. *Minor Feelings*, as an “Asian American reckoning,” is itself a text that explicitly judges: Hong’s prose deconstructs historical systems of oppression and dismissal that engender “minor feelings” and enable the racial triangulation of Asian, Black, and white subjects. Yet, in what ways does a craft of “bad English” judge? Does it not leave Hong and others *more* open to judgment from equals and other writers composing in and succeeding in preset avenues of craft?

One “judgment” of “bad English” arises out of an acknowledgement of English’s cultural limits but also, more important to opening creative lanes of thought, a consideration of English’s possibilities. Drawing on the ideas of poet Nathaniel Mackey, Hong articulates that she wants to artistically “other” English—which “has to do with innovation, invention, and change”—to resist the nomenclature of the social “other”—which “has to do with power, exclusion, and privilege, the centralizing of a noun against which otherness is measured, meted out, marginalized” (qtd. in Hong 97-98). By reworking the linguistic possibilities of English, Hong is performing Mackey’s theories of semantic transformation—preventing the loss of her poetic “power” and authorial “privilege” to structures of hegemony and literary imperialism. Hence, Hong exclaims, “My method of othering English is to eat English before it eats me” (98). There is a temporal, dooming quality to English—the language is made monstrous, seeking to “eat” Hong, connoting that she will be socially “othered” by English’s dominating qualities. Nonetheless, she presents her own resistance, noting that she wants to absorb then fracture the malleable structures of English and “other,” or reinnovate and reinvent, the language. Hong’s rhetorical methods fit within hooks’ discourse of the “oppressor’s language,” where the oppressor construct a rhetorical “territory that limits and defines” and “shame[s], humiliate[s], colonize[s].” Consequently, this act of resistance grants her creative agency as she breaks the “oppressor’s language” in anticipation of any induced shame or inferiority.



Yet, Hong presents herself as distinctly paranoid—characterized by her future-orientation and hyperawareness of the *potential* pain that language can ensue. Instead, a healing and reparative “judgment” arises when Hong’s methodology of “bad English” is read beyond just breaking English. Rather, it can be read as a reassembly, or, circling back to Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson’s language, redescription of English itself. On her “companion poem to Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan,’” which she describes as an “epic narrative poem in my own invented pidgin,” she discloses: “I wanted to pull all the outside Englishes inside and drag inside English outside. I wanted to chip away at the pillar of poetry. More than chip. I wanted to savage it” (100). She continues to use violent diction to portray the destruction of English’s linguistic features—noting a desire to “savage” the overarching poetic structures; however, she also materializes her reshaping through “outside” and “inside” English, which respectively symbolize marginalized, othered English and literary, imperialistic English. Thus her “pidgin,” and her reconstructed English, not only breaks the “pillars” of literature but redefines the power hierarchies of craft itself by placing “outside” and “inside” English on a level playing field.

Through this transition of “inside” to “outside,” margin to center, Hong delineates a reparative way to resist literary imperialism. In “‘Pure Craft’ is a Lie,” Salesses imparts that

The argument that one should know the rules before breaking them is really an argument about who gets to make the rules, whose rules get to be the norms and determine the exceptions...Writing that follows nondominant cultural standards is often treated as if it is “breaking the rules,” but why one set of rules and not another? What is official always has to do with power. (6-7)

Salesses notes that to *break* the rules of craft, one must first claim and uplift hegemonic structures as the “rules.” Furthermore, in following or breaking the understood expectations, the “empowered” structures of writing remain set in place as overarchingly dominant. In recentering an “outside English,” then, Hong is not just resistant and anticipatory to the damaging effects of colonial English but strategizing ways to redescribe the fundamental form of English—where “bad English”

can exist alongside “good English” as a producer of poetic meaning. As Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson avow:

Within a reparative approach, the critics’ attention is displaced from exposing and deconstructing the impersonal but harmful effects of given cultural objects while seeking to broaden their understanding of what these have to offer. (105)

Crucially, it is not to say that “the impersonal but harmful effects” of certain cultural objects, such as English, are disregarded; Hong is, by no means, disregarding or effacing the colonial effects that English can impose. Rather, there is a shift towards understanding the cultural and linguistic possibilities of a “bad English,” or in hooks’ words, the “alternative cultural productions” and “alternative epistemologies” that they provide. Where Hong’s “eating” and “savaging” resist English as an all-consuming imperial power, her active pulling in of “outside” English is a redescription of the creative avenues which English, both “bad” and “good,” can provide.

Although Hong’s redescription opens creative play within English, she remains hesitant and asks, “Was it sufficient enough to break English to point out how ill-fitting it was?” (100). While Hong never explicitly answers her own rhetorical question, she acknowledges this conundrum by examining the creative, communal, and reparative effects of both her created “bad English” and preexisting “outside” or “bad English.” She recognizes that the spoken English within diverse and minoritized communities has empowering effects, where a sharing of language practices grants subjects minor agency while opening new communal experiences. One form of “bad English” which she explores is profanity, a form of socially “bad” rather than grammatically “bad English.” Her examination of the expletive reveals that a sharing of coarse English words materializes varied intercommunal bonds across borders and races, and within her own family. On cursing, she puts forth:

The immigrant’s first real introduction to surviving in English is profanity. When my cousins came over to the United States, I immediately passed on a cache of curses to them to prepare for school. My uncle said he used to start and end all his sentences with “motherfucker” because he learned his English from his black customers when

he was a clothing wholesaler in New York. My uncle, a profane and boisterous man, has since returned to Seoul and keeps up his English with me. (93)

Hong exposes that “surviving in English,” and thus surviving in America, requires new techniques—one being the use of profane and “bad” language. There is a necessary “immediate” shield which profanity provides: for example, the ability to defend oneself in school settings. Yet, in sharing her localized experience with profanity, Hong suggests that there is a reparative consequence here where the minoritized “selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance” from profanity, an example of what Sedgwick denotes as a disavowed “cultural object” (150). And, by uplifting the distinct power of the profane language itself, Hong roots herself within hooks’ transgressive pedagogy. In the conclusion of her chapter “Language,” hooks expresses: “To recognize that we touch one another *in language* seems particularly difficult in a society that would have us believe that there is no dignity in the experience of passion, that to feel deeply is to be inferior, for within the dualism of Western metaphysical thought, ideas are always more important than *language*” (174-175; emphasis added). There is a cross-cultural connection formed between Hong and her cousins, and her uncle and his Black customers, where they “touch one another in language” and in profanity. It is their distinct sharing of culturally disavowed, yet “passionate,” language that opens the possibility of resistance to assimilatory pressures and traumas. As a result, Hong advocates for the counter-hegemonic and reparative work of hooks, Wiegman, and Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson, among others, where the healing and solidifying effects of linguistic practices “downplayed by dominant critical practices” can be uplifted.

Hong, however, does not just recognize the community building that arises out of “bad English” but participates in constructing cross-cultural solidarity through the transnational sharing of grammatically “bad English.” Within her essay-chapter, Hong details the way she deconstructs and warps English, such as the invented pidgin of her intertextual poetry, but also details the “collecting” of East Asian miswritings—what she deems as “Engrishisms,” a term that mimics and

criticizes the stereotyped East Asian accent of Western media. As aforementioned, an effect of US linguistic and cultural imperialism within Asian nations is the transformation of “natives” into “outsiders.” This phenomenon enables mistranslations of English to become gags that other and distance global non-native English speakers, even in their own nation, and these “Engrishisms” becomes tools of racism and discrimination (96). Yet, while Hong acknowledges the racism arrives out of English’s colonial spreading, she simultaneously (re)grants agency to these global subjects by surfacing the poetic meaning, whether intended or unintended, in their “Engrishisms.” On this harvest of mistranslation, she declares:

I steal these lines and use them in my poetry. Take the phrase “I feel a happiness when I eat him.” It has all the traits of a surprising poetic line. A familiar sentiment is now unfamiliar because chance has turned Error into Eros. That needless “a” is crucial since it tweaks the tone into a slightly sinister animatronic pitch while indicating that the lover is not awash in happiness but feels happiness at a remove. Like an extra tooth, that “a” forces open a bead of uncertainty, or cold reflection, while she takes into consideration her happiness. She is not sure why she is happy, but she is, as she eats him. (96)

While Hong approaches this phrase through the traditional, literary strategies (noting the tone, the emphatic effects of “that needless ‘a,’” the emotive traits of the nameless narrator), she also explicitly broadcasts its “surprisingly poetic” nature. This instance of “bad English” is recast from scurrilous and othering to rich in poetic meaning via Hong’s simultaneous “close reading” and reparative “surface reading.” In “close reading,” rather than overtheorize the social and cultural context of this phrase (she already lays the racist colonial foundations which purport “bad English” as lacking intellect), Hong is getting closer to the transnational subject: she illuminates the “literality” of the “Engrishism” while empathetically “devoting extreme care for the object” (Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson 106). And, in “surface reading,” an “ethical and affective” practice that “involves experiencing cultural materials in their ‘pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy,’” Hong is decolonizing these lines and surfacing the affective, poetic nuances that can arise from a reparative reading position (Sontag qtd. in Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson 106). In “stealing” these objects and

embedding them in her work, she continues to wrench “outside” English inwards—resisting the hegemonic placement of “bad English” as an othered literary form and a tool of racist exclusion.

Hong establishes that transnational sharing and reinterpretation of English further enables racial solidarity by resisting the contemporary “stay in your lane” politics. In radical US political spheres, there has been a strong demand for “reparative action to compensate for centuries of whites’ plundering from non-Western cultures.” Yet, a concomitant of this political demand is that activists, writers, and artists who conjoin themselves to liberating movements must “speak only from their personal ethnic experiences” (Hong 101). To metaphorize this shift of “racial identity” to “intellectual property,” Hong writes on a literary market economy: in this “economy,” racialized art is commodified for white authorship/readership and forcefully purified and ignorant of “the messy lived realities in which racial groups overlap” (102). This reshaping of identity into property, for Hong, detracts from liberation efforts, for “instead of decolonizing English, we are carving up English into hostile nation-states” (102). Eng and Han’s triangulation of Asian, Black, and white persists in this market economy, but more importantly, there is disunity within the Asian American diaspora precisely because shared lineages of trauma and exclusion are viewed as separate rather than parallel. Against this economy of segregated pain, Hong argues for a literary gift economy, where instead of hoarding “intellectual property,” or racialized stories, minoritized subjects must take advantage of the “immeasurable value of cultural exchange.” She propounds, “The soul of innovation thrives on cross-cultural inspiration. If we are restricted to our lanes, culture will die” (102). To “enliven” culture and “innovatively” enrich racialized discussions, Hong asserts there must be sharing across minoritized groups, for creative and political action occurs best within cohorts of interracial and international solidarity.

This collection of “bad English,” while solidifying, does not advocate for the homogenization of multicultural voices and experiences. Rather, in referring to Trinh Minh-Ha’s

idea of “speaking nearby,” Hong champions spotlighting the “gaps” between the racialized experiences of writers of color, noting the relational information that can be drawn out of these open spaces. Trinh’s argument of “speaking nearby” speaks to larger arguments for interracial and international solidarity, which have been foundational to postcolonial transnational feminist politics. Cross-border alliances have been most necessary for cultural artists of developing and postcolonial sites who must build transnational solidarity to gain the critical mass to be heard at the global level. Thus, for Hong, “speaking nearby” is an explicitly reparative strategy that she is drawing from this critical lineage to construct interracial and cross-ethnic alliances across minoritized American communities. On “writing nearby” to Rodrigo Toscano, a Latino American poet, for example, Hong puts forth: “I can’t speak for the Latinx experience, but I can write about my bad English nearby Toscano’s bad English while providing gaps between passages for the reader to stitch a thread between us” (105). The “stitching” of marginalized works and “bad English” arrives in direct contrast to a distinct splitting or separating of minor experiences. It positions the racial histories of “bad English” as, referring to Eng and Han, *relational*. Returning to Eng and Han’s exploration of Winnicott’s transitional space and “thirdness,” this salient, experiential gap “allows us to approach race not as a fixed object, not as a fixed thing with an essential nature, or an intractable and frozen binary of white-black, of good and bad” (88). While siloing and conjoining racial experiences is a reaction to whiteness— “it’s easier to understand, easier to brand”—situating oneself in Trinh’s relational “gaps” expose both the overlying racialized “threads” of stories while enabling individual artists to retain their creative and social agency (Hong 104). Viewing race and language as relational avoids the “frozen,” polarized and hegemonic splitting engendered by white literary hierarchies, allowing for minoritized groups to unite in uplifting othered voices while seeking liberation and pleasure out of dismissed cultural objects.

Following the critical trails of Wiegman, and Sedgwick before her, Hong reveals that a racialized “moving toward ontology and ‘finding intimacy with our objects of study’” further enables the construction of reparative solidarity (Wiegman qtd. in Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson 102). For Hong, the power of “bad English” comes in its “chewy syllables” and “interactive diction,” as it forces a reader to engage empathetically: “If you want to truly understand someone’s accented English, you have to slow down and listen with your body. You have to train your ears and offer them your full attention” (104). The interactive, embodied nature of “bad English”—“slowing down” and “[listening] with your body” to construct and reveal Trinh’s experiential stitches—encourages a localized, empathetic engagement with the fractured language. There is a plea here, one that aligns with Sedgwick’s own critiques of critique, to not revert to critical, deconstructive perspectives—where a paranoid splitting driven by a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (i.e., between minoritized groups, subject/object, self/other, epistemology/ontology) reaffirms “accented English” as “outside English.” Instead, in offering a minor subject “full attention,” there is an ethical shift: in “listening with your body” and “close reading,” historical discrimination of accented speakers is not disregarded (it is perhaps brought to the forefront), but an intimate and sensitive attention to “bad” or “accented English” transforms what Wiegman calls the “affective environment” of hearing/reading “bad English” (7). The negative affects of shame and guilt, and the “practices of mastering, judging, categorizing, or rejecting experience,” are sidestepped through an “ethics of kindness,” where the listener/reader experiences what these racial, cultural objects “have to offer” (Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson 102, 104).

A decolonizing, cross-cultural engagement with widespread practices of “bad English” and global “Engrishisms,” then, is more than an act that illuminates misshapen English’s poetic power: it is a movement towards communal racial reparation. Hong puts forward that Asian diasporic subjects like herself are world historical subjects, and that the shared experiences of linguistic and cultural

othering between native and diasporic subjects bleed across borders. Rather than “break the rules,” which as Salesses persists still hierarchizes a white literary form, she breaks the restrictive identity “lanes” and “speaks nearby” to an alternative, global experience with “bad English” or an “Engrishism”—ultimately claiming these phrases as poetic and literary objects. As a result, she creatively resists the market logic that racial and national identities are purified and distinct, but rather she sees these collected transnational fragments of “bad English” as sensitive gifts that open affective and artistic possibilities. As she writes on Asian individuals who actively, yet unknowingly, wield “bad English” on their clothes and signs: “I thought, I have found my people” (97). This cultural re-reading, where “bad English” is given agency rather than dismissed as a humorous gag (where she sees “what they have to offer”) builds ethnic and multicultural and transnational solidarity; and, in “close reading,” she is, as Moreno-Gabriel and Johnson insist, getting closer to the subject and constructing empathetic bonds. Where “good English” still deforms, others and excludes, “bad English” is “ethical” and “kind.” “Bad English” not only reshapes the “good English” that has violated it but meaningfully transforms it, pardons it, parallels it, and transcends it.

An ethical engagement with “bad English” is also an act of psychic and racial reparation for Hong, as there is a literal reintegration of the lost object into her writing: the lost homeland and the “bad English” it supplies is mixed within her own created and learned “bad” and “good English.” Eng and Han formulate racial reparation as a “loosening” process that resists dichotomies of love/hate, subject/object, and white/Asian (97). Here, a racial reparation in a linguistic context also resists good/bad English. A creative play and allocation of English enables Hong to decolonize English, centering marginalized vernaculars alongside an empathetic attunement to linguistic objects of a “lost” national homeland. A note of importance is that the “lost” homeland here is not strictly Korea, for signages of “bad English” arise from across East, South, and Southeast Asia. As a result, the reclaiming of a lost racial homeland that transcends a singular ethnic group—and one that



conjoins the Asian American diaspora at a language-oriented crossroads—allows for dynamic solidarity. This reparative strategy enables Hong to shatter ethnicity siloes and claim agency to “speak nearby” and build cross-ethnic allyship across Asian America, a necessary move to avoid the drowning of individual groups. In affirming her position within the diaspora, Hong is positively reshaping the shameful, melancholic attachment to English enforced by the assimilatory pressure of discriminatory language politics.

Although Hong is cognizant of the multitude of healing pathways that arise from the “bad English” form, her relationship to healing aligns in similar ways to Stephanie Foo’s and Esmé Wang’s, the key authors of Chapter 1. Hong is critical of the discourse of healing as a one-way path—a model of “get to the other side”—but rather exposes that the trauma of assimilation and language discrimination rarely dissipates in its entirety, and English occasionally washes over trauma’s cyclical nature. In a subsequent chapter of *Minor Feelings*, “Portrait of an Artist,” Hong recollects on the experience of reading Theresa Cha’s *Dictee*, a canonical Asian American text that inspired Hong in theme and “experimental” form. She recalls that *Dictee* differed from other Asian American fiction and poetry because its style, specifically the deconstructive language, felt true and genuine, where other Asian American fiction felt “inauthentic” and “staged by white actors” (154). In reminiscing on her discovery of *Dictee*, she claims:

I thought maybe English was the problem. It was certainly a problem for me. English turned an experience that should be in the minor key to a major key; there was an intimacy and melancholy in Korean that were lost when I wrote in English, a language which I, from my childhood, associated with customs officers, hectoring teachers, and Hallmark cards. Even after all those years since I learned English, I still couldn’t shake the feeling that to write anything was to fill in a blank or to recite back the original. Cha spoke my language by indicating English was *not* her language, that English could never be a true reflection of her consciousness, that it was as much an imposition on her consciousness as it was a form of expression. And because of that, *Dictee* felt true. (155)

For Hong, English lacks affective complexity—exemplified by English’s turning of “minor key” moments into “major key” moments. A “true” English, one that follows Cha and *Dictee*, reveals that

English is always a substitute for the more “intimate” and “melancholic” native language. This “true” English is also not “staged” by whiteness but is rather reflective of the language’s hegemonic qualities and “imposed” traumas—both the discriminatory usage by “customs officers” and “hectoring teachers” and the expected linguistic assimilation of “Hallmark cards” and other American cultural objects. These are traumatic elements that are infinitely embedded in the foundations of the language, and Hong admits English will never be a full substitute for the native language.

Nonetheless, Cha’s English is, foremost, “true” *for* Hong and reflective of the authors’ Korean American, feminine allyship, and the “truth” of “bad English” arises from its potential for molding diasporic, transnational, and cross-ethnic solidarity. Hong’s goal with “bad English” is not to efface histories of linguistic trauma and “recite back to the original.” It is to critically acknowledge that the English enforced on Asian diasporic, postcolonial subjects is “*not* [their] language” and that repairing a relationship to English, or constructing new, positive relationships *out of* “bad English,” enables a reparative transition. Hong exposes that the “lived experience” of writing and reading “bad English,” where a public and cultural reproduction surfaces its counter-hegemonic qualities, is, harking back to hooks’ transgressive models, “fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation.” This transition, the movement away from negative affects towards positive communal solidarity, ignites the liberatory power of these postcolonial language rituals. Hong’s “bad English” strategies—which are constructed upon commemorated foundations of language deconstruction—free marginalized writers of colors from white “literary imperialism,” instead forging new empathetic traditions that can speak “truthfully” for personal reparation *and* “nearby” a variety of ethnic and racial groups.

### Chapter 3: The Tangled Melancholies of Transracial Adoption

Today, when I'm asked, I often say that I no longer consider adoption—individual adoptions, or adoption as a practice—in terms of *right* or *wrong*. I urge people to go into it with their eyes open, recognizing how complex it truly is; I encourage adopted people to tell their stories, our stories, and let no one else define these experiences for us.

— Nicole Chung in *All You Can Ever Know*

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I spotlight and analyze the self-writing of Korean American Nicole Chung and explore how Chung uses her memoir *All You Can Ever Know* (2018) to frame her own explorations of love, community, and psychic negotiations. I focus on Chung's memoir to uplift the voice of a transracial adoptee, a member of a noteworthy realm of Asian America that has yet to be discussed in my project. My framing and psychoanalytic understanding of transracial adoption arises from David Eng and Shinhee Han's book chapter "Desegregating Love: Transnational Adoption, Racial Reparation, and Racial Transitional Objects." Within "Desegregating Love," the two scholars focus on a Korean American *transnational*, transracial adoptee, Mina, and extend their foundational ideas of racial melancholia by considering Kleinian reparation and Winnicott's ideas of transition. Eng and Han explore how "problems of racial melancholia between first-generation Asian immigrant parents and their second-generation American-born children entangle intergenerational processes, influenced and configured by the social forces of history" (67). These melancholic processes are presented as not just embedded in the ego—*intrasubjective*; they are also *intersubjective* and external—presented via the negative affective responses of ambivalence, shame, anger, and hate that come from an engagement with lost histories, parents, families, and communities. In contrast, the melancholic adoptee which Eng and Han describe, Mina, is suspended from the "intergenerational and intersubjective process" of communal melancholia and experiences a form of psychic isolation. "Such a failure of recognition threatens to redouble racial melancholia's effects,

severing the adoptee from the intimacy of the family unit, emotionally segregating her, and obliging her to negotiate her significant losses in isolation and silence,” establish Eng and Han (79). Moving away from isolated melancholia, they notice how disrupting affect dichotomies (i.e. love/hate) through racial reparation—a topic covered in depth in Chapter 2—allows for Mina to initiate her own turn towards repair. Reparation in Mina’s psyche arrives, for Eng and Han, from the reappropriating of hate or envy as productive. This adjustment occurs through “spoiling of whiteness...a kind of fixed racial palimpsest”: a psychic movement that allows for the Korean heritage to be treated as “good *enough*,” rather than the perpetually “bad” racial object (96-97; emphasis added).

Where this model of reading and psychoanalyzing adoptees is limited is in its need for a love/hate dichotomy defined by racial divide. This model refuses to inquire into the love/hate and burrowed good/bad objects that exist *within* racialized adoptee experiences (the white adoptive family, the racial birth family, or, with Chung, her discovered Korean community). The “good enough” model pushes back against “dominant constructions of adoptees as either well-adjusted or maladjusted, happy or angry,” but does not consider intersubjective communal possibilities that arise from racial reparation and depolarized affects (Kim 9). Given Asian adoption’s historical foundations of religious nationalism and, what adoption studies scholar Arrisa Oh coins as, “Christian Americanism,” reclaiming love and community is especially powerful in adoption self-narratives. In the introductory chapter of *To Save The Children of Korea*, Oh tracks the rise of “Christian Americanism” in the 1950s and contends “Korean adoption took off while other forms of international adoption did not is because only Korean adoption had a leader like Harry Holt, a lumberman and farmer from Oregon... Holt was the father of what became the international adoption industry... More important, he became the inadvertent figurehead of... Christian Americanism” (8). Led by Harry Holt’s dominant presence in Korea as a figurehead for

transnational adoption, Christian Americanism molted into a “powerful religious and patriotic ideology... a way for Americans to participate in their country’s Cold War project of proving its racial liberalism” (8). Oh puts forth that “the languages of humanitarianism, rescue, and colorblind love first deployed in the service of Korean adoption have persisted, and they continue to shape conversations and politics around the practice of international [*and* transracial] adoption today” (9).

Other adoption studies scholars, like Eleana J Kim, align with Oh: “Transnational, transracial adoption is often invoked as the actualization of ideals of humanitarianism and the promises of multiculturalism, and adoptees are regarded as potential representatives of postnational [*and* postracial] cosmopolitanism” (8). Kim pushes beyond traditional methods of adoption studies, frameworks which rely on measuring the “adjustment” of adoptees or a “developmentalist framework that understands adoptee adjustment and acculturation to be part of an individualized process of moving from ‘preadoption’ traumas of loss and biological rupture into the ‘postadoption’ phase of adjusting to normative kinship structures” (9); Kim, an anthropologist, preferably argues “for the importance of understanding adult adoptee narratives...as socially and historically specific responses to common experiences of displacement and disidentification” (8).

Establishing myself in a contemporary adoption studies scholarship, I use this chapter to explore how Asian American models of racial melancholia can be disentangled through “adult adoptee narratives,” specifically the personal memoir. In *All You Can Ever Know*, Nicole Chung aligns with Oh and Kim and declares that, in her youth, few adoption stories “ever showed what happened *after* tears or the hugs or the accusations, when people had to cope with new knowledge, to move forward—and choose whether to build a relationship from nothing since the moment of the rupture” (74). While she “saw the appeal of such [simple]” adoption stories, she “longed for stories in which the unvoiced questions, the quiet drama of the everyday adopted experience, did not remain so unexplored” (74). Thus, I turn to Nicole Chung’s narrative accounts, where she exposes

her written answers to the “unvoiced questions” of triumphalist and dichotomized adoption stories, to both explicate and cumulate reparative themes explored across this honors project. At the same time, I analyze Chung’s memoir as a representative text that arises out a broader Asian American literary transition towards love-based communities, and I present her own intersubjective pivot towards a racialized, love-based model.

Reflections on racial melancholia are becoming key constituents of understanding affect and self-writing within Asian American studies, and an exploration of racial melancholia saturates this thesis and the following chapter. As suggested in my introductory chapter, racial melancholia is a racial and psychoanalytic model minted by Anne Anlin Cheng that builds off Freud’s classical 1917 essay on “Mourning and Melancholia.” The pathological melancholic, in contrast to the mourner, can never “get over” their loss, and “loss is denied as loss and incorporated as part of the ego” (Cheng 50). “As a model of ego-formation (the incorporation *as self* of an excluded other), melancholia provides a provocative metaphor for how race in America, or more specifically how the act of racialization, works,” establishes Cheng (50). In incorporating the lost (racial) object into the ego and identifying with the ghastly object of loss itself, the racialized melancholic consistently confronts postracial, colorblind American cultural memories and histories of “exclusions, imperialism, and colonization” (50). These mementos, notably, run diametrically opposed to the “American narrative of liberty and individualism” (50). As David Eng and Shinhee Han contend in their explorations of racial melancholia: “The racial subject, like any other subject, can speak only in and through a long history of prior race relations” (19).

Yet, because of its Freudian origins, the racial melancholia model appears as a pathological condition. This diagnosis has been subject to pertinent questioning within the scholarly landscapes that blend Asian American studies with critical race theories and psychoanalysis. In “The Melancholy of Race,” Cheng corresponds, “Melancholia has thus seeped into every corner of our

landscape. Is there any getting over it?” (56) In their text *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, Eng and Han call for of viewing melancholia from an ameliorating perspective (“Is there any getting over it?”). Instead, reshaped race-driven psychoanalytical theories can be used to understand racial melancholia as what Raymond Williams call “a structure of feeling,” or an essential affective unit of everyday life. In attempting to depathologize racial melancholia—a reparative shift that collapses clinical depictions of people of color as “forever injured and incapable of being ‘whole’”—Eng and Han respond to Cheng’s question and surface melancholia’s *productive* capacity (61). Eng and Han argue that Freud’s delineated mourning is “unethical” and “perfectly content to kill off the lost object, to declare it to be dead yet again within the domain of the psyche” (63). To contrast, the ethical and political productivity of racial melancholia lies in the subject’s inability to let go of the lost object. This refusal is a consistent protest by the ego to preserve the lost object within the realm of the psyche. “Racial melancholia thus delineates one psychic process in which the loved object is so overwhelmingly important to and beloved by the ego that ego is willing to preserve it even at the cost of its own self,” profess Eng and Han (63). This “cost” arises through the expression of negative affects—cited in *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation* as ambivalence, anger, rage, shame, and hate—but can be resolved intrasubjectively through racial reparation and, as I subsequently demonstrate, intersubjectively through communal and love-based models.

My project brings to light the intricate mosaic of reparative, intrasubjective models of analysis and self-writing present in several recent Asian American memoirs. These narrative methods exist as both praxes of healing and coping from trauma, illness, and grief but also as modes of renegotiating melancholic tendencies. For Eng and Han, productive melancholia arises out an “aggressive and militant preservation of the loved and lost object,” which expresses itself through the “ambivalence, anger, and rage” of self-preservation and survival (63-64). These scholars also present that transitional objects and reparative transition—an ultimate reworking of the good/bad

dichotomy of racial melancholia—initiate psychic movement but also open the potentiality for *intersubjective* reparation. Then, as Eng and Han avow: “...the genealogy of racial melancholia as individual pathology functions in terms of larger communal group identities contingent of the vicissitudes of history” (65). Communal mourning and national melancholia—the formation of racialized group identities based off the “vicissitudes” of American histories—engage an ability for “social recognition as a racial collective” (64-65). Yet, if this community, whether familial or constructed, is severed and lost, in what ways can reparation occur? How can rituals of repair endure as both tools of intersubjective renegotiation and intrasubjective reparative transition. By considering expanded (and love-based) ideas of communal repair, this chapter responds to Robert G. Diaz’s inquiry surrounding an Asian American reparation. In his explorations of repair, Diaz asks: “Assuming that reparation has often been a method for surviving and living against elision, for asserting a presence deserving of recognition, or for coping with insurmountable losses, what might the potential for an expansion of reparation’s meanings and enactments hold for us?” (7).

My conceptions of love-based models are foremost inspired by and beholden to bell hooks’ advocacy for love. In *All About Love*, hooks exclaims that “all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic” (xix). But, hooks declares that young people, with a similar cynicism of Sedgwick’s “paranoid scholars,” think “love is for the naïve, the weak, the hopelessly romantic” (xix). Similarly, love made hooks’ older friends and associates “nervous or scared” and they were “frightened of what might be revealed in any exploration of the meaning of love in our lives” (xix). As hooks profoundly draws out in her introduction:

Only love can heal the wounds of the past. However, the intensity of our woundedness often leads to a closing of the heart, making it impossible for us to give or receive the love that is given to us. To open our hearts more fully to love’s power and grace we must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice (xxviii-xxix).



Then, building from hooks and framing her ideas within the Asian American melancholic model, I contend that love-based paradigms are effective tools of self-writing but also affirming modes of race-based scholarship. In the concluding remarks of my initial chapter, I put forth that Stephanie Foo's and Esme Weijun Wang's devotion to self-love through alternative healing methods enables their care writing. In these restorative connections, the authors are granted a healing agency that opens a "path of healing" outside paranoid biomedical and psychiatric superstructures and beyond racially melancholic tendencies. Via these (self-)loving strategies of healing, they can vitally seek hooks' redemptive, communal love (144).

Thus, in this chapter I frame Chung's memoir within recent scholarship on Korean American adoption, Eng and Han's racial melancholia models, and the love-driven affect theories of bell hooks to determine how productive and ethical melancholia for Chung arises out of positive, love-based intrasubjective analysis alongside the negative (yet valued) affective responses of ambivalence, hate, shame, and anger. I also proceed to question: in what ways do intrasubjective love (self-love) and interpersonal love (communal love) overlap in their literalized roles as reparative tools within *All You Can Ever Know*? I establish that, in her examinations of the colorblindness, racial discrimination, and "Christian Americanism" found within her childhood, Chung scripts the way a colorblind love—a form of care that aligns with Frank Chin's and Jeffrey Paul Chan's "racist love"—redoubles her racial melancholia and impedes the opportunity for racial reparation. Then, by reexamining her "lost" family legacy and building new familial bonds with her "lost" sisters, Cindy and Jessica, Chung justifies a need for love sovereignty and, using hooks' frameworks, a loving connection. These networks of love resist and release adoption-induced paranoia and galvanize a healing movement away from adoption traumas. Ultimately, I present that *All You Can Ever Know* uplifts an interpersonal love-based model of self-writing that resists burrowed, adoptive traumas

through family reconstruction: a reparative gesture that materializes the productivity of a communal melancholia and opens a capacity for repair.

### **A Redoubling by Colorblind Love**

In the subsequent section, I explore Chung's portrayal of colorblind love and parenting, a narrative depiction that aligns with Oh's Christian Americanist argument. Moreover, I read Chung's transracial adoptee narrative as a complication of hooks' "All About Love" discourse, for when love itself is anchored in racism, white supremacy, and racial invisibility, it becomes, what Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan define as, "racist love." For Chin and Chan, "The unaccepted model is unacceptable because he cannot be controlled by whites. The acceptable model is acceptable because he is traceable. There is racist hate and racist love" (65). Racist love operates at its supremacist heights when it "results in the neutralization of the subject race as a social, creative, and cultural force. The race poses no threat to white supremacy. It is now a guardian of white supremacy" (67). While Chin and Chan's model is reductive for reading an adoption narrative—it fails to consider the loving power that *can* arrive in transracial relationships—it provides a necessary framework for understanding Chung's racial reckoning. *All You Can Ever Know's* opening sections expose that love for Asian American adoptees is always, as Chin and Chan suggest, a racialized love, and the adoptive parents' love is (presented as) white love. In negotiating the complexities of a falsified colorblind love, Chung exposes the ways a misused rhetoric of care and religious nationalism reinforced and, citing Eng and Han, "redoubled" her racial melancholia—exacerbating her intrasubjective feelings of racial loss and isolation.

Chung's memoir repeatedly considers the impact of a lore-driven perception of her birth family, and the attached folk stories of her adoption, on the creation of her identity. This is most prescient in Part I, where Chung recounts, using the language of Eleana Kim, her parents' and

family's dialogue of "humanitarianism, rescue, and colorblind love." Chung begins her memoir with a declarative statement about the legacy of her Korean birth family: "The story my mother told me about them was always the same. *Your birth parents had just moved here from Korea. They thought they wouldn't be able to give you the life you deserved*" (3). Her mother continues by expressing "*The doctors told them you would struggle all your life. Your birth parents were very sad they couldn't keep you, but they thought adoption was the best thing for you,*" to which adolescent Chung—who "knew [her] line"—responds "*They were right, Mom*" (4). This homogenous story, one that was seeped with sentimentality and "told and told again," is fundamental to Chung's understanding of her adoption and the legacy of her adopted and birth family. It also serves as the foundation upon which Chung builds her self-writing. The story, and the relations around this act of storytelling, create an environment of scripted "love": the imagined, yet lost, birth family loved Chung "from the start," yet her parents were "meant to adopt [Chung]" and she was their "gift from God" (4-5). This "love"—one that prioritizes the nobility of her birth family and the underlying religious motives of her family—brought young Chung comfort and served as an object to return to when feeling "lost or alone or confused about all the things [she] couldn't know" (5).

The prevalence of this story in Chung's childhood, while presented as essential to her youthful coping mechanisms, was simultaneously detrimental to and reinforcing of Chung's feelings of racial melancholia. "Family lore... can form the bedrock of another kind of faith, one to rival any religion, informing our beliefs about ourselves, and our families, and our place in the world," declares Chung (4). Yet, how does Chung contend with and repair her communal and familial losses when family legacy and "lore" conflicts with palpable experiences or enhances negative affective responses? When questioned about her adoption, Chung used her own adoption narrative as "one way to gain acceptance," and the myth served as an "excuse for how [she] looked, and a way of asking pardon for it" (4). Chung became subject to this "love"-soaked narrative (she was her

parents' "gift from God") and, in this objectification, she lost a sense of racial agency. She had to "excuse" and "pardon" her Koreanness or gain "acceptance" for not being white. And while her birth family's story was devoted to "love," Chung scripts her parental relations as arising from a colorblind, dismissive affection—one that absolves her parents from reckoning with Chung's racial position, and one that engendered feelings of shame and severance from her families.

Chung's relationship to her adoptee status is often defined by feelings of confusion, specifically those surrounding her relationship to the family unit, her insecure racial position, and the resistance towards set polarized affects. When asked about her relationship with her parents—"if there had ever been *any issues*... Had [she] ever *minded*... not being white, like [her] parents"—Chung emotively describes that she "felt something like panic, the sudden shame of being found out" (6). The language of fear that saturates Chung's response is not due to her "being found out" as adopted (she reaffirm this fact quite often); rather, it is the fear of "being found out" as "almost *white*" yet, like Homi Bhabha propounds, not quite (7). In being interrogated if "*any issues*" arose from her racial difference, Chung is asked to contemplate how her othered status both inundates her familial relations but also encourages a polarization of racial love and hate. Eng and Han's readings of transnational, transracial adoption contemplate the ways that colorblindness and deracializing adoptees incites "affective cleavage" within the adoptee: love/hate are split across racial borders, where love is assigned to the ideal whiteness and hate is assigned to the othered Koreanness. Chung responds to these models of racial melancholia by contemplating the question of "not being white," and its potential impact on her identity: "Did I *mind* not being white? It amounted to asking if I minded being Korean; *yes, I minded*, or *no, I didn't mind*, both seemed too mild for how I'd felt" (7). The question of minding, then, requires a severance within Chung's psyche: she must either "*mind* not being white" and "[mind] being Korean," or she must be indifferent about her social position.

The position of indifference that Chung describes is dissatisfying to a full understanding of her interior racial conflict; rather, she presciently insists:

The truth was that being Korean and being adopted were things I had loved and hated in equal measure... Sometimes the adoption—the abandonment, as I could not help but think of it when I was very young—upset me more; sometimes my difference did; but mostly, it was both at once, race and adoption, linked parts of my identity that set me apart from everyone else in my orbit. (7)

For Chung, there is no splitting. “Race and adoption” serve as coalesced forces that engender feelings of othering, exemplified in her cited position of feeling out of her community’s “orbit.” More so, her narration reveals that there is an *equalizing* of love and hate in her considerations of her racial and adopted position. To separate these affects dismisses Chung’s lived, racial history as a person of color and Korean American—she *minds* being Korean—and thwarts any genuine feelings of “real love” she has for her family (7).

Lines of questioning that force Chung to separate love/hate across racial borders and traditional modes of nuclear kinship dissuade the reparative position—a psychic space that suspends static racial associations with polarized affects. These inquiries also efface and remove blame from childhood histories of colorblindness. Chung expresses, “All parents have ways of saying things about their children as if they are indisputable facts, even when the children don’t believe them to be true at all. It’s why so many of us sometimes feel alone or unseen, despite the real love we have for our families and they for us” (7). If these “indisputable facts” overwrite loving modes of kinship—for example, in transracial adoptions, discourses of racial invisibility—it can lead to feelings of “social and psychic isolation” (Eng and Han 78). Chung writes that these “facts,” which are instead scripted and fictionalized statements, can enhance, disrupt, or efface realities of identity confusion:

In childhood, I was uncertain who I was supposed to be, even as I resisted some of my adoptive relatives’ interpretations—both *you’re our Asian Princess!* and *of course we don’t think of you as Asian*. I believe my adoptive family, for the most part, wanted to ignore the fact that I was the product of people from the other side of the world,

unknown foreigners turned Americans. To them, I was not the daughter of these immigrants at all: by adopting me, my parents had made me one of them. (7)

Adoption, for Chung, serves as a form of erasure. In adoption, Chung became “one of them” in rhetoric but remained distinctly racialized—“*you’re our Asian Princess!*”—or actively *deracialized*—“*of course we don’t think of you as Asian.*” The language of ignorance and a refusal to cast Chung as Asian leads to her “uncertain” adolescent state: she is skeptical of “who [she] was supposed to be,” and what social and racial role she was supposed to fill. More so, she is, by “fact,” “one of them.” In this, she becomes a subject of the rescue- and colorblind-oriented language of stereotyped transracial (and transnational) adoption narratives—and Chung is subject to, returning to Eng and Han, a postracial “collective denial of difference” (Eng and Han 79).

Chung also, alternatively, reframes herself under a discourse of commodification and false familial assimilation. Adoption studies scholar Arissa Oh boldly states, “Adoption commodifies children, in rhetoric and reality” (11). Chung feels uncertain—both in her social roles and in her kin relations—because her particular adoptive discourse is tinged by a lack of national and racial agency; she is either dollishly cast as a “*Princess*” or dismissed of any biological ties to Korea. Rather than exist as a “product of people from the other side of world,” an objectified state that acknowledges her ethnic and racial history, she is “made” into “one of them.” She is forcefully cast into the family, assumed as “*almost white*,” but remains racially invisible. Crafting herself in almost perfect alignment with Eng and Han’s isolationist models, Chung implores, “I had always felt like the much-adored but still obvious alien in the family. I knew we didn’t always make sense to other people. And of course my adoption, the obvious explanation for it, was right there, but I could never bring myself to reference it” (12). There is an evident tension in Chung’s early self-writing in that she finds herself drawn to postracial tendencies—a desire to not reference her transracial family structures even if their origins “were right there”—but recognizes her “alien” self. Most of all, in self-classifying

“alien,” Chung surfaces her internalized notion that she is a persistent foreigner, regardless of her parents’ “loving,” humanitarian avowals. Eng and Han dictate that a failure to recognize the Asianness of a transracial adoptee “threatens to redouble racial melancholia’s effects, severing the adoptee from the intimacy of the family unit, emotionally segregating her, and obliging her to negotiate her significant losses in isolation and silence” (79). Chung later asks, “How could I explain what it had been like? How my presence in my family, and especially I the town where I grew up, had often made so little sense to me?” (13). While Chung was “much-adored”—contesting Eng and Han’s assertion that there is intimacy severance—she is incapable of unraveling deep-seeded sentiments of confusion and isolation. Perpetually trapped and surrounded by discourses of invisibility, even within a rhetoric of familial “love,” she offers this emphatic question to expand upon feelings of communal severance. Lexicon of “normalcy” prevents Chung from accessing a mode of racial reparation as she is consistently bound to commodifying, deracializing language—which “redoubles” racial melancholia and authorizes communal alienation. Hence, there is a need for love sovereignty: an escape from Chin and Chan’s “racist love” (or, a love steeped in racial invisibility) which allows for Chung to love and be loved on her *own* terms.

### **Releasing an Adoptive Paranoia**

Asian adoptee narratives have been lacking in consideration of this liminal response to colorblind love—where love and hate are not racially split but equally shared across racial communities. Rather, these narratives place adoptees under “individualized,” “developmentalist frameworks,” where negotiating “pre-adoption” traumas and assimilating into new “post-adoption” family structures are seen as separate, successive events. As I outlined in the introduction, love-based frameworks are becoming ever present in the self-writings of Asian Americans, and this transition is crucial for intrasubjective analysis. An inherent function of productive melancholia is to

love the lost object endlessly and wield that love as a mechanism to remain somewhat intact with lost cultures, languages, and homelands. Yet, as made clear in the prior section, expressions of Christian Americanism redouble racial melancholia and obstructs opportunities for racial reparation—depriving the transracial Asian American adoptee of racial agency and racial love.

Moving forwards, I argue that racial self-love, an affect that exists in opposition to racial hatred, shame, or anger, requires a racialized community. This contention is a complication of love driven affect theories, like those of bell hooks, and persists that healing is not simply *about* love or catalyzed under loving conditions but explicitly requires a racialized love. Chung's love-based model arises from a recollection of her loved-based communities, and, more specifically, her active work in constructing these communities. While her criticisms of colorblind love saturate the entire memoir, Chung's work towards healing arrives when she moves towards an alternative and oppositional model of non-colorblind love, or a *racialized* love model.

In her adoption narrative, Chung resists psychic splitting and rather aligns herself with Eng and Han's exemplary model of intrasubjective *and* intersubjective analysis—or, under hooks' lexicon of love, a combination of self-love and communal love. The opening of intersubjective, communal love allows for love to be felt out of isolation, disabling a redoubling melancholia and its ensuing severance. Instead, as hooks attests:

Whenever we heal family wounds, we strengthen community. Doing this, we engage in loving practice. That love lays the foundation for the constructive building of community with strangers. The love we make in community stays with us wherever we go. With this knowledge as our guide, we make any place we go a place where we return to love. (144)

Where colorblind parenting exhausts the ability of racial reparation, it also perilously transforms love into a lost racial object. There is then a need for love sovereignty: to not just be adored and “one of them” but to feel “the love we make in community” and self-love on one's own terms. hooks advances that, in that love, a new homeland (“a place where we return to love”) is not just crafted



but transported. This only arises out of intersubjective feelings of love and in “[healing] family wounds,” which gives rise to intrasubjective imbedded love: a push towards repair. I first contend that Chung achieves this movement and builds a loving community through reconnecting, and actively writing for, her biosisters: Cindy and Jessica. In the subsequent section, I suggest that she embraces hooks’ “love ethic” and promotes intergenerational healing and racial reparation through an altered relationship with her daughter. In this relationship, she sustains racialized love—a care that acknowledges her and her daughter’s Korean blood ties—as a way of countering intergenerational and adoption traumas.

Chung initially introduces Cindy, one of her two biological sisters, by writing from her perspective. This stylistic choice is a way of literalizing her sister’s thoughts, providing Cindy with textual agency and depth, but is also an initial step of creating community. While imagined, Chung’s presentation of Cindy uncovers their overlapping, often melancholic, qualities. Positioning herself as an omniscient narrator (presumably using Cindy’s true experiences), Chung chronicles how Cindy attended schools that “were very white,” and Cindy “knew she didn’t quite fit in” (57). Similarly, “When she did see other Koreans... she didn’t feel entirely at ease with them, either” (57). Like Chung’s split racial feelings, Cindy feels torn between these two cultures—a “doubling of difference”—and she is scripted through uneasiness and displacement (Eng and Han 44). Unlike Chung, however, Cindy travels globally via her work in the Army and eventually settles in Korea, a return to her native homeland. Yet, feelings of displacement, confusion, and paranoia move across borders alongside her: “Cindy was fascinated by everything in Korea, especially all the Korean people. Sometimes she was filled with an undeniable sense of homecoming, or maybe just a sharp longing for it, yet she knew she was no longer Korean *enough* to belong here. She was an outsider, an American, and had been for a long time” (59). Feelings of joy (“an undeniable sense of homecoming”) are underwritten and disputed for Cindy falls back on her “outsider,” “American,”

status as the driving force in failing to be both “good enough” and “Korean *enough*.” Melancholia, for Cindy, engenders intranational and international displacement, where neither diasporic communities or native communities feel accepting or suitable for racial reparation. It also reproduces itself, at least in this passage, as pathological: Cindy’s mourning of the lost culture and homeland is not ever resolved, even in direct attachment to that object. The loss becomes assimilated and seemingly irremovable, creating greater feelings of isolation.

In an earlier section of *All You Can Ever Know*, Chung persists that speculative writing—“imagining a world [she] could not see in [her] white hometown”—became both a survival strategy and “defiant and hopeful act” (41). She relates, “I found a measure of previously unknown power as I envisioned, in my own stories, places where someone like me could be happy, accepted, *normal*. My self-drawn heroines weren’t alone, and I didn’t have to be, either” (42). Chung’s choice to literalize Cindy as a pseudo-heroine of her novel is replicating her childhood survivalist methods. In Cindy’s story, Chung commands the “previously unknown power” to repair her *own* life narrative through imagining her biosister’s life. Envisioning Cindy’s story serves as a mode to move away from speculation and imagination, and instead Chung gives reality to the childhood narratives of self-sustenance. This is akin to the work of other memoirists discussed in this project—Stephanie Foo’s heterodox healings arise from a (re)imagining of her life story through the perspective of her younger self, building a form of self-empathy and interdimensional community. Chung’s storytelling, like Foo, engages the possibility of a community, even if that community arises first as an imagined cohort crafted through storytelling. Cindy’s and Chung’s shared affects, the melancholic, isolating feelings that they “[don’t] quite fit in” or they are not “good enough,” become clear through an active imagining of the sisters’ experiential overlap. Chung’s translation of childhood storytelling into her adult self-writing conventions becomes a keyway in which she locates sites of repair,

methodizing that *she* “can be understood only through sustained attention to race and racial difference” in order to *become* a “subject of (racial) history” (Eng and Han 95).

Although not identical (for Cindy is not an adoptee), these shared *racial* experiences are what enabled the formation of loving bonds. hooks elaborates on these linkages in her chapter “Healing: Redemptive Love” and deems them as moments of “communion”: “While it is definitely true that inner contentedness and a sense of fulfillment can be there whether or not we commune in love with others, it is equally meaningful to give voice to that longing for communion. Life without communion in love with others would be less fulfilling no matter the extent of one’s self-love” (213). hooks, once again, draws a border between inter- and intrasubjective love but, preeminently, she understands that love in isolation, while fulfilling, is a side effect *of* community. When Chung is notified of Cindy’s existence, she records, “I’d long known that I had sisters... I tried to imagine them, again, and was unable to picture a single woman who had my eyes, or my smile, or my laugh. But they were out there, somewhere” (96). Closed off from any racial communities and severed from her birth family by the closed adoption, Chung finds it impossible to “imagine” a sister (or mother) who looks like her phenotypically. Building off the work of critical race theorist Cheryl Harris, Eng and Han disclose that “Race is as much about skin color and physiological markings as it is about a wide range of disparate social and psychic experiences of segregation and assimilation, absence and belonging, integration and dissociation, inclusion and exclusion” (9). Racial belonging arises from a sharing of racial histories, so Chung seeks healing and reparation in not just the lost object, which seems too far removed or is actively expunged, but in a parallel or mirrored object, like Cindy and her birth family. In these new connects, she can “see the faces of [her] closest relatives,” “know their names,” and “envision hundreds of gossamer-thin threads of history and love, curiosity and memory built up slowly across the time and space between [them]” (Chung 80). These acts

depathologize melancholia and open up its “productivity”—the ethical hold on the desired, loved, yet lost, object—allowing for a movement towards “self-love” and healing, fueled by “communion.”

In reifying the lost object into “relatives” and “names,” and marking these with racial histories, love, and memories, Chung believes that she will transition away from adoptive paranoia towards a place of closure. So, when Chung interacts with Cindy for the first time via email and they share pictures of their likeness, Chung recognizes that “no one who saw [Chung and Cindy] together would doubt [they] were sisters” (119). In this likeness, she immediately recalls,

I thought of my years in Oregon, my white school and our white neighborhood, all the times I’d wished I could just talk to someone who looked like me. My longing for Korean family, for people who understood, was one of so many things my adoptive parents had not been told to expect; the day I came home from school and told her how much I wish I knew other Asians stuck in my mother’s memory precisely because it had surprised her. I didn’t mention the bullies, but I didn’t have to—as someone who loved me, she felt uneasy just knowing that I noticed. Eventually, I had learned to stop voicing such thoughts. What could my parents say about it? What could they do? (119).

Cindy’s likeness, their “sisterly,” genetic similarities, appeals to Chung because there is a base instinct that she is one of the “people who understood”: an individual who shares a similar, but not identical, history of discrimination. In rhetorically questioning what her white parents could (not) share, Chung also insinuates what Cindy “*could* say about it” or “*could* do” in relating her own racial history as a Korean American (emphasis added). Cindy is also described as feeling paranoia-induced disconnect. The existence of her adoptive sister was hidden from her, and, even when revealed, it was told through shrouded truths: “*Our parents told us that you died. I have heard two versions of the story since we found out about you, and it could be both are untrue or only one is true*” (118). Beyond biosisterly connections, the sisters’ childhood *and* adult experiences are paired through feelings of detachment and paranoia: a blurred state of questioning where family histories and myths are simultaneously hidden and unclear. This state is, however, not an insular feeling but revivifies the movement

towards a healing position. Paradoxically, Chung shares sentiments of *disconnect* with Cindy. In these mutual feelings, Chung finds similarity and recognizes her racial position within an Asian American racial history; she now knows “other Asians.” So, importantly for building intersubjective solidarity, she can, moving forwards, “[voice]...thoughts” that unravel her own social, racial, and filial position—unknowns that have, hitherto, overwhelmed her psyche.

This communication with Cindy, even if only digital, empowers Chung to notice “an openness in Cindy’s emails that immediately appealed to [her]” because she “took it as an early hint that we were alike, at least, in how our minds worked, or in valuing the truth” (120). She even records that Cindy unconsciously uses her nickname “Nicki,” which was “the name chosen by the people closest to me” (121). There is an innate attachment formed in this virtual interaction: it could be formed in their genetic ties (“we were alike... in how our minds worked”) but it is more likely that these networks of *racial* love enable, what Chung deems as, “openness.” Chung submits, “We were united, even if it was only in our curiosity and frustration at a lack of openness in our family” (120). At this time, closed adoption was still a norm and Chung presents the frustrations that flourish within the closed adoption system: “Why couldn’t we have talked on the phone, after we heard from my birth mother? Why couldn’t my parents have allowed her—me—that much?” (52). A substituent of Chung’s adoptive trauma is that she lacks jurisdiction over her own birth family history and genetic information; hence, in this moment, she desires to navigate her birth parent’s decisions and define her own domestic relationships (to both adopted and birth families). Chung stages the argument for love sovereignty by showcasing the disempowering fallout of closed adoption. Conjointly, she uplifts the reparative power of loving relations through her unifying portraits of Cindy (both those that are imagined and pragmatic). Chung and Cindy both experienced fractured and traumatic filial relationships, and the sisters’ shared “openness” paradoxically enables closure, and unity. Re-conferring on her love sovereignty, Chung uncovers that information hidden

or effaced in their childhood (the lost, misunderstood objects) becomes materialized through the choice to (re)connect and love, releasing both sisters from a state of paranoia. This choice is not necessarily against closure or closed adoption, a posture that succumbs to Kim's described pre-adoption/post-adoption split. Rather, Chung is determining what *is* closure and granting herself autonomy over her healing and reparative process, even if this reconnection choice is solely the initial catalyst towards her ongoing healing journey.

Chung escapes from and releases paranoia by actively constructing a kinship web of racial love, ultimately choosing to engage with the ethics of (racialized) love. On living by a love ethics, hooks postulates:

When we are taught that safety lies always with sameness, then difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat. When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other. (93)

For hooks, “sameness” presents a safety. Yet, this safety is in direct contrast with an ethical love. Chung's depictions of colorblind love expose the pitfalls of a safety of sameness, or the safety of effaced difference. When resisting the “fear” of “alienation and separation” (releasing paranoid feelings about her birth family, her racial status, and her position as a transracial adoptee), Chung opens herself to “connection.” Naming Cindy as the “other” appears contradictory given the sisters' biological relations, but it is evident that her racial history and experience misaligns with Chung. In their loving “connection,” Chung regards points of overlap between heterogeneous histories, permitting the biosisters to become “united.” This *choice* to connect is, as hooks explores, the choice to love, and the choice to seek out *racialized* love opens the reparative option to heal from past traumas.

A reshaped ethics of love that opens filial connection is, for the adoptee, a potent method of encouraging love sovereignty and recrafting false and discouraging models of love. When offered the

choice to hear “difficult things” about her birth family which could potentially disrupt her idealized family lore (which she later discovers is a euphemism for Cindy’s sustained physical abuse), Chung recounts:

I didn’t want to be disappointed. I had wanted to find my birth family for so long... I didn’t know what to make of my birth parents, but with Cindy, at least, I didn’t want to begin with lies and omissions. I didn’t want her to have to hide anything she had experienced or any part of who she was. Whatever she had been through, I wanted to know—to listen to and honor it. I didn’t have the inclination or energy to present a façade. What was the point of being reunited, being *sisters*, if were both still alone? (123)

Chung’s concluding rhetorical question extends the power of hooks arguments—love as the choice to resist fears of “alienation and separation”—but also reframes how hooks’ intersubjective “connection” breeds intrasubjective repair. As Eng and Han attest, “It is the naming of...losses that transforms difference into a politicized identity” (65). Rather than propagate “lies and omissions,” leaving both melancholic siblings isolated and “alone,” Chung’s choice to “listen to and honor” Cindy’s traumatic losses (or, the “difficult things”) resists multiple “façades”: the façade of the idealized birth family, the façade of racial “sameness” and homogenization, and the façade of adoptive reunions. These falsified ideals exist under rigid frameworks of good/bad—where reunions with the idealized, racialized birth family is an instantaneously good and healing moment for the adoptee. Rather, it is in Chung’s advocacy for sustained difference (the sharing of racial experience across a variety of Korean American perspectives) where a more complicated Asian American race narrative arises. As afore mentioned, within isolated melancholia there is a “suspension of...intersubjective processes” and a “loss of the communal aspects of racial melancholia” (Eng and Han 78). Alternatively, through engaging with a connected, loving, and productive melancholia, Chung deploys a psychic strategy that exposes the potentiality for familial, *intragenerational* healing.

Through fully connecting with Cindy, Chung, however, is continually exposed to the traumatic elements of Cindy's past: this exposure, while conducive to a loving connectedness, enlightens the harmful, potentially inherited, traits of Cindy's genetic past. After several conversations with Cindy, Chung shares more about her new bonds with her adoptive mother, and she reveals the horrific truth of Cindy's past: "Cindy had told me that our mother had abused her. I opened my mouth a few times to say this, but the truth felt stuck like a hard lump in my throat. It wasn't disbelief or even disappointment causing me to choke on my words. It was shame: shame that chilled me through" (124). Chung's somatic feelings of chilling "shame"—the "hard lump... causing [her] to choke on her words"—are evoked through a "disbelief or even disappointment" that her childhood idealization of her birth mother was false. In being incapable of sharing this harrowing fact with her adoptive mother, Chung mediates her "redoubled" melancholia, losing the idealized, fantasized image of her birth family in this traumatic recapitulation:

The hopes I'd harbored about talking with my birth mother, getting to know her—even the simple vision of us meeting face-to-face, embracing as parent and child—seemed so foolish now...Perhaps our mother *had* wanted to keep me, for reasons I might never know. But I would never again be able to think of her as someone I had been meant to stay with. I wouldn't imagine her looking at me with love on the last day she ever saw me. I'd picture her towering over my sister as a little girl, venting her anger and unhappiness on the small shoulders of a child who could not escape. (126)

This "imagined" mother-daughter bond of Chung's childhood ("*They thought they wouldn't be able to give you the life you deserved*") is subsequently tainted in Cindy's revelations. When Chung empathetically positions herself alongside her sister, her now realized doppelganger, she sees a past she escaped but her sister "could not escape." Trapped between two (false) "loves," an abusive love and a colorblind love, Chung's familial connection with Cindy transitions from cheerful and expectant to threatening of the "hopes [Chung had] harbored."



In this hopeless moment, Chung unveils another intersubjective connection across difference, repairing her relationship with her adoptive mother. Chung bares her epigenetic paranoia following the discovery of her sister's abuse: "What if there's—I don't know, a child abuse gene, and she passed it on to me and I hurt the baby?" (127). Her fear of her unknown inherited code begets her feelings of hesitancy and obsession, and she envisions a version of herself that is untrue. She focuses in on her "temper" and alleges that she is "not patient," plainly expressing intergenerational traits and, in a paranoid fashion, claiming them as inseparable from her own mannerisms. Yet, her mother pleads, "Nicole! You could *never* hurt your child. Or *any* child. You're going to love that little girl more than anything—don't ever doubt that" (127). Her mother's innate parental response arises in the emphatic final clause, encouraging that she *knows* Chung and understands her psyche through their familial affairs. Still worried, Chung whispers, "How do you know?" Her mother's response soothes Chung's shame: "Because I have known you your whole life,' she said firmly. 'Because I'm your mother.' And despite my fear, the guilt I felt for escaping my sister's fate, the lurking evils I now worried were part of my nature, I allowed myself to believe her" (127). Her mother's affirmative, repeated use of "because" permits Chung to both accept her "fear...guilt...[and] the lurking evils" while believing that she "could *never* hurt her child." This moment of maternal interpersonal relation is initiated in Chung's mourning (the loss of her idealized birth mother) but is markedly representative of Chung's complex loving associations—and her reparative movement to seek love across her vast family borders. Discussing the state of transnational and transracial adoption studies, Eleana J. Kim contends, "Most of the studies to date have privileged the perspectives of adoptive parents to examine how racial difference is negotiated and conflated with 'cultural' difference within the family and how parents rewrite family scripts to naturalize the 'artificial kinship' of adoption" (10-11). Chung actively resists writing on "artificial kinship" by providing a "[perspective] of adoptive parents" that substantiates *genuine*, love-based

kinship. On mourning and loss, hooks writes, “Love knows no shame. To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending. The way we grieve is informed by whether we know love. Since loving lets us let go of so much fear, it also guides our grief” (200-201). Modeling grief as a reparative affect tied to love, Chung rewrites Kim’s pre/post adoption traumatic split and transcends melancholic dichotomies. She exposes how a sustained, continued relation with both biological *and* adoptive families spurs the movement beyond the negative losses and affects of adoptive traumas.

### **“There’s no closure”**

Thus far, this chapter has explored how Chung’s narrative “involves a process of ‘return’ or excavation of personal history and past lives” (Kim 12). It has questioned how Chung’s discourse of false, deracialized love, and later racialized, “connected” love, is an active way of uncovering and reworking what Kim deems the “excess of relationships that ‘enchains’ the child’s givers and recipients and ‘haunts’ adoptee subjectivities” (12). Chung is, over her memoir, working through the melancholic “narrative discontinuities... proven to be central to the social imaginary of Korean adoptees whose expressive cultures and discursive practices often explore ‘loss,’ and the challenge of constructing identities and places of belonging out of bits and fragments” (Kim 12). Her ethical hold on past histories and legacies, a commitment to connected bonds, literalizes a Freudian “psychic strategy for living and for living on,” for in “the transferential aspects of melancholic identifications, Freud reminds us, ‘is the expression of there being something in common which may signify love’” (Eng and Han 86). Negotiating her relationship with Cindy through writing and dialogue, Chung opens herself beyond an isolated melancholia and reworks her trauma alongside her biosister—(re)enabling the healing force of communal melancholia.

When Chung becomes a mother, her reworkings of legacy become muddled in that she no longer disentangles familial “narrative discontinuities” but must construct and rework a *new* family legacy. In the concluding chapters of her memoir, Chung discusses her daughter Abby’s curiosity with adoption: “She is...beginning to understand my adoption, in the words and stories I’ve given her. She was barely four years old the first time she asked me, ‘Mama what does ‘adopted’ mean?’” (200). While Chung attempts to describe the technicalities of adoption, she “watched [her daughter] frown” and “began to doubt whether my carefully worded definition made sense to her. It had seemed as good a place as any to begin, but was she, after all, too young to hear it or understand?” (201). This meditation on doubt, a repeated thought process in Chung’s self-writing, is exasperated when she sees her daughter’s frowning response to her openness and vulnerability. Chung divulges that when it comes to adoption and the ensuing atonement, “*There’s no closure*” (201). Even if Chung finds a *moment* of closure with Cindy, Abby’s presence and curiosity reopens Chung’s earlier uncertainties surrounding her closed adoption. In the display of her family relations, Chung outwardly presents that love-based kinship breeds coexistent “openness” and “closure,” an anomalous simulacrum of Sedgwick’s reparative process that consistently moves between the depressive and paranoid/schizoid position. Chung later declares:

All the same, my adoption no longer feels like mine alone to wonder about, or not—if it ever was. It is part of my sister’s legacy, and our children’s, too. So I don’t try to convince my daughter that the way I lost one family and entered into a new one is entirely natural, that it was an uncomplicated happy event. (202)

Where her original ventures into her past were hers “alone to wonder about,” this redefining of legacy ensures that Chung’s story as a narrative of inheritance does not become saccharine (“an uncomplicated happy event”) or completely individualized. “It meant years of wondering and confusion for me; for her, it means she will know less about Korean culture than many other Korean kids whose parents were not adopted. It’s okay if she sometimes feels sad when she thinks

about that, about everything we've lost," elaborates Chung (202-203). The acknowledgment of intergenerational losses—the explicit fact that a disconnected sense of culture engenders “sadness”—makes adoption discussions seem taboo. Yet, in a mother-daughter connection not dissimilar to Cindy and Chung's sisterly union, repair opens in an admission to adoption's complexity.

Where the severed family unit sustains Asian American melancholia (a thread followed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2), a reclaiming and reinstitution of this unit opens the loving, productive, and ethical qualities of both melancholia and reparation. Expanding reparation beyond the coping with “insurmountable losses,” Chung surfaces how family construction is an indispensable facet of love-based models. Chung's new memoir *A Living Remedy* (2023) only confirms her devout interest in the power of family bonds, for she reflects on the grief, rage, and confusion of losing her parents to illness. Like *All You Can Ever Know*, Chung's new text seemingly ruminates on the complexities of a racialized love and a reparative love, reconciling how her own definition of family is constantly in flux. Chung's arrival at this reparative model is not a naïve move, or an easy move. As explored over the arc of this thesis, love-based and reparative models arrive through a willing engagement with the “weaker” or “localized,” rather than “strong,” moments of the memoirists' healing journey. Drawing on Silvan Tomkins' work on affect, Sedgwick discusses the “reach and reductiveness of strong theory”; regardless of “how well [strong theory] avoids negative affect or finds positive affect,” it operates and organizes a widespread and mimetic domain (134). In contrast, Tomkins reveals, “To the extent to which the theory can account only for ‘near’ phenomena, it is a weak theory, little better than a description of the phenomena which it purports to explain” (qtd. in Sedgwick 134). Where strong theories grow in power by “[ordering] more and more remote phenomena to a single formation,” weak theories *describe* the “near,” or local, “phenomena” rather than constantly and monopolistically anticipate negative affects. hooks also approaches this subject in *All About Love*,

where she acknowledges, “It is easier to articulate the pain of love’s *absence* than to *describe* its presence and meaning in our lives” (xxvi; emphasis added). Hence, in laying out these “weak” moments—emphatically not weak in healing power or affective evocation—the Asian American memoirist both offers and facilitates a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their reparative experiences and their social positions by approaching, rather than avoiding, the synchronous positive and negative affects embedded in their life stories.

In these same “weak” moments, the memoirist must reflect on and lay out their own personal and intergenerational traumas: a move that actively thwarts the reparative turn as solely subject to the US’ imperialistic ideological system. Repair needs not be just for “surviving and living against elision, for asserting a presence deserving of recognition, or for coping with insurmountable losses.” Repair is also not the antonym of paranoia: saccharine and naïve where paranoia is strong, negative, and suspicious. To arrive at love-based models and a reparative method is neither to wallow in trauma or sensationalize pleasure but to substantiate that “love in theory and practice” is equally about finding and narrating love (on sovereign terms) as it is about “[giving] voice [to] that longing for communion” (hooks xxix, 213). This project beseeches that expressions of reparation and love as easy, or simple, is refuted by the Asian American race narrative, which contests that loving is a constant displacement between understanding and *mis*understanding one’s everyday racial identity. It is in the process of a restructured and renamed reparation—the *loving* reparation that my project methodizes—where we see the potency of a productive melancholia. In naming and locating losses, the Asian American memoirist politicizes their identity; but, in empathetically reclaiming, repairing, and caring for the lost object(s), the memoirist pleads that localized pleasure, a *healing* pleasure, is an accessible and worthy affect.

**Coda: “It will take a little bit to become. Wait a bit”**

We may spend half our time wandering around, wondering what we’re even doing here, why it’s worth the effort. But living is an incredible thing, just to have been here, to have felt, if only briefly, the volume and depth of others’ empathy. I wrote, most of all, to tell you I have seen how good the world can be.

— Chanel Miller in *Know My Name*

This past winter, my family and I travelled to India. My memory of India (exclusively from a 2010 trip) is stained by the assaulting heat of summer Bombay and Rajasthan, sweaty clothes, braces, and a taxi trip with Mikey Dada to a fly-ridden chole bhature shack. This 2022 trip—a senior year return to the mother country, a visit to connect us to our rooted culture, and, perhaps most importantly, a chance for my adopted sister to see where she was born—had been delayed across the pandemic years. By the time we actually stepped onto the plane in the Atlanta airport, the trip felt like an afterthought: we were in India, but the anticipation had passed with the years of waiting. But, arriving in Delhi reinvigorated a newfound spirit and excitement. I found myself, a 22-year-old Indian American male who writes on the Asian American collective, in the “homeland”: the same metaphorical space that I refer to as a source of melancholia, a psychoanalytic Kleinian object that is embedded into the (racialized) ego, came to life. I could see, taste, hear (quite loudly), and smell (quite pungently) the milieu of my ancestral territory—*my* homeland.

My own psyche, however, altered rather quickly. The slow, melancholic feelings of dread and shame arose as we rode rickshaws, and ordered tandoori meats and naan; or, as my *father* (the only native Hindi speaker in my family) performed these acts. I didn’t speak the language of Delhi, or *any* language of India—unless my fractured Gujarati counts. In a way, I became a synecdochic subject for Asian American studies, practically a dimensionless cartoon that gives life to the diasporic and racial critical foundations of this Honors. Yes, English is a language of India, too. But separated by these linguistic fissures, I felt guilty. The years that I could have been studying my “home” language

were spent on the countless other endeavors which are offered up to an American boy. Paranoia crept in my conscious, a shadow that followed me across every honk-filled intersection and mirrored every sip of boiling chai. In this trip, I was supposed to find intimacy with and relate to a place that is embedded in my own genetic code and localize my own hypothesized diasporic experiences in a *real* place. The antagonistic thoughts filled my head: where the memoirs that I present are beautiful and rich, embedded with lively reparative processes, my memoir would be so short. Maybe just a Part I.

The startling, painful question finally arose: did a reparative model—this project’s expanded, racialized reparative model—have any substantial basis beyond the page? Determined to resist Sedgwick’s paranoid mindset, an obsessive turn towards the strong negative affect, I begin to seek out and collect, as coined by Cathy Park Hong, the “Engrishisms” littered throughout India. Having just spent months engaged with Hong’s “Bad English” ideologies, I sought out (perhaps obsequiously) a way to expand my own cultural limitations and understandings of English. Warped, engaging, and (under Western literary imperialism) “bad English” was found on signposts, informational booklets, advertisements. What initially felt silly and slavish became a surprisingly fruitful, and honestly entertaining, endeavor. The Indian “Engrishism” made shape of momentous historical tensions—the linguistic remnants of British rule clashed with the rising turn towards English in these dictional artifacts. A favorite of mine was found in a Jaisalmer hotel:



(Patel)

The classic British phrase “Keep Calm and Carry On,” an encouraging motto used to relieve the worries of UK citizens during World War II raids, is now remade into an auditory command. There is something enthralling about how “silence” becomes both a condition and an instructing verb, a way to be *and* a way to traverse. In isolation, “Silence on” imagines a biological switch; a simple translation to “be quiet.” But in conjunction with “Keep calm,” the somatic quality of the phrase moves from on/off to defining a certain form of movement: it is not just to be silent, but silencing is an actionable way of being. Not to mention, there is an archival tension at play in a postcolonial nation’s intertextual warping of their colonizer’s wartime slogan. This piece of paper is empirical evidence for the spreading of Western culture but also an example of a transnational, *intercultural* reinnovation—a fracturing of the oppressor’s own motto towards a new goal (even if that goal is just to maintain the serene atmosphere of a Golden City hotel).

Later in the Jaisalmer trip, my family ate lunch within the city’s fort atop a restaurant named “Little Tibet.” In the corner of their stained, laminated menu, I found my manifesto:





(Patel)

The food at “Little Tibet” was not just “made fresh” but it also “became.” Where the transitive “make” implies that ingredients are freshly jammed together to create a new foodstuff, “become” insists that the product was always there—it only need take its form. If we “wait” that “little bit,” that spiritual synthesis will arise. And the food was damn good, too.

My sister found this all to be very silly. I would try my best to defend my frivolous endeavors: “There is something so beautiful about treating these words as fact, as poetry, or as having meaning, and doing that all without treating the English as wrong or bad; just a *different* English.” Her reply was a disgusted “EW!” She is young, a teenager, and maybe once she read my work, she would feel different. But I think I am a little revolted too: maybe it’s the creeping viral paranoia saturating every cell. Reparative readings seem functional on paper but that “EW!” prescribes the readings as flimsy and simply facile.

At a recent book talk in DC, Stephanie Foo made eminent the need to resist “obfuscation” (Interview by Chow). As writers, as critics, as thinkers, and as Asian Americans, we need to plainly “name the thing” (Foo). This naming is a refusal of reparation as naïve or revolting or “merely aesthetic” or “merely reformist” (Sedgwick 144). It is a critical act that is equally expository and healing, political and individual. Reading these signages of “Bad English,” recording my *own* reinterpretations, is gleeful (or pleasurable, for cohesion’s sake) but it is not mild. I hope, if anything,

this project has uplifted the power of “naming the thing” while exposing that love-based and reworked reparative models are sensitive yet powerful modes for Asian American self-writing. “Naming the thing”—writing towards exposure—and seeking ameliorating affects of love and pleasure—writing towards repair—are parallel critical and self-analytical positions. We should read them as relational, political methods in tandem.

I end this project with a note to my paranoid inner voice, the self who might see this as schematic or naïve. The nihilistic feeling of “No one will read this,” or “None of this matters,” is inconsequential, even if it is overwhelming. In critically interpreting towards repair, hope, love, and exposure, I am flourishing in a necessary reparative ethics. This ethics is contextual—of the present times—and historical—inspired by those Asian Americans who have theorized before me. It is easy to feel that an exclusively paranoid critique will always overbear trauma narratives and race narratives. Yet, the Asian American reparative turn that I posit is forming and seeping into the modern institution. Look at the most recent Oscars: *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once* (2022)—an Asian led and directed film whose central ethos is to love one another—swept the major awards. One also need search no farther than the *New York Times* bestseller list or Goodreads book awards to see the saturation of these beautiful Asian American self-writings into a mainstream culture.

The final clause of the menu’s command— “wait a bit”—lacks a period and lacks finality. In the syntax construction itself, the chef seems to be pleading towards patience: the acceptance of incompleteness. Something is yet to come and restricting that arrival with the severing dot closes that ambiguous opportunity. This project is an archive of personal writings—a collection of angry voices, funny voices, inspiring voices—but is nowhere near a complete cultural collection. There is an abundance of empathy to be gained in writing on and reading the lives of others, and in the healing journey of the Asian American memoirist. With this thesis, I sought to engage with a diasporic memoir boom from a loving, intimate lens that I see as both scholarly and personally

affecting, but, as with all movements, change is continuous and never ending. One form of the Asian American reparative turn—unified in the memoir turn—is formed, and an expanded racial rhetoric is near. It will take a little bit to become. Wait a bit

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