

Anna Pehkoranta

Rewriting Loss:
Melancholia, Ethics, and Aesthetics in
Selected Works by Chuang Hua, Maxine Hong
Kingston, and Fae Myenne Ng



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UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

ABSTRACT

Pehkoranta, Anna

Rewriting Loss: Melancholia, Ethics, and Aesthetics in Selected Works by Chuang Hua, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Fae Myenne Ng

University of Jyväskylä, 2013, 173 p.

Diss.

This doctoral dissertation investigates the dynamics of melancholia, ethics, and aesthetics in a selection of Chinese American women's fiction. The corpus of the study consists of four prose narratives written by three different authors: *Crossings* (1968) by Chuang Hua, *The Woman Warrior* (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston, and *Bone* (1993) and *Steer Toward Rock* (2008) by Fae Myenne Ng. The study is comprised of four individual articles accompanied with a reflective introduction that illuminates the theoretical, methodological, and discursive context of the articles. While the theoretical framework of this dissertation is rooted mainly in sociologically oriented literary criticism, most importantly in Asian Americanist, psychoanalytical, and feminist critical practices, the study also shows a particular interest in the literary form and the aesthetic in the narratives it examines. It thus embodies a historically and materially engaged critical approach that also pays close attention to the literary and aesthetic character of the texts. Further, it recognizes the intimate relationship between literature and theory, suggesting that in Chinese American women's writing the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions of the text are often deeply intertwined. The study departs from the Freudian notion of melancholia as a pathological response to loss; instead, it understands melancholia as a politicized concept which offers an alternative to the postmodern rhetoric of postethnicity, and as a site where the realms of ethics and aesthetics effectively elide. Each one of the four original articles examines the subject of the study from a particular angle, accentuating a specific aspect of melancholia in the narratives it investigates. On the strength of this kaleidoscopic view on the subject at hand, this dissertation suggests that the selected Chinese American narratives are rewriting loss not only in the sense described above, but also by offering alternative readings of parts of American history neglected or lost in dominant historical narratives, and by rewriting personal and communal losses into fiction that actively participates in the production of new theory. The study argues that the selected works of fiction exemplify what could be termed an ethics and an aesthetics of melancholia, wherein the past is ever present in a fundamental way. In this vision, the dynamic of melancholia, in which the past is never completely lost or replaced by the present, becomes the very mechanism that constructs and maintains subjectivity, thus entailing a future that fully acknowledges its own historicity and its irremovable ties to the material histories of earlier generations. Finally, this dissertation suggests that melancholia is present in the selected narratives not only as an ethical or political construct, but equally as an aesthetic element that substantially adds to the ethical import of Chuang's, Kingston's, and Ng's fiction.

Keywords: melancholia, ethics, aesthetics, loss, Chinese American literature, Chuang Hua, Maxine Hong Kingston, Fae Myenne Ng, Asian American literature

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Jyväskylä, October 12, 2013

Anna Pehkoranta

LIST OF ORIGINAL ARTICLES

- I "Shifting the Center: Emotional Exile and the Aesthetic of Displacement in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*." In Tanfer Emin Tunc & Elisabetta Marino (eds.) *Positioning the New: Chinese American Literature and the Changing Image of the American Literary Canon*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, 69-82.
- II "Negotiating Loss and Betrayal: Melancholic Ethics and Narrative Agency in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock*." In Daniela Agostinho, Elisa Antz & Cátia Ferreira (eds.) *Panic and Mourning: The Cultural Work of Trauma*. Berlin & Boston: de Gruyter, 2012, 69-83.
- III "Surviving the Loss: Abjection and Hypochondria in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*." In Sämi Ludwig & Nicoleta Alexoae Zagni (eds.) *On the Legacy of Maxine Hong Kingston: The Mullhouse Book*. Berlin & Münster: LIT Verlag, forthcoming.
- IV "Displaced Desires: The Dislocated Self and Melancholic Desire in Chuang Hua's *Crossings* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock*." Resubmitted to *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, as requested.

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ABSTRACT

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1 INTRODUCTION: REWRITING LOSS, READING MELANCHOLIA

Loss, with its many faces, is deeply inscribed in the fabric of Asian American literature. Chinese American women's writing is no exception, but it does introduce a uniquely constituted set of questions associated with loss, one that is simultaneously of universal concern and specific to the historical, cultural, and gendered context of its production. In this dissertation, loss is understood as referring to a number of experiences pertaining to Asian American subjectivity, as the narratives under discussion suggest; loss may denote a racially based, historically defined loss or lack of equal civil, political, economic, and social rights or opportunities, a loss of a cultural past and a place of origin, a loss or absence of a loved person, or a loss of a coherent sense of self. This study delves into four literary texts written by three Chinese American women - *Crossings* (1968) by Chuang Hua, *The Woman Warrior* (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston, and *Bone* (1993) and *Steer Toward Rock* (2008) by Fae Myenne Ng - investigating the particular legacies of loss characteristic of these narratives through the notions of melancholic ethics and melancholic aesthetics. My analysis builds on a number of theoretical accounts of melancholia, rooted mainly in psychoanalytical, feminist, and Asian American critical practices. Melancholia, in this study, is not understood as psychological damage or a necessarily pathological condition as defined by Freud, but rather as a form of inner conflict that "opens up the radical indeterminacy of human desires and subjectivity" (Cheng 2009, 91) and may even entail psychic and emotional healing in certain socioracial dynamics. As the title of this dissertation suggests, each of the three writers included in this study are rewriting their legacy of loss in ways that are both subversive and deeply ethical. The ethical component in their writing is inextricably bound with the aesthetic vision displayed in the texts, and as I attempt to demonstrate in this introduction and in the articles included in this study, both are structured by an overarching sense of melancholia, its ambiguity as precisely the place where its transformative power lies.

Before turning to the novels, the primary object of investigation in this dissertation, I find it necessary to examine the concept of melancholia from a cul-

tural historical perspective in more detail. Melancholia, it seems, has inspired a number of theoretical analyses in cultural and social studies within the past two decades or so. I return to these theoretical accounts in more depth in later chapters, but for now it suffices to note that this recently resurfaced theoretical interest in the concept of melancholia crosses disciplinary boundaries and extends from gender studies to literary criticism and film studies. As such, it poses a compelling question that I wish to address here in an effort to provide a cultural historical and social context for my reading of the four novels. The question in need of addressing is this: why melancholia? What makes melancholia such a timely issue at present, and why did it become an acute theme in cultural and social theory around the turn of the millennium? Several of the novels examined in this dissertation are situated partly in the 1960s and seem to suggest that there was something inherently melancholic in the air in the 1960s United States, too, as the following chapters demonstrate. Hence, from the perspective of Asian American criticism the key question to consider is: what common factors might there be that resulted in the 1960s becoming a particularly melancholic era for Asian Americans and still continue to make melancholia a current issue in Asian American criticism today?

One answer to this might be that at present, there seems to be a heightened call within literary studies in general and in Asian American criticism, specifically, for more universally ethical perspectives instead of scholarship based exclusively or primarily on identity politics. Interestingly, a somewhat similar turn toward more ethical politics in the United States can be traced back to the 1960s, known as a decade that witnessed some of the unprecedented political changes set in motion by the civil rights movement, the second wave of feminism, the anti-war movement, the proliferation of student protests on university campuses, and the rise of environmental activism, to mention a few of the political movements that have since changed history. Asian Americans were involved in all of these forms of political activism, but at the same time they began to formulate a political agenda of their own, as the Asian American movement was taking its first steps in numerous cultural and political arenas (Wei 1993, 2, 11). As Elaine Kim (1982, 173) notes, the era of the Vietnam war and the civil rights movement signified for many Asian Americans an era of becoming increasingly aware of the necessity to articulate an Asian American identity that would take into account their specific position as Americans of Asian descent. Of all the channels for political activism available to Asian Americans during that period, it was the anti-war movement that played the most prominent role in raising awareness of the acute need to establish an Asian American movement, as it brought Asian Americans of different ethnic origins together and emphasized their shared "membership in a pan-Asian community" (Wei 1993, 2). Many of the political movements of the 1960s rested heavily on identity politics, as did the Asian American movement in its embryonic stages. On closer inspection, however, one may discern that the very beginning of the Asian American movement was in part motivated by a racially

constituted melancholic bind, which cannot be undone by means of identity politics alone.

To understand this melancholic condition and to comprehend why it is still relevant for Asian Americanist criticism today, it is necessary to examine the relationship between melancholia and ethics. It is my belief, as this dissertation suggests, that the concept of melancholia can provide important ethical insight not only to questions of ethnic identity and racial relations in the United States, but also to the different ways in which literature can function as a subversive practice – not from an ideological point of departure, but from an ethical one. The melancholic bind in which Asian Americans found themselves during the formative years of the Asian American movement has an intimate connection with the notion of racial abjection and the so-called model minority discourse which dominated the representations of Asian Americans as a racial minority at the time.¹ Although the roots of the model minority rhetoric can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century, the image of Asian Americans as a model minority gained new momentum during the 1960s, as a contrast to the militant African American groups of the time (Kim 1982, 177). The model minority thesis was first articulated in 1966 by social demographer William Petersen in his article “Success Story, Japanese American Style,” published in the *New York Times Magazine* on January 9 of the same year (Palumbo-Liu 2001, 216; Robert Lee 2010, 260). Other writers soon followed suit, juxtaposing the successful social assimilation of Asian Americans into American society against the failure of African Americans (Palumbo-Liu 2001, 216-217). At the core of the model minority rhetoric is the fact that it posits Asian Americans in the margins of American society, yet at the same time it presents them as models for other Americans (ibid., 214). This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion follows the logic of abjection, according to which the object is what is rejected from the self but what the constitution of the self necessitates (Kristeva 1982, 3-4; Li 1998, 6; Shimakawa 2002, 2). What is pertinent, here, for the purposes of the present discussion of melancholia is that the logic of abjection exemplified in the model minority discourse leaves Asian Americans in a melancholic bind, in which what is lost cannot be relinquished because the very nature of what is lost remains obscure. If to be recognized as American presupposes that one remains forever in the margins of what is considered American, identity formation becomes, at the very least, an ambiguous and troublesome process.

David L. Eng (2000, 1278) has argued that minority subjects “are all coerced to relinquish and yet to identify with socially disparate objects on their psychic paths to subjectivity,” to the point that such “ambivalent attachment to devalued objects” not only defines, but indeed comes to produce “minoritarian subjectivities.” Rather than examining melancholia as a pathological reaction to loss on the level of individual subjects, Eng discusses melancholia as a model for understanding subject formation at large with regard to racial minorities in

¹ Detailed discussions on the paradoxical yet intimate relationship between racial abjection and the model minority discourse can be found, for instance, in Li (1998, esp. 2-10) and Palumbo-Liu (1999, 395-416).

the United States. Suggesting that the melancholic ambivalence experienced by the minority subject can be seen as resulting from the melancholic's (in this case, the minority subject's) desire to preserve a lost object left unacknowledged by dominant society, he goes on to argue for a political reading of melancholia: "If, for instance, there is no public language by which a loss can be recognized, then melancholia assumes a social dimension of contemporary consequence that must be acknowledged and analyzed as a *problem of the political*" (ibid., emphasis mine). The most pressing question, for Eng, is why melancholia seems to haunt different minoritarian groups in particular; why is it that in contemporary American society, "women, homosexuals, people of color, and postcolonials" appear to have an increased risk of falling prey to melancholia and depression, thus having to "bear the greatest burden of unresolved grief" (ibid.)? If we are to find answers to this question, Eng suggests, we must begin by investigating melancholia as a politically charged concept.

Eng is not alone in his wish to politicize melancholia. In a similar vein, Jeffrey J. Santa Ana (2004, 24) calls for an affective understanding of racial politics in the contemporary United States, maintaining that "emotions of physical and psychological pain can be political and historical, especially in regard to oppressed minority people." The melancholic bind, in which racial minorities at large find themselves in the United States, mirrors the "schizophrenic" (ibid., 33) mindset of the minority subject who, according to Santa Ana, vacillates between the fashionably postethnic utopia of consumption-based assimilation and the memory of historical injustice (ibid., 24):

Faced with an identity that's wrought out of the pain and historical affect of living in a racist and homophobic climate, on the one hand, and the postethnic elision of such pain and identity in consumption-based assimilation, on the other, racial and ethnic minorities in a postmodern global era mediate between the communitarian emotions of history and the post-identity sensation of consumerist individualism.

It is precisely because of the intimate connection that exists between emotions and historical conditions that he sees feelings as politically charged and as essential to the formation of identity. If identification with a racial minority in contemporary American society is, as Santa Ana maintains, primarily "an affective process of articulating and resolving the contradictions between historically painful emotions and the euphoria of commercialized human feeling in consumer postmodernism" (ibid., 25), melancholia may appear both as an effect of the inner conflict produced by such disparate motivations and as an effort to reconcile and mediate between these two affective tendencies, between remembrance and forgetting. While it may be that consumer postmodernism creates a sense of euphoria and indifference that in itself constitutes a "mono-affect" that "restricts painful and materially expressive emotions," as Santa Ana claims, melancholia may offer an alternative to the empty dissolving of differences into sameness that characterizes the rhetoric of postethnicity (ibid., 23).² The

² Santa Ana refers to Fredric Jameson's (1984, 64) notion of the "waning of affect" which Jameson sees as symptomatic of the decentering of identity that characterizes the consumer postmodernism of late capitalism.

postethnic discourse, most often advocated by those invested in conservative political positioning, celebrates multiraciality and hybridity as epitomes of a new era, in which ethnicity along with other differences such as gender and sexual orientation becomes irrelevant as identities are based on cultural consent instead of racial difference, while equal economic opportunities are more readily available to anyone regardless of their racial background (Santa Ana 2004, 19-20; Singh & Schmidt 2000, 6). According to David Palumbo-Liu (2000, 766), the rhetoric of postethnicity posits individual economic rights above group or collective rights, ignoring how racial typing tends to overshadow individual identity for racial minorities, thus impeding their individual rights to economic justice. The postethnic ideology is symptomatic of what Palumbo-Liu (1999, 296) calls "vacillations of identification" characteristic of American society in the late twentieth century. These are dialectical shifts between two competing conceptions of race and national identity, more specifically between "a modernity in which race retains its negatively differential function" as the supposed foundation of the nation, and "a postmodernity in which a value-neutral 'hybridity' instantiates an ahistoricized symmetry in the place of similitude" (*ibid.*, 107-108). While the former is rooted in the persistent historical value of whiteness, the latter attempts to move beyond racial thinking but in the process denies the significance of material histories.³

Santa Ana's (2004, 25) alternative to the postethnic and postmodernist celebration of hybridity at the expense of material history can be conceptualized through the formulation of an "affect-identity," an emotionally constituted identity present in a significant part of Asian American literature published since the early 1990s. These narratives are non-assimilationist in the sense that they specifically address the difficult emotions and psychic pains arising from their characters' attempts to assimilate into the surrounding supposedly postethnic and multicultural consumerist society. By doing so, they express an emphatically melancholic attitude to the vacillations of identification that are taking place in those historical moments that are depicted in the narratives. Simultaneously, these texts manifest an intimate connection with immigrant history and the struggles and material conditions of immigrant ancestors, as Santa Ana (*ibid.*, 37) notes. The articles included in this study seek to demon-

³ David Palumbo-Liu (1995, 163) has also criticized the elision of history and its material implications peculiar to analyses that treat history in the postmodern era as a dematerialized Foucauldian discourse without considering the concomitant notion of power. According to Palumbo-Liu, such inadequately critical interpretations of the postmodern condition are particularly problematic when attributed to ethnic literatures under the assumption that the ethnic subject is somehow "the exemplary postmodern being" free from conventional boundaries and automatically hybrid in character. Such erasure of historical specificity, Palumbo-Liu (1995, 167-168) maintains, does not increase but indeed constrains our understanding of different ethnic literatures. Gilbert H. Muller (1999, 177), for instance, writes about a sense of "doubleness" peculiar to the Asian American experience, claiming that "American writers of Asian descent possess that acute awareness of difference that Lyotard observes is an attribute of the postmodern condition." Although Muller attributes the doubleness characteristic of Asian American subjectivity rather straightforwardly to postmodernity, he does not, however, entirely succumb to the elision of history that Palumbo-Liu cautions against.

strate that many of the characters in the four Chinese American texts examined in the articles express exactly such “feelings of pain and shame that utterly contradict the postethnic and consumption-based affect of euphoria and indifference” (ibid., 26). Thus, the melancholic ethics present in these narratives might also be read as an expression of an “affect-identity” arising from the contradictory position of the minority subject.

A long history of discriminatory legislation has also had a profound effect on the formation of Asian American subjectivity. Sucheng Chan (2010) divides the history of Asian American political struggles into four different periods, each characterized by their own political successes and failures in regard to gaining equal civil, political, economic, and social rights. In the first period, between the 1860s and 1880s, Chinese immigrants succeeded in winning important civil rights. The second period, from the 1890s until the 1920s, in contrast signified a remarkable setback for aspiring Asian immigrants: a series of exclusionary laws was set in force from the late nineteenth century onward to control Chinese and other Asian immigration to the United States. This meant that Asian immigration to the country was severely restricted and those who had managed to enter before the enactment of the new legislation could not become naturalized citizens nor landowners. In the third period, from the 1940s until the 1970s, Asian Americans gained political rights, during the 1940s and the 1950s, and economic rights, during the 1960s and the 1970s. Finally, as Chan maintains, during the currently ongoing fourth period, Asian Americans have fought to win social rights with varying results. (Chan 2010, 213.) Until 1943, when the first Chinese Exclusion Act was finally repealed, the racially based discriminatory legislation set strict boundaries on the size and constitution of the Asian American community. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Lisa Lowe (1996, 4) argues, “the American *citizen* has been defined over against the Asian *immigrant*, legally, economically, and culturally” (emphasis original). The above historical developments have also cast a long shadow on Asian American literary and cultural production, and the difficult political history of Asian Americans continues to resonate as a somber backdrop for Asian American subjectivity in contemporary American society. As Lowe (1996, 5-6) writes,

A national memory haunts the conception of the Asian American, persisting beyond the repeal of actual laws prohibiting Asians from citizenship and sustained by the wars in Asia, in which the Asian is always seen as an immigrant, as the “foreigner-within,” even when born in the United States and the descendant of generations born here before.

According to Anthony Sze-Fai Shiu (2006, 4), the institutionalization of Asian American Studies as an independent academic program in American universities is in a sense largely constituted by loss, as the survival of the institutional structure has often required operating “within the very racial system that produces inequality.” “On an individuated level,” he notes, “the Asian American subject is also characterized by a racialized loss or lack: of citizenship rights, legal protections, economic opportunities, and an unfettered ‘self’” (ibid.). It seems, then, that despite the devastating effects the political, economic, and cul-

tural exclusion of Asian Americans has had on the level of individual psychology, this historical loss has also sparked countless creative acts of resistance, many of them in the form of literary expression.

The depathologization of melancholia implies that loss is attributed with a creative, and even hopeful, quality instead of a simply negative one. To view loss in such a way, in terms of something new being born out of the ruins of what is lost, may at first seem counterintuitive, as David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (2003, 2) correctly observe. A closer examination of the question nevertheless reveals that “what is lost” is in effect inseparably connected with “what remains,” Eng and Kazanjian (*ibid.*) argue, “for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained.” In other words, it is the remains of what is lost, not the loss in itself, that keeps haunting us. But it is also precisely because what remains is still there, lingering beneath the surface of our daily existence, often barely discernible, that the loss which has its hold on us has such creative potential. Avery Gordon (2008) considers haunting as a sociopolitical and psychological state which, unlike trauma, does not suggest stagnation but in fact quite the opposite. Haunting, Gordon (2008, xvi) writes, is

precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done.

Although I do not discuss haunting in the form of “actual” ghosts in this dissertation, it is the spectral presence of what is lost and with equal importance, if not more so, of what remains, that is at the core of my investigation. In the spirit of Gordon’s above description of haunting, I hope to address that “domain of turmoil and trouble” (*ibid.*) to which the narratives examined in this study point. As a creative site where the realms of the aesthetic and the political unavoidably and repeatedly coalesce, literature is not so much a source of answers to questions of the political as it is a space where questions previously unimaginable are stirred up and brought to the surface. Literary narratives do not offer themselves to be read as political pamphlets or anthropological documents, whether these narratives are perceived as ethnic literature or not. What they do, instead, is stir up affects, emotions, and memories, exposing “the cracks and rigging” (*ibid.*) that often leave us disturbed enough to ask questions we might not have known to ask before. In the present dissertation, I wish to explore some of the questions that the narratives under discussion have tempted me to address. Melancholia holds a central position in my inquiry for two main reasons: first, as an emotional response to loss, it inflicts several of the characters in the narratives selected for this study; second, for reasons mentioned earlier in this chapter, it offers an insightful critical tool for literary analysis. What gives melancholia its particular advantage as a critical and conceptual tool in the present context, then, is that it encourages the simultaneous exploration of the aesthetic and the ethical, or, the political, dimensions of literary texts.

2 POINTS OF DEPARTURE

2.1 Literature in and of Transition

In many respects, Chinese American women's fiction is, and has in the past been, literature in and of transition. Not only is it in a constant state of flux with regard to stylistic and generic conventions, canon formation, and literary influences circulating across and beyond national literatures, but Chinese American women's narratives often address questions evoked by modes of being that can be characterized as being in transition. This may signify balancing between different identities, such as negotiating between the possibly conflicting demands posed, for instance by one's racial, gender, and class affiliations. Being in transition, however, can also refer on a more individual level to different psychological processes motivated, but not determined, by such concerns. This level of individual psychology is apparent in the selection of narratives included in this study. While transition itself denotes some kind of shift in the state of things in general and, psychologically speaking, in how one perceives herself or himself and the surrounding world, being in transition signifies a prolonged or chronic state of change. Such a mode of being retains in itself an openness that enables several simultaneous affiliations and identifications; it is a sense of 'betweenness' that nevertheless seeks to find new horizons even if it never completely abandons what has been before. As I attempt to demonstrate later in this introduction, this openness or lack of closure is very similar to the logic of melancholia, particularly in a context where racial dynamics are at play.

As literature that addresses various ways of being in transition, Chinese American women's writing invites a reading that draws from psychoanalysis and, more specifically, from psychoanalytically oriented literary criticism. At the core of both practices is a preoccupation with the development of human subjectivity and the role of the subconscious in this process. Anne Anlin Cheng (2009, 91) writes that "instead of seeing change as transformation in linear temporality, psychoanalysis teaches us that change *is* the condition of subjectivity and, as such, the precondition for political relations" (emphasis original). If

change is indeed the prevailing condition of subjectivity, Asian American texts approach this universal human condition from a peculiar vantage point. Susan Koshy (1996, 315) has captured this specificity of Asian American writing by stating that "Asian American literature inhabits the highly unstable temporality of the 'about-to-be,' its meanings continuously reinvented after the arrival of new groups of immigrants and the enactment of legislative changes" (quoted in Sohn, Lai & Goellnicht 2010, 1). This peculiar temporality, which is always in the process of 'becoming,' is not only a characteristic of Asian American literature, but also a characteristic of the attribute 'Asian American' itself. Since its inception in the late 1960s, the term 'Asian American' has drawn a great deal of criticism for being an overly monolithic and homogenizing concept, even to be used for the strategic purposes of ensuring equal social, political, and economic rights for Asian Americans of different ethnic origins. But even if in reality no such thing as an 'Asian American identity' exists, the term 'Asian American' continues to be widely employed, not as an identity, but as "an analytical category" (Sumida 1994, 807) by definition subject to continuous change, internal contradictions, and a sense of inhabiting a place that is at the same time both between and beyond the two attributes it consists of.

In the course of history, the words 'Asian' and 'American' have often come to be understood as mutually exclusive, and for a long time, such an extreme separation of the two concepts was in fact reinforced by the American legislation. This factitious divide has done its fair share in contributing to the aforementioned "schizophrenic" (Santa Ana 2004, 33) situation of the Asian American subject, thus resulting in the formation of a double-consciousness and a sense of displacement that might also be described as melancholic in character. It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that a substantial part of Asian American writing, both contemporary and past, reflects upon this inner conflict (Sumida 1997, 281). Unlike African American studies, Chicana/o studies, or Native American studies, which are commonly presumed to focus on politics and history, there is a persistent assumption that Asian Americans studies, literary criticism very much included, centers around questions of identity; the Asian American subject, in particular, is perceived as a site of contestation over 'Asian' and 'American' cultures (Chang 2007, 867-868). But as Stephen H. Sumida (1994, 808) has pointed out, there is also a long history of mutual interaction and traveling of cultural influences in both directions between Asia and America, so much so that American cultural history, including its most "canonical" elements and ideologies, in fact turns out to be permeated by Asian philosophical, political, and artistic influences. In this light, the separation of the two notions, the question of what is 'Asian' and what is 'American' about Asian American literature, seems to be above all a political construct. Sumida suggests that we conceive of literary history as metaphorically consisting of "centers without margins" in such a way that enables us to see how even the very epicenters of literary cultures are infused and permeated with outside influences and that it is these influences, together with many others, that create their distinctiveness. This process, of course, is never complete or final, and therefore the notions of

American and Asian American literature, too, are in a constant process of their formation.

Homi Bhabha's notion of "the third space" might offer a useful tool for imagining a position from which to read Asian American literature without succumbing to binary thinking and political polarizations that do little to alleviate what Santa Ana calls the schizophrenic condition of the Asian American subject. According to Bhabha (2008), the third space is a site where cultural translation occurs: it is a metaphorical space, "unrepresentable in itself" (55), that introduces "an ambivalence in the act of interpretation" (53) by ensuring that "even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (55). He uses the term translation "as a motif or trope [...] for the activity of displacement within the linguistic sign" (Rutherford 1990, 210), in a Benjaminian sense of coming to terms with the "foreignness" inherent in language.⁴ What is at the heart of cultural translation in Bhabha's theory, then, is the internal otherness or liminality inherent in the symbol-forming activity of cultures. It is within the realm of the third space, he argues, where cultural translation takes place and the ambivalence inscribed in the structure of meaning and signification makes itself visible.

Germane to Bhabha's theorization, Ken-fang Lee (2004, 106) suggests that in Chinese American women's writing, the dehyphenated identity of the Chinese American subject "takes the place of neither/nor as well as of both/and at once," thus resembling Bhabha's notion of the third space, in which the minority subject is "caught in-between."⁵ Although Lee insightfully attributes the presence of the third space to the double-consciousness often addressed by Chinese American authors in their narratives, I see the third space not as much as a metaphorical space where the Chinese American subject, in particular, is "caught in-between," as Lee puts it, but rather as a general characteristic of language and enunciation which fundamentally defines the human condition because of our ineluctable rootedness in language. As the mechanism that ensures the ambivalence of cultural signification, it opens up new possibilities for interpretation instead of creating boundaries that restrict or constrain. With a certain affinity to the recent efforts to depathologize and politicize melancholia, the third space offers a metaphor for literary criticism that reaches beyond the obvious and seeks to surpass the conventional binaries between politics and aesthetics, between Asian and American. It is precisely this state of being "in the beyond" that gives the in-between condition often expressed in Chinese Ameri-

⁴ In his essay "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin writes that "all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" (Benjamin 2007, 75).

⁵ In a similar fashion, Amy Ling (1990) suggests that Chinese American women writers are subject to what she calls a "between-world condition" that ultimately describes the existence of all minority subjects. Ling (1990, 177) writes: "On the one hand, being between worlds can be interpreted to mean occupying the space or gulf between two banks; one is thus in a state of suspension, accepted by neither side and therefore truly belonging nowhere. [...] On the other hand, viewed from a different perspective, being between worlds may be considered as having footholds on both banks and therefore belonging to two worlds at once."

can women's writing subversive potential. This is further supported by Bhabha's (2008, 10) observation that "to dwell 'in the beyond' is [...] to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality."

The temporal dimension of the third space is of crucial importance here, for it is of similar character to the temporality of melancholia: a palimpsestic time attached simultaneously to the past and the present. In her recent psychoanalytically informed study on traumatic enjoyment in Asian American literature, Juliana Chang (2012) presents an intriguing interpretation of this melancholic temporality as it is manifested in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, one of the four narratives examined in this dissertation. According to Chang, Ng's novel embodies a reverse chronology, a "temporality of the remainder," which unfolds not into the future but into the past, without ever achieving final closure to the story and thus disturbing the "linear temporality of modernity and national history" (ibid., 43). If the logic of melancholia systematically aspires toward "palimpsestically keeping alive what should be left behind," as Chang suggests, then Ng's narrative manifests an essentially melancholic temporality which refuses to let go of the historical debris left behind by the dominant historical narrative (ibid.). In a Lacanian sense, then, *Bone* offers glimpses of the Real that disturb and undermine the Symbolic order of national history. Further, a melancholic lack of closure and a palimpsestic temporality, in different combinations and forms, are characteristic of all of the narratives under discussion in this study, casting upon them a particular aura that posits them as 'transitional' texts. That is to say, these texts recount stories of characters who are undergoing various stages of psychological and emotional transition. Moreover, these texts suggest that in matters of history and subjectivity, a final closure – a Symbolic order that is not a fantasy – can never be reached. Indeed, aspiring toward such moment of narrative authority would entail disregarding the inevitable presence of the melancholic remainder, which, I would argue, is also an invaluable reminder of "our human, historic commonality" that Bhabha writes about above.

2.2 Situating Chinese American Women's Writing

Before introducing the rest of the selection of literature that forms the corpus of this dissertation, it is necessary to situate Chinese American women's writing within its immediate historical and literary context. Contextualization is needed in part because the literary and cultural environment in which the texts examined in this study appeared is of specific relevance to my reading of them. Although the literary, cultural, and historical context of any given work of fiction is likely to influence its interpretation in one way or another, and I believe that this is true even if the reading occurs from a strictly text-centered theoretical perspective, this becomes especially evident in my reading of the four narratives under analysis in the present study, which pays particular attention to

“the historical and cultural nuances of each text” (Feng 2010, 17). Context, in literary studies, can refer to various phenomena affecting the production and reception of a work of fiction. For one thing, context can point to the theoretical and epistemological climate and the literary scene at the time of writing, publishing, or reading a given text. It goes without saying that the prevalent theoretical climate and the literary scene of the moment can differ significantly between the times when a text is written, published, and read. But in addition to pointing to these more immediate aspects of a text’s cultural contexts, such as the dominant cultural values or literary currents at any one of these moments, context can also refer more generally to the historical and cultural forces and circumstances that are reflected in a work of fiction. In this latter sense, context may indeed be viewed as indicating “the historical and cultural nuances” (ibid.) of a given text. As such, contextual matters are markedly present throughout this dissertation. I discuss these historical and cultural nuances and their respective contexts in greater detail in connection to the analytical chapters; in the following, I focus instead on the cultural and literary climate surrounding the production and reception of Chinese American women’s writing since the 1960s.

The most immediate historical and literary context that needs to be addressed here consists, on the one hand, of the history of the Asian American movement, and, on the other, the larger body of Asian American literature. In addition to emphasizing these perhaps quite obvious interpretive contexts, I wish to situate Chinese American women’s writing within the wider context of modern American literature with the aim of challenging dominant conceptions of Chinese American women’s writing as minority literature par excellence. To a certain extent, the Asian American movement and Asian American literature as a distinct canon have parallel histories, or, at the very least, histories that have at times appeared to be intertwined. Within two decades, both experienced a significant shift in their visibility and impact in American society – the Asian American movement in the 1960s and Asian American literature in the 1970s – to the extent that numerous scholars attribute the birth of the Asian American movement and the emergence of Asian American literature as a separate canon to those very same decades. William Wei (1993, 1), for instance, situates the birth of the Asian American movement in the late 1960s, connecting it to the convergence of two historical phenomena: the emergence of a generation of young Asian American university students and public protest against the Vietnam War. As mentioned above, aside from these simultaneous historical occurrences, a number of other significant developments in American society taking place during the 1960s assisted the birth of the Asian American movement. Among these developments were the rise of the New Left, the second wave of the feminist movement and notably the African American civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. (Wei 1993, 2). Together with other factors such as problems perceived in census classification and the continuing presence of anti-Asian hostility in the United States, all of the above social movements partially contributed to efforts directed toward articulating a “pan-ethnic” Asian American identity that served as a strategically formed common

ground for the nascent Asian American political movement (Espiritu 1992, 12-13).

In addition to the burgeoning of several social movements and the general political climate of the time, a number of significant legislative changes in American immigration policy took place in the 1960s. These changes in immigration laws had a substantial impact on the growth of the Asian American population, which in turn contributed to the growing interest in Asian American cultural production. The legislative changes enacted in the mid-twentieth century were designed to repeal a series of discriminatory immigration and naturalization laws originating from the late nineteenth century that denied the Chinese, and soon after, other Asians, citizenship and "incorporation into the political body of the United States" on racially based grounds (Koshy 2004, 85). The Chinese Exclusion Act passed by the United States Congress in 1882 to control Chinese immigration to the country marked the first instance in the history of the United States that immigration to the country and naturalization were restricted or denied on the basis of racial identity (*ibid.*, 34). The first Chinese Exclusion Act was followed by two amendments in 1884 and 1888 that further complicated the entry of Chinese immigrants to the United States; the law was extended in 1892 and again in 1902, and in 1904 Chinese exclusion was made indefinite (Chan 1991, 54-55). Additional exclusionary laws were subsequently enacted to restrict the entry of other immigrants of Asian origin: the National Origins Act of 1924 completely halted Japanese immigration to the United States and the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 was aimed to control Filipino immigration, while the Asiatic Barred Zone Law of 1917 had already set limits to the entry of Asian Indians (Takaki 1998, 14; Koshy 2004, 2-3). The Chinese exclusion laws remained in effect until 1943, when Chinese were permitted the right of naturalization and a quota was set to allow a small number of Chinese immigrants into the United States each year (Chan 1991, 122). However, it was not until 1965 that the quotas based on national origin were replaced by other criteria that allowed a total of 170 000 visas for immigrants from the eastern hemisphere and 120 000 visas for those from the western hemisphere (*ibid.*, 146). Together with the Family Reunification Act of 1968, the alterations in legislation resulted in a massive increase of the Asian population in the United States (Lim 1993b, 575-576; Takaki 1998, 420). Interestingly, as the newly reformed immigration legislation privileged skilled and highly educated professionals, these legal changes also contributed to the development of the aforementioned model minority rhetoric (Koshy 2004, 135).

Accordingly, David Leiwei Li (2003, 603) attributes the emergence of 'Asian America' as a discursive category to the 1960s and to the unraveling of the racialist foundation of the United States as a nation-state, which was aided by the victories the civil rights movement gained in extending fundamental civil rights to all citizens. Although the legislative changes accelerated by the civil rights movement do not by themselves suffice to explain the categorical emergence of Asian America, several legislative reforms did in part enable the articulation of an Asian American identity (*ibid.*, 604). Among these changes was

the abolition of school segregation and de jure exclusion of native-born Asian and African Americans, which allowed Asian Americans access to public education given in the English language (*ibid.*; see also Cheng 2001, 3–5). Another distinctive shift in legislation was the aforementioned Immigration Reform Act of 1965 that “ended de facto exclusion and opened the door for entrepreneurial and professional immigration from Asia” (Li 2003, 604). Together these changes contributed to the acuteness of the need to articulate ‘Asian America’ as a discursive category to meet the historical and material actuality of American society. However, most Asian Americanist critics today acknowledge that while ‘Asian America’ and ‘Asian American’ as discursive categories were articulated in the late 1960s and early 1970s to meet the urgent political need of forming a political coalition that would consist of a variety of ethnic Asian communities, the contents of these categories have been subject to continuous change since their inception (Ty & Goellnicht 2004, 1-2; Guiyou Huang 2006, 3). Thus, ‘Asian America’ is a fluid category that is constantly molded, among other things, by the arrival of new immigrant populations, generational shifts, and changes in the social, economic, or political opportunities available to Asian Americans.

Questions associated with identity politics were also prevalent in the debates taking place among writers and literary scholars during the 1970s. The emergence of Asian American literature followed the first Chinese immigration wave of the nineteenth century with some delay, as the restrictive legislation kept the number of Asian Americans relatively low until the late twentieth century. An increasing awareness of Asian American literature among the American readership took place in the 1970s, when a strong interest in excavating the Asian American literary tradition resulted in the project of formulating an Asian American ethnic canon (Li 1998, 28). Several anthologies containing prose and poetry by authors of Asian descent were published to give definition and create a paradigm for the developing tradition of Asian American literature; although the anthologies had slightly different ideological and aesthetical standpoints on the Asian American ethnic canon, they found a common goal in the project of reconstructing the lost tradition which had long been excluded from the sphere of American literature (*ibid.*). Asian American literature and literary criticism provided a central arena for Asian American studies and identity politics during the 1970s, as the debates that came about within literary studies offered an important, albeit not solid, ground for the (still ongoing) project of articulating an Asian American identity. As Silvia Schultermandl argues, Asian American literature has offered “a steady companion in and key informant to the paradigmatic shifts that occurred in the field of Asian American studies over time, and the paradigmatic shifts that occurred in ethnic American studies at large” (Schultermandl 2009, 18). In short, Asian American literature has addressed many of the same questions that have motivated the Asian American political movement.

‘Asian American literature’ is a term that lacks definite boundaries. Many scholars use it as a loose umbrella term to indicate the wider literary context of their inquiries, but the definitions and usage of the term in criticism vary re-

markably. During the early decades of Asian American studies, the concept of Asian American literature was often used when referring primarily to writers of East Asian descent, that is to say, writers of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean origin. Elaine Kim (1982, xi), for instance, limits Asian American literature in her pioneering study of Asian American literature and its social context to “published creative writings in English by Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent.” That said, Kim is acutely aware of the problems related to the definition and emphasizes its contextual nature. Since the 1990s, however, in the wake of changing demographics and the growing presence of writers representing multiple Asian nationalities on the American literary scene, a more wide-ranging understanding of Asian American literature has reasserted itself among literary scholars. Asian American literature today indubitably encompasses fiction produced by authors of South Asian and South East Asian descent as much as by those of East Asian origin. This shift toward a more complex understanding of Asian American literature is reflective of the fragmentation and proliferation of identities in American society at large, with less emphasis being placed on “similar experiences” supposedly shared by all Asian Americans (Ty & Goellnicht 2004, 1). These changes combined with a paradigmatic shift from an identity political perspective toward an increased focus on heterogeneity, diaspora, and global concerns have elicited critical voices, some of which have even predicted the eventual demise of Asian American literature as a viable umbrella term (Cheung 1997, 1; Schultermandl 2009, 9). Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1993a, 162), for instance, argues that Asian American literature as a concept is “already collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions.” Despite the criticism aimed at its ambiguity, ‘Asian American literature’ nevertheless continues to be a concept used by Asian Americanist scholars, perhaps for the lack of a better term, and often preceded by a contextualized definition. In the present study, I use the term loosely as a general reference to the larger literary context and, notably, to the critical discourses relevant to my reading of the selected works, while staying alert to the problems posed by its ambiguity.

At present, there is a general consensus that Asian American literature contains equally works written by authors of Asian descent who were born in the United States and works by authors who have migrated to the United States from different Asian countries.⁶ The rapid rise in the number of first-generation Asian Americans that has followed the legislative changes enacted in the 1960s would indeed make it problematic, at the very least, to limit Asian American literature to the writings of only American-born Asians, as Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1993b, 576) has noted. However, the question of what constitutes an Asian American text has recently resurfaced with an interesting new shift in focus. One of the issues creating confusion among Asian Americanist critics at present involves what Shelley Fisher Fishkin (2002) calls “transgressive texts,” a notion which in this context refers to texts with Asian American protagonists or other

⁶ Sometimes ‘Asian American literature’ is used interchangeably with the term ‘Asian North American literature’ to include texts written by Asian Canadian authors. Here, however, the former refers only to writings published in the United States.

serious characters that are written by authors of other than Asian descent. Fishkin defines a transgressive text as “a text in which a white writer violates reigning paradigms of what a white writer should be writing,” adding that similar assumptions regarding the work of black writers may equally constrain the readers’ appreciation of their writing (*ibid.*, 122). By extension, the notion of transgressive texts can be applied to Asian American literature as well. Mark C. Jerng (2010), for instance, discusses Korean American Chang-rae Lee’s novel *Aloft* (2004) as a transgressive text par excellence. In the novel, Lee presents an Italian American man both as the main protagonist and as the first-person narrator of the story; this decision has sparked a considerable amount of criticism among Asian Americanist scholars (Jerng 2010, 185). The debate concerning the status of transgressive texts in Asian American literature was further fueled four years after the appearance of Lee’s novel by the decision of the Association of Asian American Studies to grant the prize for the best Asian American work of fiction in 2008 to James Janko, a white American author, for his book *Buffalo Boy and Geronimo* (2006). The awarding of the prize to a white American author propelled many Asian Americanist critics to ask whether a text written by a non-Asian American author, particularly a white one, can or should count as an instance of Asian American literature. In an article exploring the issue, Jennifer Ann Ho (2010) insightfully contends that “it is the questions and not the answers that matter in the quest for Asian American knowledge” (219), and for that reason any transgressive text that “bear[s] a social responsibility and a commitment to the principles of social justice and antiessentialism” (216) brings a welcome challenge to Asian American epistemology and may therefore offer a valuable contribution to the Asian American literary canon.

“From its beginnings,” argues Mary Condé (2003, 111), “the tradition of fiction in English by women of Chinese ancestry has been entangled with ideas of disguise and fabrication, and with the deliberate appropriation of the exotic.” Condé is referring, among others, to Edith and Winnifred Eaton, two Eurasian sisters whose work is usually seen to mark the beginning of Chinese American literary history (Ling 1999, 137).⁷ Born to an English father and a Chinese mother, both sisters made a career in writing, Edith under the name Sui Sin Far, and Winnifred under the Japanese pen name Onoto Watanna; each establishing their own literary paradigms that other Chinese American writers later followed. While Edith Eaton persistently opposed racial and sexual stereotypes and injustice, specifically fighting for women of lower social standing in her writing, Winnifred’s choice was to write exotic romances that capitalized on the racial stereotypes of the time and catered to the Orientalist expectations of her readers (Ling 1999, 142).⁸ During the first half of the twentieth century, with a

⁷ Edith Eaton (1865-1914) was born in England and immigrated at a young age with her parents first to the United States and later to Canada, where her sister Winnifred (1875-1954) was born. In their adult lives, both sisters lived and established their literary careers in the United States. (Ling 1999, 138.)

⁸ Tomo Hattori (1999) has made a compelling argument against the polarized discourse dominating scholarly accounts of the Eaton sisters that simplistically casts Edith as the “good,” socially and politically conscientious sister, and Winnifred as

particular surge in the publication of Chinese American women's writing during the 1940s, writers such as Han Suyin, Helena Kuo, Lin Tai-yi (Anor Lin), Jade Snow Wong, and Mai-mai Sze followed on the paths opened by the Eaton sisters. Despite the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and the changes in the political climate regarding immigration, for the following three decades, Chinese American women's writing consisted mostly of works written by immigrant writers (Ling 1999, 150). The 1960s, however, already entails an important shift in the larger context of Asian American literary history. In Chinese American women's writing, the highly experimental prose of Chuang Hua's *Crossings* (1968) distinctly departs from its predecessors, both novelistic and autobiographical narratives by women of Chinese ancestry, forging an entirely new literary path which places an unprecedented emphasis on the literary form.

Since the 1960s, Asian Americans have been actively seeking visibility in the literary and cultural arenas as well as the political ones. This search for visibility in American society has signified not only demands for equal political, social, and economic rights and opportunities, but also the projection of particular histories which had been largely excluded from the dominant historical narrative of the United States until the 1960s. A part of this political agenda was the project of "claiming America," which signified a common effort on the part of several young Asian American writers to claim America and its history for Asian Americans by "demonstrating Asian roots in American society and culture," particularly during the 1960s and the early 1970s (Kim 1982, 173). As King-Kok Cheung (1997, 1) notes, the body of Asian American literature has witnessed significant changes in its constitution since Asian American literature as a distinctive canon started to emerge in the aftermath of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s. In comparison with literature published before the 1960s, an "increased use of freer forms and language" (Kim 1982, 214) has been registered in the body of Asian American writing since the 1960s. In the years following, there has also been a larger shift in Asian American culture and criticism from the margins toward the center, as some scholars have noted (for instance, Lim & Ling 1992, 6). It seems clear, then, that the 1960s marks a watershed in the history of Asian American writing. Published in 1968, Chuang Hua's *Crossings* is among the very first Asian American literary works born out of the new cultural climate furthered by the pivotal political and legislative changes that took place during the 1960s.

the "bad" sister, "a sellout and a race traitor" (228-229). Hattori argues, instead, that by exploring the complexities of "how a subject must learn to capitalize on her culture in order to survive" (229), Winnifred Eaton's narratives are symptomatic of the model minority image forced upon Asian Americans, and express "the Asian American subject's undeluded and pragmatic manipulation of herself as a human form of racial capital" (231). Thus, he contends, they deserve equal critical attention as texts that reveal important aspects of the racist and capitalist logic affecting Asian American cultural production. "The *jouis-sense* of Asian American resistance," writes Hattori, "the moment in which it materializes its resisting subject, is the moment in which Asian American criticism enjoys its own trauma, produces it as excess and surplus, and coins it as ethnic cultural capital" (232).

The temporal overlap in heightened political agendas and literary aspirations has sometimes created confusion and contestation among Asian Americans regarding the relationship between literature and politics. The heated debate that took place between playwright and critic Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston in the late 1970s in the wake of the publication of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* created a focal point for the discussion about the relationship between literature and politics in Asian America. The widely noted controversy concerned precisely the goals and prospects of Asian American literature. Chin criticized Kingston's work for its lack of a clear political goal and for repeating old Orientalist dichotomies between the East and West with its description of the protagonist's inner battles (Li 1998, 45). He also categorically rejected the genre of autobiography as a literary form deriving from the Christian tradition of confession (Cheung 1997, 18). Referring to the African American political literature of the 1950s, Kingston denounced Chin's radically political understanding of literature as both ineffective and artistically restrictive, responding to Chin's demand for openly political literature by stating that a radically polemical approach would force Asian American writers to participate in a racist conversation and restrict perception to the surface of phenomena (Li 1998, 45). Deborah L. Madsen (2006, 258) suggests that the conflict might be regarded as an expression of a clash between two separate traditions in Chinese American writing – the “low” working-class tradition promoted by Chin as the “authentic” Chinese American literary tradition, and the “high” cultural tradition represented by authors such as Kingston – formed as a result of the social polarization fostered by the exclusionary laws of the late nineteenth century that severely restricted Chinese immigration to the United States and thus distorted the social structure of the Chinese American community in the country.

As part of what has become known as the so-called Asian American pen wars, critics such as Benjamin Tong and Jeffery Paul Chan also insisted upon the fictitiousness of Kingston's work, condemning its autobiographical identity as a racist ploy engineered to please the white reading public (Grice 2002, 82).⁹ In a similar vein, albeit not in an attempt to criticize Kingston's writing, Elaine Kim (1988, 812) argues that during the latter half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, a large part of published Asian American writing was marketed as autobiographical, because it catered to the common perception of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners” within American society. The conflict between Kingston and her critics also reflected the polarization between cultural nationalist and feminist concerns in Asian American writing that was furthered by the publication of *Aiiieeeee!* (1974/1991), one of the first anthologies of Asian American literature. In the introduction to the an-

⁹ Laura Hyun Yi Kang (2002, 29-70) discusses autobiography as a generic form commonly associated with Asian American women's writing at considerable length in the first chapter of her book, which explores the emergence of ‘Asian American women’ as a distinct social category in different cultural formations during the late twentieth century. She specifically addresses the autobiographical controversy surrounding the publication of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* as an instance of “generic fixation” that often falls upon minority literatures.

thology, Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong set out to counter ethnic stereotyping against the Asian American male, particularly the effeminization of the Asian American man. Featuring writers of only Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino descent in their anthology, the editors go on to postulate a distinction between authors representing an 'authentic' or 'real' Asian American sensibility rooted in the ancient Asian heroic tradition, and an 'inauthentic' or 'fake' assimilationist sensibility allegedly reflecting the false sense of "dual personality" imposed upon Asian Americans by white dominant society (Chin & al. 2012, 33). In the introduction to its sequel *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, the editors explicitly extend their original criticism of inauthenticity to encompass works by such critically acclaimed Chinese American authors as Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and Amy Tan (Chan & al. 1991, xii-xiii). Shirley Geok-lin Lim (2000, 110) and King-Kok Cheung (1997, 10-11), among others, have critically observed that the focus of the two anthologies on predominantly male authors and the objective of the editors to formulate an authentic Asian American sensibility that was founded upon an explicitly male-centered notion of language and culture resulted in a severe disregard of ethnic and sexist stereotyping as experienced by Asian American women. Further, the exclusion of women writers from the Asian American literary canon, as defined by the editors, rendered the Asian American woman writer in a doubly marginalized position based on both her ethnicity and gender.

The criticism presented by the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* and its sequel also extended to Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, which they saw equally as part of the politically acquiescent lineage of Chinese American women writers allegedly conforming to the assimilationist expectations of the white majority and catering to the white readers' stereotypical image of Asian Americans as a model minority. Although from the perspective of later research, including the study at hand, such claims may appear severely misconstrued, echoes of those early critical interpretations of Chinese American women's writing can at times still be heard in contemporary criticism. Youngsuk Chae (2008), for instance, has argued for a differentiation between a "politically acquiescent Asian American multiculturalism" visible specifically in some Chinese American women's texts, as she maintains, and a "politically conscious Asian American multiculturalism" present in other Asian American writings. While critical of the original criteria used by the editors of the two anthologies in distinguishing between what they called literature of the "real" and literature of the "fake," Chae nonetheless contends that works such as Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), both written by female writers, are examples of a politically acquiescent literature that reproduces essentializing and exoticizing conceptions of Asian Americans. Sheng-mei Ma (1998, 12) has presented a similar critique of Kingston's and Tan's narratives for what he calls their "ethnographic feminism" allegedly designed to cater to the expectations of the American reading public in its simultaneous flair for the "exotic" and the "politically correct."

The above controversies reflect the wider atmosphere within Asian American studies in the 1970s: Asian American literature as a separate canon had not gained visibility in the field of American literature until the 1970s, and it was also not until then that questions of ethnicity and ethnic identity started to appear in parallel with a feminist perspective in both fiction and criticism. Despite the polarized character of these debates, as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1999, 29) points out, the critical issues raised by these controversies are central to any theoretical discussion of ethnic American literature. Another notable conflict over the status of Asian American literature and the question of representation erupted in connection with the awarding of the 1998 annual prize for the best work of fiction by the Association for Asian American Studies to Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novel *Blu's Hanging* (1997). Several Asian Americanist scholars have discussed the controversy at considerable length as part of their theoretization on Asian American subjectivity and the question of representation (Chiang 2009; Chuh 2003; Li 2012; Nguyen 2002). Yamanaka's novel was accused of a racist depiction of Filipinos with regard to its graphically violent content; the story centers around a dysfunctional Japanese family living in the ethnically diverse and class-stratified society of Hawaii, and the sexual molestation and rape of the family's son named Blu by a young man of mixed Filipino and Japanese descent, who also sexually abuses his young nieces. The awarding of the prize to Yamanaka's novel instigated fierce protests surrounding the association's annual convention, particularly by the Filipino community and those who supported the allegations against Yamanaka's novel. The controversy soon turned into a "crisis of representation" that came near to signifying the end of the association and eventually led to the revoking of the award. (Nguyen 2002, 8.) The conflict surrounding *Blu's Hanging* and the controversies described above can be said to "mark the continual negotiation of Asian American subjectivity under the categorical pressure of representativeness, and of the concept of representation in general," as David Li (2012, 9) observes. The more recent debate concerning the status of Janko's *Buffalo Boy and Geronimo* as an Asian American text, as discussed above, can also be seen as reflecting this ongoing negotiation over the question of representation and representativeness in Asian American literature.

There is a general consensus among Asian Americanist scholars today that Asian American literary and cultural studies have undergone three partly overlapping phases: the cultural nationalist phase of the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist phase since the late 1970s, and the transnational or diasporic phase roughly beginning in year 1990 (Sohn, Lai & Goellnicht 2010, 2). Along with this trajectory, there has been a shift from identity politics exemplified by the cultural nationalist stance of the *Aiiiiieee!* group toward an emphasis on heterogeneity, diaspora, and global concerns in Asian American writing, as King-Kok Cheung (1997, 1) and Silvia Schultermandl (2009, 9) have noted. In recent years, a growing interest toward aesthetics and formal analysis has surfaced in the field of Asian American literary criticism. This is reflected in the increasing number of essay collections (Davis & Lee 2006; Zhou & Najmi 2005) and book-length stud-

ies (Huang 2010; Lee 2012; Ng 2007; Park 2008) that focus on investigating the literary form and aesthetic in Asian American literature, although it has been argued that the emphasis in this shift in focus has been on “the political dimension of aesthetics” (Sohn, Lai & Goellnicht 2010, 2). All of these changes can be seen partially as responses to Lisa Lowe’s (1996, 66-67) influential call for a greater emphasis on “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” in defining the ‘Asian American.’ While Lowe acknowledges that socially constructed notions such as an ‘Asian American identity’ or ‘Asian American culture’ have functioned as important organizing tools for Asian American politics, specifically during its early stages, she stresses the necessity of countering essentializing notions of ‘Asian Americanness,’ and contends that it is both possible and necessary “to rethink the notion of racialized ethnic identity in terms of differences of national origin, class, gender, and sexuality” and to “diversify our practices to include a more heterogeneous group and to enable crucial alliances” with other groups in forwarding “the ongoing work of transforming hegemony” (ibid., 82-83).

As shown by Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1993b), the position of Asian American women writers in the field of American literature has been strongly defined by concerns related to ethnicity and gender. In the context of “mainstream” American literature, the Asian American woman writer has been given a marginal position because of her ethnicity; yet at the same time, she has been marginalized in the canon of Asian American ethnic literature in relation to male writers. Paradoxically, from the perspective of what is usually referred to as mainstream American literature, the Asian American woman writer has been emphatically an ethnic writer, although at the same time she was long excluded from the cultural nationalist project of constructing an Asian American ethnic consciousness. King-kok Cheung (1990) even suggests that literary critics writing about Chinese American literature have often been pressured to choose between a feminist perspective and a cultural nationalist way of reading. A remarkable shift occurred, however, in the position of women writers of Asian descent in the whirlwind of the Asian American literary and cultural upswing of the 1970s. Thus, one might say that until the 1970s, the Chinese American woman writer, in particular, was partially silenced because of her gender, whereas from the 1970s onwards the emphasis has been on her ethnicity and her position as the portrayer and standard-bearer of the Asian American ethnic sensibility.

The contradictory and at times paradoxical position of Chinese American women’s writing suggests that these texts offer a highly fertile ground for research not just politically, but also from the perspective of producing new literary theory. Donald Goellnicht (1997, 340) argues that reading Asian American narratives as theoretically informed fictions that also actively contribute to theory construction offers one way of undermining the impact of positions of privilege and subverting existing power relations within literary institutions and academe. With this in mind, it is critical not to read Chinese American women’s narratives simply as minority literature allegedly borrowing its narrative technique and style from its canonized predecessors, but as highly innova-

tive fiction that actively contributes to the body of American literature. It is not unprecedented that Chinese American women's texts would seek new ways of expression that are unmarked by pre-existing discourses; innovation in form is often characteristic of minority literatures, as Werner Sollors (1986, 244) has pointed out. Chinese American women's fiction is an example of minority literature that has struggled to be recognized for its aesthetic qualities and literary value instead of being simplistically cast as ethnic literature that only motivates politicized readings, as is often the case with minority literatures. At the same time, thematic and subversive readings of Chinese American women's texts continue to offer relevant perspectives for analysis, and not only for ethical or political reasons, but also for the possibility of a fuller understanding of the aesthetic and literary qualities these texts embody. Often it is precisely the interplay between the thematic content and the aesthetic organization of a text that calls for a certain kind of hermeneutics of suspicion that considers the ethical implications of the literary work in question.

Discussing the reception of Chinese American literature against the historical context of the formation of ethnic communities known as Chinatowns in major American cities, Jeffrey F.L. Partridge (2007, 31) argues that Chinese American literature as a separate canon has been minoritized and "ghettoized" into what he calls a "literary Chinatown." The dynamics at work behind this trajectory is also responsible for the birth of literal Chinatowns; this dynamics, he contends, is largely held together by the erroneous presumption that historic Chinatowns are somehow a spontaneous expression of Chinese culture and an affirmation of the cultural "rootedness" of their inhabitants (*ibid.*). However, such romanticization of the history of Chinatowns effectively overlooks the historic connection between racism, social class, and ghettoization, and the role that Euro-Americans played in the formation of such ethnically divided communities, as Partridge maintains (*ibid.*, 32). On a similar note, Yoonmee Chang (2010, 2) criticizes the notion of an "ethnic enclave" that has come to signify "voluntary, culturally chosen segregation" in reference to Asian Americans; instead of using the word 'ghetto' when referring to the "racially segregated, economically impoverished spaces" inhabited by Asian Americans, the term 'ethnic enclave' is often used to portray these spaces as culturally motivated communities and to obscure the connection between class inequity and such spaces. For the present purposes, it suffices to note that the construction of historic Chinatowns as "voluntarily formed cultural communities" (Chang 2010, 2-3) and as expressions, if not celebration, of Chinese cultural "rootedness" (Partridge 2007, 31) has certain critical affinities to the formation of Chinese American writing as minoritized literature.

The "ghettoization" of Asian American literatures, as Partridge calls it, has been noted by a number of scholars in Asian American cultural studies since the 1980s. In her introductory chapter on Asian American literature for the *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, Elaine Kim (1988, 811) observes that as writers representing ethnic and racial minorities in the United States, Asian American writers have been burdened by a common propensity of readers to

approach their texts “as sociological or anthropological documents rather than as literary ones.” In the same vein, Rey Chow (1998, 99) mentions that despite what the actual contents of their works may be, authors representing ethnic or racial minorities are first and foremost regarded “as targets of ‘ethnic’ information.” In raising the issue, Chow is particularly interested in the politics at work behind such generalizations that do not take into account the ethnic origins and sensitivities of what is considered as mainstream American cultural representations (*ibid.*, 100). In line with Chow’s argument, I also wish to continually challenge the common perception that minority literatures are somehow more predisposed to historicity and ethnic particularity than the so-called mainstream culture and its literary expressions. That historicity and cultural peculiarities – what is specific to a certain time and place in the history of humankind – is necessarily present in all literature and not only in literatures identified as ‘ethnic writing’ does not signify, of course, that these aspects should not remain important analytic categories in critical readings of minority literatures. Rather, these are questions that should be extended, with equal importance, to critical discussions of what is considered as mainstream American literature.

William Boelhower (1987) has questioned the distinction between mainstream and ethnic writing as both misleading and untenable, suggesting that this conceptualization of American literature should be reconsidered against the concept of ethnic semiosis. Instead of examining literature as an expression of pre-existing ethnic boundaries, Boelhower considers literature as a productive force which Americanizes and ethnicizes readers and other cultural agents (Sollors 1987, 4). His position stresses the significance of “the ethnic gaze,” the site where ethnicity is finally perceived and reproduced (Boelhower 1987, 95). Neither mainstream nor ethnic writing emerges as such without the other, without the distinction, which is itself a result of the ethnic gaze; therefore, the concepts of mainstream and ethnic writing cannot be separated in a meaningful way. As Werner Sollors (1987, 3) puts it in his foreword to Boelhower’s book, “the ethnic sign is everywhere, and ethnic writing *is* American writing.” Accordingly, it seems accurate to state that what is commonly read as ethnic literature in American literary criticism is in fact at the very heart of what is American. While the “ethnicity school” represented by both Boelhower and Sollors sought to undermine the ghettoization of ethnic literature, stressing the ethnicity of all American literature, it also tended to “subsume ethnic and racial minority literatures under a single generic category,” disregarding historical particularities that separate different minority literatures from each other (Singh, Skerrett & Hogan 1994, 12). Admittedly, all literature produced in the United States is “ethnic” in the sense described by Boelhower and Sollors, but not all literature produced in the United States represents minority literatures. Quite often, ethnic literature nonetheless refers to literatures written from a minority perspective, albeit not necessarily by authors belonging to an ethnic minority, as the debate regarding so-called transgressive texts suggests. My position here, then, acknowledges the arbitrariness of the term ‘ethnic literature,’ as described

above, but also seeks to foreground the impact of historical particularity, that is, differences in material histories, in the formation and production of ethnic minority literatures.

2.3 Selection of Literature

The selection of narratives comprising the primary material of this study spans four decades of Asian American writing, starting from the late 1960s and extending until the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The years of publication of the selected texts range from 1968 to 2008; with the exception of the 1980s, the selection of narratives contains one text from each intervening decade. Although the time frame of this study is therefore relatively large, the choice of literature is not motivated by a wish to attain a comprehensive survey of Chinese American women's writing published during that time.¹⁰ Instead, the selection of texts included in this study is founded upon thematic and aesthetic reasons. First, the selection of texts is based on the emphasis each of the works places on affects and experiences related to loss and to the extent that its narration reflects the melancholic condition of its characters. Second, the texts included in the study are all stylistically innovative and thus offer an interesting subject for aesthetic inquiry. While adhering to this principle, I have sought to keep the total number of texts low enough to allow for a sufficiently detailed and in-depth analysis of the selected narratives to support my arguments regarding their aesthetic character and ethical implications. The corpus of the present study thus consists of four texts from three different authors. As such, it does not allow for generalizations concerning Chinese American women's writing at large, let alone the larger body of Asian American literature. Instead of making any such claims, the study at hand offers, above all else, a thematic reading of the four individual texts that comprise its corpus.

The corpus of this study is a result of careful consideration. When deciding on the selection of texts to explore, I have sought to include authors from different decades of Chinese American writing. The purpose of this is not so much to gather a selection of texts that would paint an accurate image of Chinese American women's writing so as to entail generalizability, as I have already mentioned. Rather, the aim of implementing such temporal variety in the selection of narratives has been to allow for and ensure the inclusion of texts with varying narrative settings and diverse positions of entry into the Asian American literary tradition. The three authors whose texts comprise the prima-

¹⁰ The 1980s, for instance, witnessed the publication of a number of works by Chinese American authors, both male and female, that can be regarded as important landmarks in the body of Asian American literature. Among these works and of most relevance to the present study are Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980) and *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). Despite their integral role in the body of Chinese American women's writing, I have excluded these texts from the corpus of this study for thematic reasons, as explained above.

ry material of this study thus represent different temporal and cultural periods in Asian American writing. Chuang Hua's *Crossings* appeared in the late 1960s, when the Asian American movement was taking its first steps in the form of political activism across the United States (Wei 1993, 11). This was several years before Asian American literature as a separate canon started gaining visibility.¹¹ In contrast, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* came out in a significantly changed cultural climate, although only eight years separate its publication from that of *Crossings*. The 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century, when Fae Myenne Ng's two novels appeared, again represent different periods in Asian American writing. These differences in sociopolitical and cultural circumstances between the times of their publication are also reflected in the critical reception of the selected works, from the long critical oblivion surrounding the publication of Chuang Hua's *Crossings* in the 1960s and until the 1980s, to the fierce critical debates over questions of authenticity, representation, and the position of minority literatures instilled by Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in the 1970s and 1980s, and finally, to the surfacing of diasporic and transnational perspectives in the 1990s and to the very recent shift toward a more aesthetically oriented critical focus that have largely determined the reception of Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock*.

Of the three authors discussed here, Chuang Hua stands out as a peculiar one for several reasons. For one thing, her personal history is significantly different from that of the other two writers. While Maxine Hong Kingston and Fae Myenne Ng, were born to immigrant families already residing in the United States, Chuang Hua emigrated from China at a young age. Chuang Hua's upper-class family background also distinguishes her from the other selected authors, who both grew up in working class families. What is, perhaps, the most notable peculiarity in Chuang Hua's authorship is the relative mystery that surrounds her authorial image. There is very little information available on Chuang Hua's personal history (see, for instance, Xiao 2000, 117; Guiyou Huang 2006, 122), and most of what is known is stated on the final page of the present edition of *Crossings*. Chuang Hua is the pen name and the Chinese name of Stella Yang Copley, born in Shanghai in 1931. At the escalation of the Sino-Japanese conflict, she left China with her family in 1937, heading first to Hong Kong and then to England, later settling in the United States. In the United States, Chuang

¹¹ The moment when Asian American literature started gaining wider recognition as a distinct canon has been attributed to the appearance of three anthologies of Asian American writing in the early 1970s: *Asian American Authors* (Hsu & Palubinskas 1972/1976), *Asian-American Heritage: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* (Wand 1974), and *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (Chin et al. 1974/1991). These early anthologies were primarily concerned with the cultural nationalist task of identifying and countering stereotypes against the Asian American male – most explicitly formulated in the influential introduction to *Aiiieeeee!* – and consequently left female writers severely underrepresented. In the late 1980s, these first attempts at establishing an Asian American literary canon from an explicitly male perspective were followed by the appearance of two anthologies with a particular focus on Asian American women's writing: *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (Lim & Tsutakawa 1989) and *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women* (Asian Women United of California 1989). (Lim 2000, 109-112.)

Hua graduated from Vassar College in 1951, and lived in Connecticut and in New York. She led an extremely private life, refusing both interviews and public recognition, until her death on June 25, 2000. *Crossings* remains her only known written work. (Chuang 2007, 224; Guiyou Huang 2006, 122; Xiao 2000, 117.) Despite the fact that further details on Chuang Hua's personal history are lacking, based on the above information it seems appropriate to state that Chuang Hua is equally a transnational or diasporic Chinese author as she is a Chinese American author. Indeed, the transnational and diasporic experience of an upper-class Chinese émigré woman is at the heart of her writing.

Due to the obvious similarities between the diasporic existence of its protagonist and its author, *Crossings* has often been described as an autobiographical narrative, although relatively little is known about the life of its author. The narrative concentrates on the numerous geographical, cultural, and psychological migrations and crossings of Fourth Jane, the fourth of seven children in an upper-class Chinese émigré family. *Crossings* is a long-neglected literary gem and a pioneer in the Asian American literary tradition which, at the time of its publication in 1968, was only emerging as a separate canon. Chuang's work appeared at a time when many significant social, political, and cultural changes were taking place in the United States. The year of its publication marks an important cultural and political crossroads in American history; fueled by the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968, riots erupted in all major cities, while the antiwar, civil rights, and feminist movements, among others, culminated in student protests on campuses across the country (for instance Wei 1993, 2). As regards the American literary culture, tides were turning as well. Suggestive of this, perhaps, is that *Crossings* has been interpreted to feature tendencies belonging both to modernist (Chiu 1999; Ling 2007, 218) and postmodern literature (Tang 2010, 29). In the first scholarly analysis ever devoted to Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, Amy Ling parallels its experimental style and innovative narrative form with that of works belonging to the Western modernist tradition, by authors such as Woolf, Hemingway, Flaubert, and Faulkner (Ling 1982, 30, 36). Certain narrative techniques and thematic concerns typical of modernist writing, such as an abundant use of free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness, a transition from clock time to subjectively experienced time, a pronounced interest in the workings of memory and the human mind, and abrupt changes in focalization to the extent of repeatedly creating confusion over who is speaking (Palmer 2011, 275; Stevenson 2005, 317-318), situate Chuang's work firmly within the modernist tradition. Characteristically modernist themes present in *Crossings* include a sense of estrangement, solitude, and isolation, all of which afflict Chuang's protagonist Fourth Jane during her self-imposed exile in Paris.

Maxine Hong Kingston (b. 1940), in contrast to Chuang Hua, is arguably the most renowned and canonized Asian American author, as well as one of the most widely-taught authors in the field of contemporary American literature. Her debut work, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976), is taught extensively in universities both within the United States and abroad

and has won numerous literary awards. Kingston was born in Stockton, California, the eldest of six children, to parents who had emigrated from Guangzhou, China, prior to her birth. Along with her literary career, she has held numerous teaching positions in high schools and universities; most recently, she has taught English and creative writing at the University of California, Berkeley, where she graduated with a BA in English literature in 1962. (Chu 2001, 89; Huang 2000, 138.) Kingston is also a political activist and has been actively involved in the anti-war movement for several decades, which is reflected in a significant part of her literary production. At present, Maxine Hong Kingston lives in Oakland, California, with her husband, actor Earll Kingston. Since making her literary debut, Kingston has published fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in a number of venues, but despite the fact that her writing is often associated with autobiographical narration and other forms of life writing, she is most often regarded as a novelist (Huang 2000, 138).¹²

The Woman Warrior was first published in 1976, eight years after *Crossings*. Its position on the map of literary genres is even more complex than that of *Crossings*. One likely reason for this is that Kingston's debut novel has become an iconic work of fiction in the canons and syllabi of American minority and ethnic writing, specifically in Asian American literature. Consequently, it has inspired an ever-growing number of scholarly readings, representing varying positions regarding its generic status. Most often, Kingston's work has been read as an autobiography, autobiographical novel, memoir, or some other form of life writing (for instance, Cheung 1993; Smith 1999; Wong 1999). Helena Grice (2002, 92) has correctly observed that choices made in the publication and marketing of Kingston's work are likely to have influenced its reception and persistent classification as an autobiography; subtitled as a memoir, marketed as an autobiography, and classified in the Library of Congress catalogue as a biography, the book won the National Book Critics Circle Award for best work of nonfiction in 1976. Nevertheless, Kingston's narrative does not easily fit into these categories suggested for it. Silvia Schultermandl (2007, 120) has attributed this difficulty in the generic classification of the text to Kingston's excessive use of genre-transgressions, which "forces the reader to read against the grain of conventional assumptions of 'minority life writing.'" This tendency to blend different narrative genres and techniques is in fact characteristic of Kingston's literary production as a whole. One might argue that by being located at an intersection of a number of generic conventions, fiction and life writing in particular, Kingston's works reflect their thematic investment in different marginalized positions through their eccentric use of narrative techniques.

¹² Kingston's diverse literary production includes such genre-crossing works as *China Men* (1980), a combination of fiction and life writing often considered as completing the autobiographical project started in *The Woman Warrior*, a collection of essays entitled *Hawai'i One Summer* (1987), the novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), and *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), again a combination of fiction and memoir (Chu 2001, 89). Her latest book, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011), is an experimental blend of free verse and autobiographical narration.

Although in this dissertation, Chuang's and Kingston's narratives are discussed as fiction, with only minor references made to their possible autobiographical underpinnings, their ambivalent status deserves some attention before turning to the objectives of the present study. My decision to read both works as fiction, instead of stressing their autobiographical influences, was a conscious choice based on their literary character, which, to a certain extent, seemed to render irrelevant whether, or to what extent, these stories reflected their authors' lived experiences. By this, I do not wish to suggest that reading these two works as autobiographical or autobiographically influenced narratives would not offer a relevant perspective on Chuang's and Kingston's writing. Rather, these considerations seemed less significant for the purposes of the present study, which is primarily concerned with the ethical and aesthetic implications and manifestations of melancholia in the narratives under investigation. As texts whose literary form in effect defies most generic categorizations, Chuang's and Kingston's narratives, in particular, do not invite a strict classification of their generic status. Further, reading these texts as fiction has enabled me to avoid addressing one difficult question that in the past has led to much confrontation regarding the role of ethnic writing and to essentializing conceptions of Asian American literature; namely, the assumption that an autobiographical text is governed by the supreme demand "to speak the *truth*" (Dobrovsky 1993, 29, emphasis original). The fact that we know so little about the life of Chuang Hua, in particular, indeed stands in an interesting contradiction with the statement that *Crossings* is a semi-autobiographical novel, for how do we establish the text's possible autobiographical influences if there is no evidence to either confirm or dispute its congruence with the author's real-life experiences? More importantly, how far would the congruence have to go in order for the narrative to be correctly identified as autobiographical? What is the truth about one's life; how and by whom is that to be determined? These are questions that are not easily resolved; at best, we can say that there are some meaningful similarities between a text and the life of its author, but even then, these similarities do not suggest that what is narrated is 'the truth.'

One might argue that anomalies in narration, any deviations from the norm of the generic tradition in question, suggest the possible unreliability of the narrator and that perhaps we should not take what is narrated at its face value. Although in the history of Western literature, autobiography has often been associated with male authors rather than female ones, it plays an important role particularly in contemporary women's writing, as Rita Felski (1989, 86) remarks. In Asian American literature, specifically, autobiography is a genre most often associated with female authors. Grice (2002, 81) contends that because of the textual authority invested in autobiographical forms of writing, autobiography and other life narratives have often been the generic choice for writers coming from culturally marginal positions; autobiographical narration offers a "counter-cultural medium" that can be harnessed to challenge dominant paradigms and versions of the past (ibid., 82). Thus, autobiographical writing may function as a way of articulating and validating the experience of those

writing from culturally marginalized positions. In a similar fashion, Pirjo Ahokas (2007) suggests that contemporary ethnic life writing by writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Alice Walker effectively challenges the neoliberal ideology of postethnic multiculturalism, which overlooks the effects of racialization and the presence of racial inequality in American society. As a form of literary expression closely related to autobiographical narration, ethnic life writing “focuses on the different ways in which ethnic group identities and ethnic history shape the discursive construction of the self,” therefore being an inherently ethical and political form of writing (ibid., 241).

Reflecting on the question of autobiographical narration and the workings of memory, Rachel Blau DuPlessis (2006, 16) points out that as soon as we translate memory into words, it becomes in part fabrication. Thus, autobiographical narration is anything but innocent; indeed, it is a form of “seduction” (ibid.). What is, perhaps, most suspicious about autobiographical narration, is the status of the speaking subject, the ‘I’ of the narration. Because the ‘I’ of the narration is also the ‘eye’ that directs the reader through the autobiographical narrative, it inevitably limits the scope of what will be remembered and narrated. By blurring the line between autobiographical narration and fiction, it might be argued, many Chinese American women’s texts are effectively calling our attention to this fundamental unreliability in all autobiographical narration. Further, as Helena Grice (2002, 85) mentions, although the first instances of Chinese American women’s writing, in particular, were primarily autobiographies, since the 1960s Chinese American women’s narratives became increasingly difficult to situate within such strict generic conventions; Chuang Hua’s *Crossings* is one of the earliest examples of this new diasporic tradition. It is this location at the intersection of several generic traditions that lends Chuang’s and Kingston’s narratives a significant part of their specific aesthetic quality and ethical import. For these reasons, this study does not approach them primarily as autobiographical texts, but rather as texts located at the margins of or on the border between different narrative traditions and generic conventions.

Fae Myenne Ng (b. 1957) has published two novels, *Bone* (1993) and *Steer Toward Rock* (2008), both of which belong to the selection of narratives under discussion in the present dissertation. Ng’s two works have been marketed unambiguously as novels, and consequently their generic status as fiction has not been contested nor has it occupied literary critics to the degree that the generic category of Kingston’s work, in particular, has. Ng was born in San Francisco, the daughter of Chinese immigrants from Guangzhou, and grew up in San Francisco’s Chinatown, where both of her novels are set. Prior to her literary career, she attended the University of California, Berkeley, and Columbia University, where she received a master’s degree. (Yen 2000, 261.) She has lived both in San Francisco and New York, and currently teaches at the University of California, Berkeley. Of Ng’s two novels, *Bone* has been studied extensively, albeit not quite to the extent to which Kingston’s debut work has been addressed by literary scholars. Su-ching Huang (2006) and Lisa Lowe (1996) have both discussed Ng’s novel as part of their book-length studies with regard to

spatial and cultural negotiation in the context of Asian American history. Juliana Chang (2012), in turn, has examined *Bone* in her recent book on traumatic enjoyment in Asian American literature from the perspective of “melancholic citizenship,” paying particular attention to the novel’s reverse temporality. Wendy Ho (1999), and more recently, erin Khuê Ninh (2011) have investigated Ng’s narrative as part of their studies from the point of view of family dynamics. In her study focusing on questions of class, ghettoization, and authorship in Asian American writing, Yoonmee Chang (2010) explores suicide and death in *Bone* from the perspective of imagining an alternative political future. These are only some of the most recent readings of Ng’s novel published as part of larger studies discussing Asian American literature; essays and articles that deal with similar questions are numerous. Donatella Izzo’s (2006) essay focusing on modernism in *Bone* is one of the few readings that explicitly deal with the novel’s formal and aesthetic features.

Not surprisingly, five years after its publication, *Steer Toward Rock*, has not yet received similar scholarly attention. In many regards, its thematic content echoes the issues touched upon in *Bone*. Both narratives are deeply embedded in the history of the anti-Asian legislation enacted in the United States since the late nineteenth century. In *Bone*, the political history of Chinese Americans offers a melancholic background for the tragedy that faces the Leong family, that is, Ona’s suicide; in *Steer Toward Rock*, this long history of exclusion is present in a more pronounced way in the sacrifice made by the novel’s protagonist, who enters the Chinese Confession Program instigated in the 1950s as part of the government’s anti-communist agenda. Ng’s both novels thus weave together personal and communal narratives of loss and recovery. At the same time, they challenge dominant versions of history by narrating fictional stories that are nevertheless founded upon a part of American history that has largely been forgotten. With regard to its literary form and narrative technique, *Steer Toward Rock* is more experimental than Ng’s debut novel. Both works are characterized by an air of simple, even declaratory language that hides behind it an almost overwhelming richness of affects, but *Steer Toward Rock* is more lyrical and abrupt in its expression. While *Bone* is famous for its reverse temporal organization, Ng’s second novel experiments with a combination of multiple narrators and chapters written in the form of a letter or an interview. Because of their aesthetically ambitious form and their thematic focus on the painful history of Asian exclusion in the United States, Ng’s two novels offer an intriguing point of departure for the study of melancholia and its complex entanglements with ethics and aesthetics in Chinese American women’s writing.

2.4 Research Objectives

This dissertation attempts to shed light on a set of questions related to the presence of loss and melancholia in works by three Chinese American women writers. I am particularly interested in finding answers to the question of how or in

what ways loss and melancholia figure in Chinese American women's writing, and what aesthetic and ethical implications this may have. Guided by this general goal, I set out to explore the following questions: In what ways are loss and melancholia present in the narratives investigated in this study? If loss and melancholia play a prominent part in Chinese American women's writing, what kind of spaces do these texts leave for agency? What is the relationship between history, loss, and narration in the texts under analysis, and how is the thematic treatment of loss reflected in the aesthetic aspect of these works? Moreover, what is the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and politics in literary analysis, and to what extent can literary research be motivated by an emancipatory cognitive interest? This last question is not as much a research problem in need of an exhaustive answer as it is an ongoing negotiation to which most literary critics, especially those who come from critical traditions such as feminist or postcolonial criticism, feel compelled to take part in. As Christopher Lee (2010, 21) notes, questions such as "what is the relationship between aesthetics and politics and, in the case of Asian American Studies, between its intellectual and activist projects" continue to occupy scholars of Asian American literature. Certainly, these are questions pertaining to the present study, and even though no final answers to them can be given within the limits of this dissertation – indeed, not many research questions in literary studies are such that they can be answered exhaustively – they nevertheless provide a faithful signpost for my own critical endeavors.

An important point of departure for my discussion is the recently reported crisis of symptomatic reading and the attendant 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' a term originally coined by Paul Ricoeur (1970, 32), who associated "the school of suspicion" primarily with the work of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In the introduction to her book *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski (2008, 1) concludes that "there is a dawning sense among literary and cultural critics that a shape of thought has grown old" as "more and more critics are venturing to ask what is lost when a dialogue with literature gives way to a permanent diagnosis, when the remedial reading of texts loses all sight of why we are drawn to such texts in the first place." At the same time, symptomatic reading with its hermeneutics of suspicion is very much alive. With a reference to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003, 125) observation that the hermeneutics of suspicion has become a standard requisite for literary scholars in virtually any field of literary studies in the United States, Felski (2008, 3) notes that "the negative has become inescapably, overbearingly, normative." But what exactly does this mean for the future of literary studies, and more specifically, where does all this leave Asian American literary criticism, which as a field of inquiry was from its inception entwined with identity politics and the effort of garnering scholarly attention for the histories and cultural production of different Asian American ethnic communities, both of which were at the time severely neglected in American academia? Is there any other way to conceptualize a hermeneutics of suspicion other than accepting the negative as the norm?

Rather than speaking of symptomatic reading, Sedgwick (2003) uses the term “paranoid reading,” offering the notion of “reparative reading” as an alternative to the imperative of reading from the paranoid position. While paranoid reading sets out to reveal the underlying, hidden structure responsible for the traces of pathology or oppression in a given text, reparative reading does not rest upon a set of interpretative devices that would guarantee a certain predetermined theoretical outcome. Although Sedgwick does not give an accurate definition for the latter, she does hint at what it might mean as a methodology and as a critical practice to read from a reparative, rather than paranoid, standpoint: “to read from a reparative position,” she writes, “is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*” (ibid., 146, emphasis original). Unlike the paranoid reader, the reparative reader remains open to the unexpected, whether the potential surprises turn out to be terrifying or hope-inducing. At the heart of reparative reading, then, is an openness to outcomes different from what one might have expected; such an openness further entails that the reparative reader is able “to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (ibid.). Reparative reading does not necessitate renouncing those critical practices that are seen as pertaining to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Rather, it might mean that such critical practices and their theoretical tools are deployed in an open-minded, unprejudiced manner that is not attached to any specific outcome, especially one that aspires to explain away any potential ambivalence. Reparative reading might thus offer a viable alternative to the paranoid standpoint which, according to Sedgwick, is essentially “a theory of negative affects” (ibid., 136).

Jürgen Habermas (1972) has eminently argued that there are three types of cognitive interests that motivate scientific and scholarly inquiry and thus determine the type of knowledge that can be acquired through different methods of investigation. He distinguishes between empirical-analytic sciences which incorporate a technical cognitive interest, historical-hermeneutic sciences which embody a practical or hermeneutic cognitive interest, and critically oriented sciences which demonstrate an emancipatory cognitive interest (ibid., 308-311). While the technical cognitive interest manifest in natural sciences ultimately aims at the technical exploitability of the knowledge it produces, the hermeneutic or practical cognitive interest typical of human sciences aspires to the understanding of meaning through interpretation and seeks to advance mutual understanding between different actors. The emancipatory cognitive interest, often present in social sciences and philosophy, according to Habermas, differs from both of the above knowledge-constitutive interests in that it seeks to disclose and deconstruct ideological structures with the goal of instigating a positive change in social relations and the distribution of power. Critically oriented sciences that express an emancipatory cognitive interest, Habermas maintains, rely on self-reflection as their most important methodological framework (ibid., 314). In the act of self-reflection, he further argues, knowledge and interest are

conjoined, and this unity of knowledge and interest “proves itself in a dialectic that takes the historical traces of suppressed dialogue and reconstructs what has been suppressed” (ibid., 315). The three knowledge-constitutive human interests do not exist independently of each other, for “the technical and practical cognitive interests can be comprehended unambiguously as knowledge-constitutive interests only in connection with the emancipatory cognitive interest of rational reflection” (ibid., 198). Thus, rather than presenting the three cognitive interests as mutually exclusive ways of organizing scientific and scholarly inquiry, Habermas suggests that they should be understood as complementary (ibid., 311). In this light, it seems fair to say that a large part of current literary criticism incorporates not only a hermeneutic cognitive interest but also, and with equal importance, an emancipatory one. In respect to the notion of reparative reading, the emancipatory cognitive interest seems no less than its defining knowledge-constitutive and methodological principle.

What links the four articles included in this dissertation together is their shared focus on the thematics of loss and melancholia in the four novels they examine. This said, each article forms an entity of its own and approaches its subject from a particular angle. While there are overlaps between the texts that are analyzed in different articles – with the exception of Kingston’s work, each of the novels chosen for this study appears in two of the four articles – each article has a specifically determined focus of its own that sets it apart from the other three articles, thus offering a particular perspective on the writings it investigates. This allows for the developing of a kaleidoscopic vision to the subject at hand; it provides an approach that does not seek to freeze the production of meaning or interpretation at any specific moment, but rather acknowledges the accretion in understanding achieved by repeatedly returning to the same questions, only every time from a slightly shifted angle. Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1992, 22) has suggested that minority writers, particularly those who are first-generation immigrants, often express in their writings a certain ambivalence, a “double perspective” similar to an optical illusion created by an image that simultaneously contains two or more competing figures. Although this twofold or even multiple perspective is detectable simultaneously in the same figure, Lim observes, we can only see one manifestation of the figure at a time; detecting two or more distinct figures in the same form requires a shift in focus. Similarly, I have sought to shift the focus in each of the four articles so that when read in each other’s context, the articles paint an image that contains several simultaneous and parallel manifestations of melancholia as it appears in the selected narratives. With this goal in mind, the contents of the articles have been determined on thematic grounds instead of concentrating on only one of the selected texts in each article.

This research project does not seek to offer a detailed analysis of each of the works chosen for this study – that would indeed be impossible in the scope of a doctoral dissertation – instead, it offers a thematic reading of the novels in question attempting to formulate what may be termed an ethics and aesthetics of melancholia. The literature under examination is, in many ways, full of cross-

ings, breaks, and transitions. The crossing of generic boundaries can be accorded another metaphorical and synthetic meaning as reflections of a diasporic identity and as giving expression to what Amy Ling (1990) has called the "between worlds" condition present in much of Chinese American women's writing. In this vision, literature becomes a site of continuous negotiation between East and West, but also a site where the semantic contents of 'East' and 'West' as categories directing literary interpretation are negotiated.

3 THEORETICAL CONTEXT AND EXISTING RE-SEARCH

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is rooted mainly in sociologically inclined literary criticism, which encompasses most of the critical practices I rely upon in my reading, including Asian American, feminist, and psychoanalytically oriented criticism. Sociological criticism, however, offers only a loose theoretical framework for the present study and should therefore not be understood programmatically. 'Asian American criticism,' as I understand it in this dissertation, denotes criticism that investigates Asian American cultural products, literary texts in particular. Thus, it might be noted, 'Asian American literary criticism' does not refer to the ethnic background or racial attributes of the scholars responsible for the critical analyses. Instead, the term is determined by its object of investigation: literary texts that in one form or another address the Asian American experience, feature Asian American characters, and are most often written by Asian Americans. The narratives under analysis in this study meet all of these conditions and are widely acknowledged as Asian American texts, but as previously noted, the definition of what can or should be regarded as an Asian American text is a question that has been subject to severe contestation within Asian American studies since its inception.

3.1 Psychoanalytical Theorizing on Loss and Melancholia

Because this study centers around questions of loss and melancholia, it seems only inevitable that a substantial part of its theoretical framework consists of terminology rooted in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically oriented literary criticism. The reasons for introducing psychoanalytically informed concepts into my reading of Chinese American women's writing and for building on them are manifold, and as mentioned above, they arise primarily from the thematic focus and the aesthetic choices of the texts under discussion. Psychoanalysis offers an intriguing angle for Chinese American women's writing for two

main reasons. First, all of the narratives examined here raise important questions regarding identity and subjectivity; rather than exploring identity as such, they are concerned with the ongoing process of identity formation, or perhaps more accurately, with the construction of subjectivity. In a similar fashion, psychoanalytically oriented criticism is not interested in identity per se, but rather “turns our attention to the mechanisms and processes” responsible for the formation of identity (Cheng 2009, 91-92). The conceptual difference between ‘identity’ and ‘subjectivity’ is not always clear, as these two terms are often used interchangeably and definitions for both are myriad. This is true for much of Asian American cultural and literary criticism, and consequently overlaps cannot entirely be avoided in the present study either. Nonetheless, certain delineations for my usage of the two concepts can be given. Linda Martín Alcoff (2006, 92-93) defines identity as our social ‘location’ in the eyes of others, whereas subjectivity signifies our personal understanding of who we are, “who *we* understand ourselves to be, how we experience being ourselves, and the range of reflective and other activities that can be included under the rubric of our ‘agency’” (emphasis original; quoted in Lee 2012, 2). Agency, according to Alcoff’s account, is therefore intrinsic to subjectivity. I find Alcoff’s characterization of subjectivity particularly insightful and well suited for the purposes of this study, but rather than adhering to her fairly strict definition of identity, I am more inclined to follow Christopher Lee’s (2012, 2) understanding of identity “as a means to conceptualize the relationship between an individual and the historical, cultural, and social conditions that situate his or her life circumstances.”

Another reason why psychoanalysis offers a compelling theoretical framework for the study of Chinese American women’s writing is likely to be a result of what has been said above, namely, that psychoanalytical theory is invested in exploring questions similar to those motivating the narratives selected for this study. Several scholars in the field of Asian American literary and cultural criticism have employed psychoanalytical terminology and further developed some of its central concepts to serve the specific context of Asian American writing (for instance Chang 2012; Cheng 2001; Chiu 2004; Eng 2001). In order to participate in this psychoanalytically informed discourse, it is necessary to acknowledge the theoretical and conceptual lineage behind the critical discourse that the present study participates in. Most importantly, any critical endeavor focusing on questions related to loss and melancholia must take into account the theoretical contribution that psychoanalysis has brought to discussions regarding the subject. I agree, here, with Suzanne Gearhart (2005, 29), who notes that psychoanalysis offers valuable “concepts and strategies” that may help us in our efforts to understand the mechanisms at work in the processes through which identity (and subjectivity) is produced. This, of course, presupposes an understanding of identity which does not take identities of any kind as static or fixed entities but instead acknowledges that they are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated through different processes of identification. In the following, I offer a brief overview of relevant psychoanalytic concepts and theorization regarding the subject at hand.

In his famous exploration of the subject in the essay entitled "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud presents melancholia as the pathological counterpart to "the normal affect of mourning" (Freud 1957, 243). Mourning, states Freud, is the common reaction to "the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (243). The melancholic response, he remarks, may be more likely to occur if the lost object lacks clear definition: if what is lost is something rather abstract, or if some part of the loss remains unconscious (245). The essential difference between these two types of psychological responses to loss is that in the healthy course of mourning, the lost object will eventually be relinquished and replaced, and as a result the grief will eventually be overcome (244). The melancholic, by contrast, is unable to substitute the lost object and over time internalizes the loss, which results in a severe diminution in her or his self-regard (246, 249). Therefore, a significant distinguishing factor between mourning and melancholia involves the subject's sense of self-worth, which, in the case of melancholia, suffers serious damage. Freud captures the difference by observing that in the normal process of mourning "it is the world which has become poor and empty," whereas in the melancholic response, "it is the ego itself" (246) that suffers the greatest loss.¹³ Moreover, the melancholic's relation to a love-object is typically complicated by a sense of ambivalence, as "countless separate struggles are carried on over the object, in which hate and love contend with each other" (256). It is this ambivalence toward the lost object that produces "a pathological cast to mourning" (251), Freud concludes, thus resulting in guilt and self-degradation.

Although Freud's original theory of melancholia was founded firmly upon the idea that melancholia differs from the healthy course of mourning in a decisive manner, which ultimately renders melancholia a pathological phenomenon, he later undermines the clarity of this distinction in "The Ego and the Id" (1923). This paper is among Freud's last major contributions to psychoanalytic theory, and its elaboration of the psychic structure of the mind has had a revolutionary effect not only on later psychological accounts of the mind, but also on the contemporary Western understanding of the human condition (Freud 1961, 4). In contrast to his initial argument, Freud now presents the melancholic mechanism of introjection, or identification with the lost object, as constitutive of ego formation in general, stating that "the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and [...] contains the history of those object-choices" (29). What this means for the Freudian theory of subjectivity is that if subjectivity is understood to be constituted through the melancholic process of introjection, it is also in a very profound sense the product of its own past. As Anne Enderwitz (2011, 175) puts it, "the ego comes into being and continues to be

¹³ David L. Eng (2000, 1276) describes the melancholic process eloquently: "The melancholic is so militant in his or her denials that the lost object is finally incorporated into the self, turned into the shelter of the ego, and preserved as a form of ghostly identification. In this refusal to sever any attachments to the lost object, the melancholic becomes instead haunted by it. Loss denied is incorporated into the ego, and the ego thus becomes a remainder of unresolved grief."

shaped by its attachments to objects it has had to give up." Further, future attachments to objects of desire are also significantly influenced by past object-choices, for as Freud argues, "whatever the character's later capacity for resisting the influences of abandoned object-cathexes may turn out to be, the effects of the first identifications made in earliest childhood will be general and lasting" (Freud 1961, 31). That is to say, while the object-choices of the future also play an important role in subject formation, they are equally shaped by the subject's previous attachments to objects of desire. The past is thus "itself present in the present, inhabits and haunts it" (Enderwitz 2011, 176). In this respect, the human mind appears as a palimpsest of lost objects of love, in the original sense of the term, which emphasizes the unintentionality of palimpsestic action. Not only is there an inherently temporal dimension to the dynamics of melancholia that underlies Freud's conception of subjectivity, but also a spatial one, Enderwitz observes; while the past continues to be present in the very process that constitutes subjectivity, "time is spatialized so that the present self can accommodate different times" (ibid.). In other words, the self becomes a subjective space in which times past, present, and future coexist at the same time.

For most of the past century, melancholia has been theorized primarily as a gendered condition; the most famous example in this line of thought is Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun* (1989) (Parikh 2002, 201). Judith Butler (1997) has argued that the melancholic mechanism of introjection is a constitutive factor in the formation of gender in general. Integral to Butler's argumentation is the conceptual shift taking place between Freud's two essays discussed above, that is, his later concluding that melancholic identification to a lost object of desire is characteristic of all subject formation. What is significant in this revision in Freud's theory, according to Butler, is that his position on "what it means to resolve grief" has changed from his original assumption that it is possible to relinquish an object of desire so that it leaves no melancholic residue, to his subsequent conclusion that a complete or final breaking of the attachment, without melancholic identification with the lost object, is not in fact the normative process, if at all possible (Butler 1997, 133-134).¹⁴ The melancholic mechanism that governs the formation of gender, Butler suggests, rests upon the hegemonic expectation of a compulsory heterosexuality, which renders homosexual desire "as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss" (ibid., 135). In Freud's theory, both masculinity and femininity are accomplished only through abandoning incestuous and homosexual attachments, which presupposes adopting heterosexuality as the governing principle of sexual attachments. It ensues that those early losses cannot be grieved but must remain disavowed. (Butler 1997, 135.) This, in turn, results in the birth of "a culture of gender melancholy in which masculinity and femininity emerge as the traces of an ungrieved and ungrievable love" (ibid.,

¹⁴ In "The Ego and the Id," Freud writes: "When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia [...] It may be that by this introjection [...] the ego makes it easier for the object to be given up or renders that process possible. It may be that this identification is the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects." (Freud 1961, 29.)

140). The psychological effects of this heterosexual matrix fall upon all individuals irrespective of their gender or sexual orientation, but in disparate ways. However, the common principle that directs the melancholic formation of gender dictates that any threat to heterosexuality is perceived as a threat to gender itself (ibid., 135), and therefore any non-heterosexual attachments must be repudiated to such a degree that gender itself can be said "to be composed of precisely what remains inarticulate in sexuality" (ibid., 140).

Accordingly, scholars of melancholia have called attention to the observation that even if the dynamic of melancholia is constitutive of subject formation at large as Freud eventually comes to suggest, melancholia as a deep-seated psychological condition seems to haunt particularly non-male, non-white, and non-heterosexual subjects (Eng 2000, 1277-1278; Parikh 2002, 201). For ethnic and racial minorities, melancholia entails a close connection to the notion of racial abjection. Julia Kristeva's account of abjection offers an important point of departure for some of the recent theoretical developments in Asian American criticism on loss and melancholia, and it is also central to my present exploration of melancholia and its relationship to ethics and aesthetics in Chinese American women's fiction. Kristeva (1982) discusses abjection both as a necessary stage in the development of individual subjectivity and as a larger theory of culture. Kristeva describes abjection as a developmental stage in which a child rejects her or his mother's love on the basis of the threat that it seems to pose to the child's nascent perception of self. This rejection is expressed through an overwhelming aversion toward the mother's body as experienced by the child. Unable to see her/himself as separate from the mother, the child is left in a horrifying state of abjection. The abject, as defined by Kristeva (1982, 9), is neither the subject nor the object; rather, it is a frontier and therefore a constant source of ambiguity. Not only is abjection a necessary stage in the development of human subjectivity, but it is also characteristic of cultural formation in general. The metaphorical linkage between the body and cultural formation (as a kind of body) becomes most evident in the physical presence of the corpse, "the utmost of abjection" (ibid., 4). Kristeva writes: "If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (ibid., 3). As an ultimate manifestation of the abject, the corpse is something that is rejected but nevertheless cannot be completely jettisoned; it is "death infecting life" (ibid., 4) that "marks the presence of mortality and decay *within us*" (Shimakawa 2002, 8, emphasis original). What makes the abject so disturbing and gives it the power to "threaten what is thinkable or possible in the first place" is precisely the fact that it comes from within, for "what threatens from the outside only threatens insofar as it is already within," as Sara Ahmed (2004, 86) remarks. Thus, abjection also in part describes the way the subject responds to the fear of dissolution and to the certainty that at some point in life he or she, too, will die.

The question of how the ego responds to the inevitability and irrevocability of death is a subject that Freud repeatedly returns to in his late writings.

Psychoanalytic theory approaches death from a number of perspectives seen to be constitutive of the psychic apparatus. First, the materiality of the body and its inevitable death and eventual decay lead to the fact that the fear of annihilation becomes one of the most primal anxieties that characterize human existence. In an effort to circumvent the inescapable certainty of death, the ego tries to convince itself of the possibility that life can nevertheless be preserved. Second, psychoanalysis has approached death from the perspective of the unconscious, viewing it as a destructive force arising from the unconscious part of the psyche that must be constrained if any kind of human life is to be possible in the first place. Finally, psychoanalytic theory sees death as imbricated with the subject's narcissistic desire for pleasure. (Bronfen 1992, 52.) It is this particular perspective on death and the human psyche that Freud discusses in his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920). In this paper, Freud postulates that beyond the "pleasure principle," there is another, more original and more fundamental function that governs the operations of the human psyche. According to Freud's hypothesis, the psychic apparatus aspires toward the greatest amount possible of constancy or lack of excitation; an increase in the quantity of excitation is experienced as unpleasurable, while a diminution in it is found to be pleasurable (Freud 1955, 8-9). The pleasure principle, then, "follows from the principle of constancy," but because a significant part of our mental processes do not lead to pleasure, Freud concludes that it is more accurate to speak of "a strong *tendency* towards the pleasure principle" that nevertheless is often restricted or opposed by other forces (9, emphasis original). Moreover, because it would be impossible to sustain a social life solely on the basis of an aspiration toward pleasure, the functioning of the pleasure principle must be contained by what Freud calls "the reality principle" (10).

More relevant for the purposes of the present study, however, is Freud's postulation of a "death drive" generally expressed in the compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences in an effort to retrospectively bind the dangerous external energies that initially caused the ego's defenses to break down (Bronfen 1992, 54). Freud's articulation of the dynamic that leads him to postulate an opposition between such "ego-instincts" that "exercise pressure towards death" and sexual instincts that aspire toward the prolongation of life is fairly complex, but what is of importance in the present context is his hypothesis that the repetition of traumatic moments as an expression of the death drive is informed by an "instinct to return to the inanimate state" that precedes the birth of a living organism (Freud 1955, 38, 44). This leads Freud to the paradoxical conclusion that "the aim of all life is death," which can be understood in the sense that only in death will the living organism be able to return to the original inanimate state characterized by constancy and an absence of tension (38). Further, the aspiration to achieve such an original state of constancy through repetition also serves as a fulfillment of the desire to regain a state of wholeness lost at birth (Bronfen 1992, 55). Lacan has further developed Freud's ideas concerning the death drive, suggesting that all constructions of the self are illusions that are informed by a fundamental lack or void left behind by the experience of birth as loss (ibid. 53).

In Freud's theory, the dynamic between "the death instincts" inclined toward the inanimate state that precedes birth, and "the sexual or life instincts" inclined toward the preservation and prolongation of life (Freud 1955, 44), is what governs the psychic apparatus and ultimately acts as a sustaining force to life itself (Bronfen 1992, 53). The death drive and the compulsion to repeat, then, emerge as important extensions to Freud's earlier formulation of melancholia as a pathological response to loss, which he later modified to suggest that the melancholic process of introjection is constitutive of all subject formation, i.e. that subjectivity is contingent upon its own history of lost love-objects. Several Asian Americanist scholars have employed and further developed these psychoanalytical concepts in the study of Asian American literature; these developments are under discussion in the following section.

3.2 Melancholia in Asian American Literary Criticism

By and large, the turn of the millennium marks a shift in the critical discourse of Asian American studies, literary criticism in particular. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, there has been a remarkable proliferation of scholarship invested in psychoanalytic theory. Simultaneous with this psychoanalytic turn in Asian American studies, cultural theory has undergone an unparalleled surge of discursive and paradigmatic turns. Anthony Sze-Fai Shiu (2006, 6) attributes "the present revival of psychoanalytic theory in Asian American literary and cultural studies" largely to an increased interest toward the notion of 'racial melancholia' in Asian American studies. In the same vein, Rey Chow (2008, 571) identifies the recent proliferation of scholarship on melancholia as "the melancholy turn" in cultural studies. This discursive paradigm, Chow argues, is characterized by a "moral striving for justice" (573), in which melancholia appears as a critical tool in the continuous negotiation between an essentializing assumption of an "original condition" and a simultaneous deconstructive notion that this original condition, whether conceived of as language, literacy, or culture, has been irrevocably lost by being either "compromised, injured, incapacitated, interrupted, or stolen" (572). One might well ask, then, why melancholia has become such a timely issue for Asian American studies since the turn of the millennium, and why it continues to offer relevant concerns for Asian American studies today. One answer to this might be that following the hardship and struggles the first immigrant generations of Asian Americans underwent to claim their civil and political rights as well as equal economic and social opportunities, something is still missing; later generations of Asian Americans continue to be faced with the effects of historical racialization and structural racism. Racial melancholia might thus be regarded as a form of literary resistance particularly suited to the situation that describes the condition of American-born generations of Asian Americans, such as the protagonists in the present selection of narratives by Kingston and Ng. On the other hand, there has been a remarkable surge of new Asian immigrants arriving to the

United States since 1965, which has substantially changed the constitution of the Asian American community in favor of Asian-born, first-generation immigrants (Anderson & Lee 2005, 8); indeed, this demographic shift has been so extensive that “the changing population of Asian immigrants can be said to constitute the newest racial formation of Asian Americans,” as Lisa Lowe (2001, 269) has noted. However, instead of being stuck in “the ‘loss’ of an integrated self,” recent psychoanalytically informed approaches to Asian American literature, specifically those invested in the notion of racial melancholia, emphasize the need to develop reading practices that seek to imagine ways of resistance for minority literatures and envision a more equitable world unburdened by mechanisms contributing to such racially based inheritance of loss (Shiu 2006, 6). Arguably, the recent turn toward melancholia might also be seen as symptomatic of a wider inclination toward ethics and affectivity, which has been registered respectively as “the ethical turn” (Korthals Altes 2005) and “the affective turn” (Koivunen 2010) in cultural studies.

David Leiwei Li’s (1998) widely quoted study is in all likelihood the first book-length account of Asian American literature that delineates the history of Asian Americans in psychoanalytic terms and draws from the psychoanalytic notion of abjection. In his book, Li conceptualizes the genealogy of Asian American citizenship through two distinct historical periods that roughly follow the landmark years of immigration and civil rights legislation in the United States. The first of these two periods, the period of “Oriental alienation,” Li situates between the years 1854 and 1943, or, 1965, depending on which one is given priority: the year of the repeal of the original exclusion acts, or the year of the final abolition of racial quotas for Asian immigration to the United States; the second period, the period of “Asian abjection,” begins accordingly from 1943 or 1965, and continues until present (Li 1998, 4-5). The notion of Asian abjection, in Li’s account, signifies the discursive processes through which certain forms of Asian American articulation are denied, sanctioned, and replaced by dominant authorities who are to speak for the Asian America (*ibid.*, 8). What differentiates the second period from the first is precisely the logic of abjection, which simultaneously excludes or rejects and includes or necessitates the abject. Li’s conceptualization of Asian abjection relies in significant respects on Julia Kristeva’s (1982) theory of abjection, in which “the emergence of the ‘self’ depends on the constitution of the ‘not-self’” (Li 1998, 6). In other words, the birth of the self necessitates the constitution of what is considered the “not-self” but what cannot simply be deemed the object or the alienated Other. This is the dynamic of abjection that Li attributes to the condition of Asian Americans in the history of the United States. “No longer the explicit Other to be disciplined,” he writes, “the Asian in the United States must be strictly contained in permitted quarters yet readily conflated with his or her ancestral nation” (*ibid.*, 7). Li’s periodization of Asian American history is particularly illuminating from the perspective of the study at hand because it emphasizes the ambivalent status of the Asian American, which lays the foundation for my discussion on racial melancholia in the selected narratives. Further, the rhetorical shift from ‘yellow peril’ to ‘model

minority' can be seen as partially reflecting this change in the position of Asian Americans in the American national imaginary, assisted by the changes in legislation, between the two historical periods described by Li.

Another important theoretical point of departure for the study at hand is the analysis presented by Anne Anlin Cheng in her book *The Melancholy of Race* (2001), which discusses a selection of Asian American and African American literary narratives from a psychoanalytically informed critical framework. Cheng's analysis draws specifically from Freud's theory of melancholia, the insights of which she builds upon in proposing a theoretical model of identity that she calls "racial melancholia" (ibid., xi). Racial melancholia functions as a theoretical and critical framework intended to elucidate the role that grief plays in racial and ethnic subject formation by offering a model that enables us to investigate in parallel two defining aspects of racial culture in the United States: first, dominant white culture's simultaneous rejection of and attachment to its racial others and, second, what this oscillation between exclusion and inclusion entails for the racialized subject caught in such a double bind. Descriptive of "the dynamics that constitute their mutual definition through exclusion," racial melancholia thus affects both dominant white society and its racial others. (Ibid., xi.) Accordingly, Cheng's model proposes a distinction between 'melancholia' as a "structural, identificatory formation" and 'melancholy' understood in the general sense of an affect which lacks the structural dimension of melancholia (ibid., 20). Although the Freudian theory of melancholia is important to Cheng's articulation of racial melancholia, the latter also poses a challenge to Freud's initial formulation of the concept. Significantly, Cheng's account questions the binarist assumption underlying Freud's early thinking regarding melancholia, that it is possible to meaningfully differentiate between healing or healthy relinquishment, on the one hand, and pathology or unhealthy retention, on the other. Cheng suggests, instead, that melancholia may function as a "necessary, perhaps even continuous, stage of mourning" in certain socioracial dynamics (ibid., 98). This conceptualization of melancholia, then, comes closer to Freud's subsequent reformulation of melancholia as constitutive of all subject formation instead of being a symptom of a pathological response to loss. Moreover, Cheng maintains that the oppositional understanding of healthy versus pathological mourning is particularly problematic in "analyses of socioracial grief" because over the course of history, a medical model of health versus pathology has been used as a means of racial discrimination and, most importantly, because in socioracial dynamics such as American racial culture, what is lost is often something that does not in fact belong to the past, or, in Cheng's words, "because memory, loss, retention, and rejection in socioracial dynamics, involving several communities of heterogeneous histories, revolve around 'un-curable,' persistent ties, allegiances, and interests" (ibid., 99).

Along with Li's account of Asian abjection and Cheng's model of racial melancholia, this study is also informed by a number of other theoretical approaches drawing from psychoanalytical theory that require a brief overview. What binds these critical approaches together is their shared focus on issues

related to loss, abjection, and melancholia in Asian American cultural production. Karen Shimakawa's (2002) study on abjection in Asian American drama and performance art largely follows Li's articulation of 'Asian American' as abject in relation to 'American.' Contrary to Li's argument, however, Shimakawa (2002, 166, n14) suggests that it is the "vacillation between extremes [...] rather than a developmental progression from excludable alien to tolerated abject" that has defined the representation of Asian Americanness throughout its history; moreover, this juxtaposition or oscillation between exclusion and inclusion might be particularly descriptive of Asian Americanness at the present moment. To the extent that both Li and Shimakawa see 'Asian American' as abject in the American national imaginary, some degree of racial melancholia can be regarded as a likely, if not necessary, result of this cultural dynamics. Shimakawa's insistence on the acuteness of Asian abjection at the turn of the millennium further suggests that melancholia may be a particularly timely issue for Asian American literary studies at the present moment, because of the intimate connection that links racial abjection to racial melancholia. Germane to this, Cheng (2005, 124) has noted that "the economics of racism" at work in the imperialist history of the United States "have often meant that racism is not so much about annihilating the other as about keeping the other in its proper place." This resonates with Li's account of Asian abjection in the United States being characterized by a dynamic that keeps the 'Asian American' at a certain distance from the 'American.' A logic similar to that of abjection is descriptive of the position of the minority subject, who suffers from the double bind of being designated at the same time "a melancholic object and a melancholic subject, the one lost and the one losing, the one excluded and the one performing the exclusion" (Cheng 2005, 125). In other words, the melancholic burden, much like abjection in Kristeva's theory, falls upon the minority subject not only from the outside but also from within.

Other psychoanalytically informed discussions in Asian American criticism relevant for the present dissertation include David L. Eng's (2001) study on the complications of Asian American masculinity, and his collaborative projects with Shinhee Han and David Kazanjian, respectively (see Eng & Han 2003; Eng & Kazanjian 2003). Eng and Han's (2003) discussion of racial melancholia illuminates the problematics of the model minority myth against Bhabha's notions of mimicry and the stereotype, both of which are characterized by an ambivalence. Eng and Han contend that "Asian Americans are forced to mimic the model minority stereotype in order to be recognized by mainstream society," yet this mimicry is necessarily melancholic in character, because it only functions to separate the Asian American subject from the mainstream society and its norms (*ibid.*, 350). Further, they describe the process of assimilation as a continuous negotiation between mourning and melancholia, which results in racial melancholia not emerging as permanent damage but rather as "conflict," thus entailing the Asian American subject no longer appearing as a victim of pathology (*ibid.*, 363). Juliana Chang's (2012) aforementioned study of inhuman citizenship and traumatic enjoyment in Asian American literature represents the

most recent psychoanalytically oriented scholarship on Asian American writing. In her examination of Asian American domesticity and the racial inhuman in four Asian American texts, Chang capitalizes on Lacanian psychoanalysis and particularly on Lacan's concept of *jouissance*, exploring the significance of such traumatic enjoyment for American national fantasies. In contrast to Paul Gilroy's (2005, 4) universalist call for a "planetary humanism," Chang (2012, 11) argues instead that the racial inhuman should be acknowledged "as a powerful trope and force of counter-hegemony." Her examination of the reverse temporal organization and palimpsestically constructed "melancholic temporality" characteristic of Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, particularly, has informed my own reading of the novel.

Finally, studies exploring Asian American literature that are less directly invested in psychoanalytical theory but still share an interest toward questions related to the issues discussed above include a number of books published since the 1990s. Among these are Leslie Bow's (2001) and Crystal Parikh's (2009) studies, both of which approach Asian American literature through the notion of betrayal; Bow employs a markedly feminist point of view, and Parikh an ethical perspective that draws on philosophical theories of alterity and examines Asian American narratives in parallel with emergent Chicano/Latino literature. Addressing questions pertaining to reproduction and transnationality, Monica Chiu's (2004) study of manifestations of dirt in Asian American women's writing builds in part on Kristeva's notion of abjection. Tina Chen's (2005) analysis of impersonation in Asian American literary and cultural representations explores Asian American subject formation through the figure of the double agent, suggesting that Asian American acts of impersonation simultaneously foreground the limits and the importance of subjectivity for Asian Americans. King-Kok Cheung (1993) and Patti Duncan (2004) both address silence and the politics of speech in Asian American women's writing, whereas Eleanor Ty (2004) and Klara Szymańko (2008) both explore questions of visibility and invisibility in Asian American literatures, Ty by investigating "the politics of the visible" in Asian American and Asian Canadian texts, and Szymańko by addressing themes of invisibility in Asian American and African American narratives. Wenying Xu's (2008) recent exploration of food and its multiple meanings in Asian American literature discusses food in the context of race and sexuality from the particular perspective of psychological and ontological formations brought about by food practices in the narratives it examines. Wendy Ho's (1999) and erin Khuê Ninh's (2011) books concentrate on mother-daughter relationships in Asian American writing, whereas Silvia Schultermandl's (2009) study shows a similar interest toward matrilineage and generational conflicts in Asian American literature from a transnational perspective. Such concerns are under discussion in the following section, which briefly outlines the conceptual framework of diaspora, displacement, and transnationality for the context of the present dissertation.

3.3 Diaspora, Displacement, Transnationality

Diaspora, displacement, and transnationality are terms that abound in current scholarly discourses on postcolonial and minority literatures, and Asian American literary criticism does not form an exception to this. The proliferation of approaches that utilize these concepts is now commonly referred to by what Shelley Fisher Fishkin (2005) has identified as “the transnational turn” in American studies. In her 2004 presidential address to the American Studies Association, Fishkin delineates what she sees as the most significant changes in the field since the 1960s that have contributed to its transnational turn. In line with Fishkin’s account, Paul Jay (2010, 1) attributes the beginnings of the transnational turn in literary and cultural studies to the political and social movements of the early 1960s and to the associated theoretical developments that have since taken place within academia. Further, as mentioned above, the number of new Asian immigrants to the United States has increased rapidly since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 to such an extent that the majority of Asian Americans are now Asian-born; in addition, the demographics are constantly changing because new immigrant groups are coming from different Asian countries (Lowe 2001, 269). The changes brought about by the entrance of new immigration from Asia poses a challenge for several disciplinary practices, which, according to Lowe, “may force a shift in the methods and objects of Asian studies, American studies, and Asian American studies” alike (ibid., 275). Arguably, the recent proliferation of approaches that foreground diasporic and transnational concerns can be seen as reflecting the paradigmatic shift in Asian American studies anticipated by Lowe. Similarly, Kandice Chuh (2001, 293) sees Asian American studies as a nodal point between American studies and Asian studies. Both Asian and Asian American studies, she suggests, are invested in a “struggle over the meaning of ‘America;’” this tension between the conceptual categories of ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ is reflected in the marginal position of Asian American literature as “a peripheral appendage to American literature” (ibid., 278).

Diaspora and transnationality are often used as overlapping terms, and just as often the confusion is further increased by the synonymous use of the words ‘displacement’ and ‘dislocation.’ In the present study, I predominantly use the former because of its concrete and material connotations; displacement is understood here as a descriptive concept that can be characteristic of diasporic experience, but does not necessarily have to be. This might be exemplified, for example, by the difference between first generation Chinese Americans such as Fourth Jane, the main character in Chuang Hua’s *Crossings*, whose very existence is defined by a deep-rooted sense of displacement, and later generations of Chinese Americans, born in the United States, who might not necessarily feel displaced in the literal sense of the word even though they are perceived as belonging to an ethnic diaspora. Thus, displacement might be understood as referring primarily to the affective dimension of not feeling at home in a place,

whereas diaspora often suggests that there is more than simply one place on a global scale that one may consider as home, at least in some respect. As Avtar Brah (1996, 193) notes, however, "it is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home." Such ambivalence is an important aspect of displacement as an affective formation in the context of the present study. Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee (2005, 10) suggest that diaspora and transnational could best be understood "as two related but often contradictory aspects or subsets of displacement." This position highlights the importance of displacement as a concept that is, despite its affective investments, inseparably entangled with the material aspects of being displaced. Indeed, to not place diaspora or transnationalism "in the broader context of displacement," Anderson and Lee maintain, "is to diminish the weight of exile, the notion of home, or conversely the act of recreating the new home place and thence the construction of new identities and community" in the newly adopted homeland (*ibid.*).

Transnational and diaspora studies function as theoretical and methodological frameworks for the present study to the extent that they represent recent theoretical developments in Asian American literary studies. Crystal Parikh (2009, 30) argues that these paradigmatic shifts toward transnational and diaspora studies might be conceived as "necessary betrayals of (and by) the minority American subject" torn between "the competing claims of the nation-state" and "those of diasporic migrants and exiles." Numerous attempts have been made to define the concepts of diaspora and transnationality, often with respect to the process of globalization. Shirley Geok-lin Lim (2004, 9) underlines the different dynamics at work in globalization and transnationality, observing that "where the global works centripetally, transnational cultures are structured centrifugally, their energies drawn from crossings rather [than] from massing." Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (2005, 5), again, illuminate the difference between the global and the transnational using a slightly different approach, arguing that "the logic of globalization is centripetal and centrifugal at the same time and assumes a universal core or norm," whereas the transnational "can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation [...] without necessary mediation by the center." The transnational, then, is less concerned with an assumed center. Referring to David Palumbo-Liu's usage of the terms, Christopher Lee (2005, 27) suggests that diaspora, on the other hand, can be conceptualized as denoting "the psychic realm of desires, interiorities, and identifications," while globalization often refers to the economic dimension of phenomena. R. Radhakrishnan (1996, xiii) describes "diasporic location" as "the space of the hyphen that tries to coordinate, within an evolving relationship, the identity politics of one's place of origin with that of one's present home."

During the early twenty-first century, there has been a growing "trend of reading contemporary Asian American literature horizontally, situating the works within a web of local, national, and transnational formations" (Lee 2013, 184). Accordingly, Rajini Srikanth (2003, 92-93) argues that when reading Asian American literature, the local and the transnational should not be perceived as

oppositional states of being, because many Asian American authors “deploy a multiple geographical perspective in their literary narratives,” recognizing both the domestic and the diasporic as constitutive of Asian American subjectivity. In a recent effort to return the hyphen to the center of Asian American literary discourse, Belinda Kong (2010) suggests that a growing number of recently published Asian American literary narratives are addressing issues that reach beyond the immediate Asian American experience, thus assuming a “diasporic literary ethics” (144) which requires a bilateral critical approach to the texts; this “bilateral hermeneutics” would read these narratives from a combined geopolitical and biopolitical perspective (136). Before proposing her complementary approach, Kong delineates a key debate that has divided Asian Americanist critics with respect to the diasporic or transnational turn in Asian American studies, capturing it as one between three distinct theoretical positions expressed most notably by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (2012), Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1997), and Susan Koshy (1996). In her influential essay from 1995, Wong (2012, 150-151) argues that despite the recent trend toward “denationalization” in Asian American studies, “establishing the Asian American presence in the context of the United States’ national cultural legacy and contemporary cultural production” should remain at the core of Asian American criticism. Lim (1997), on the other hand, argues for an explicitly “transnational consciousness” (298) that resists the “hegemonizing dynamics” (291) of the position centered around the American national context. Finally, Susan Koshy (1996, 317) occupies a middle position in the debate, suggesting that neither of the above positions is sufficient on its own to capture “the scope and transformative impact of transnationalism on Asian American ethnicity.” (Kong 2010, 139-140.)

The conflict between national and diasporic concerns figures prominently in Asian American literature, often taking the form of a generational conflict (Anderson & Lee 2005, 9). Yet, these two dimensions of Asian American cultural formations are not mutually exclusive. To this end, Kong (2010, 147) proposes that besides reading newly published Asian American texts from a perspective that restores the hyphen’s significance, it is equally possible to read already canonized Asian American texts from a diasporic perspective of “rewriting origin” and to reassess the canonical “via the lens of the contemporary.” But as many of the theoretical positions described above suggest, diaspora, displacement, and transnationality also have material dimensions which should not be overshadowed by overly celebratory notions of transnational mobility. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1993, 121) has eminently argued that while in mainstream American historical and literary discourses, mobility has often been translated as “Extravagance,” in the Asian American cultural context it has traditionally been determined by “Necessity.” The narratives examined in the present study describe experiences that resonate predominantly with the latter notion of mobility that foregrounds its being rooted in necessity rather than extravagance. This narrative of mobility as necessity is nevertheless disrupted by another narrative in which mobility may also entail extravagance. These two narrative lines intersect, for instance, in *Crossings*, where Fourth Jane’s voluntary exile to Paris

contrasts with her family's emigration from China as wartime exiles, and in *Bone*, where the apparent difficulties of the older generation of the Leong family to maintain a steady income as well as Leon Leong's personal immigration history as Grandpa Leong's paper son are juxtaposed with the youngest daughter Nina's choice to become, first, a flight attendant shuttling between New York and distant destinations such as Hong Kong, and later, a tour guide in China. This contrasting of two opposing perspectives to mobility and diaspora resonates interestingly with Kong's articulation of a bilateral reading practice that allows the simultaneous addressing of national and diasporic concerns in Asian American literary narratives.

In the aftermath of the millennium, two collections of essays appeared with an explicitly diasporic or transnational focus. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa's (2001) collection addresses questions pertaining specifically to Asian American studies; Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih's (2005) collection encompasses a broader range of fields, all invested in minority cultural formations. In the introduction to their book, Chuh and Shimakawa (2001, 2) set out to "excavate certain practices of producing knowledge about 'Asia'" that might assist in understanding and disrupting "Asiatic racialization." Lionnet and Shih (2005, 8), again, propose a new paradigm of "minor transnationalism" that differs from "the postnational, nomadic, and 'flexible' norms of citizenship" and recognizes the the minor transnational subject's "psychic and material investment in one or more given particular geopolitical spaces." Recent book-length studies of Asian American literature with a particular investment in the transnational and diasporic critical paradigm include Eleanor Ty's (2010), Pinchia Feng's (2010), and Silvia Schulterland's (2009) already mentioned works and Helena Grice's (2009) recent study that examines several generic traditions of transnational Asian and Asian American writing in parallel, as well as a collection of essays featuring an explicitly transnational approach to Asian American writing edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, John Blair Gamber, Stephen Hong Sohn, and Gina Valentino (2006). In their introduction to the collection, the editors argue that as a result of the recent shifts in the Asian American literary imaginary toward a more transnational perspective, "Asian American literature can no longer be viewed as merely a minor ethnic province of a domestic American canon" (Lim & al. 2006, 22). Rachel C. Lee (1999) and Patricia P. Chu (2000) both focus on gendered strategies of authorship; Lee's study adopts a perspective that juxtaposes national and transnational discourses in Asian American literature and moves from ethnicity-related concerns toward a more gender-sensitive approach, whereas Chu's study approaches the very construction of ethnicity in American literature from the perspective of gender. Finally, comparative approaches to Asian American literature are manifest in several recent studies which read Asian American narratives in parallel with African American and Jewish American literature; among such works are those by Daniel Y. Kim (2005), Caroline Rody (2009), Cathy Schlund-Vials (2011), and Klara Szymańko (2008).

4 ON METHODOLOGY: AESTHETICS, ETHICS, POLITICS

“What kinds of knowledge do literary texts provide and what kinds of commitment are required to mobilize culture in the service of an anticolonial, anti-racist emancipatory project?,” asks Christopher Lee (2010, 21) in a recent effort to chart some of the key questions that have motivated Asian American literary studies since its early stages. Lee’s account seems to focus particularly on the relationship between literature and theory, on the one hand, and on the relationship between aesthetics and politics, on the other. These are issues that largely motivate the present study as well. As I have noted earlier, the dynamics between aesthetics, ethics, and politics in literary analysis are of particular interest to my inquiry. More than a mere research question, this conceptual threesome forms a methodological problem for the sociologically oriented literary scholar, and less directly, but no less significantly, to any scholar of literature. That politics is present in the most mundane choices we make in our daily lives has been established by critical theories such as feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial criticism, and this does not come as a surprise to anyone coming from those fields of study. It seems appropriate, therefore, to assume that scholarly activities are no exception, and that in fact, because of the specific role academic scholarship plays in the production and evaluation of knowledge, its political implications should be addressed with a particular focus. This is true, of course, for literary criticism as much as for any other form of scholarly activity. While critical readings with an ethical focus are often explicitly political, readings that concentrate on the aesthetic aspect of literature sometimes lack such explicitness. As my reading of the four novels under investigation in this dissertation is centered around both dimensions – the ethical and the aesthetic dimension of the texts – it provides an intriguing possibility to explore the complex relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and politics in literary analysis at large.

My method of reading in the present study is closely related to what Pinchia Feng (2010, 17) calls “attentive reading,” a method that “[pays] close attention to the historical and cultural nuances of each text” and relies on several

distinct critical and theoretical practices. I seek solutions to the research problems presented earlier through a thematic close-reading of the texts that comprise the corpus of this dissertation. The most important theoretical practices guiding my interpretation are feminist and psychoanalytical literary criticism, although my reading is not restricted to these critical frameworks. Feng's notion of attentive reading shares the conviction familiar from reader-response criticism that "meaning is a consequence of being in a particular situation in the world" (Tompkins 1980, xxv; quoted in Feng 2010, 17). To acknowledge the situatedness of all production of meaning implies that both literature and literary criticism need to be viewed as political in the sense that they not only reflect but also constitute reality (Tompkins 1980, xxv). Second, Feng's insistence on attentive reading has an affinity with Wayne C. Booth's concept of "ethical criticism," which emphasizes how the reader's character (ethos) and her or his understanding of the surrounding world are affected by reading, provided that one fully appreciates the nuances of the literary text (Feng 2010, 18).¹⁵ The notion of attentive reading, however, goes beyond a mere attempt to reformulate these theoretical accounts. "Attentive reading," Feng argues, "is in fact a reading strategy derived from the long history of exclusion [...] that constitutes and defines Asian American women's struggle for representation." Thus, it "requires us to pay close attention to the material histories of racial, sexual, and class struggle, which are often rendered abject in official records of national history." (Ibid.) This aspect of attentive reading – its being rooted in "the material histories of racial, sexual, and class struggle" – is what is at the heart of my critical endeavor, which seeks precisely to delineate the legacy of loss arising from "the long history of exclusion" suffered by Asian Americans, as it is expressed in the four Chinese American texts examined in this dissertation.

While I share Feng's (2010, 18) conviction that "literature is political and carries with it ethical responsibility," I do not wish to disregard the recently surfaced suspicion toward symptomatic reading, as I have mentioned before. Symptomatic reading, as Anne Anlin Cheng (2009) explains, owes much to the psychoanalytical method in its aspiration to reveal what lies within a text's subconscious, so to speak. Symptomatic reading as a concept was first introduced by Louis Althusser, who himself had been influenced by the work of Freud and Lacan, but it was Fredric Jameson (2002) who popularized the concept among Anglo-American cultural critics and those invested in Marxist or postcolonial criticism (Cheng 2009, 87). Cheng summarizes Jameson's account of symptomatic reading as follows: "by disclosing the absent cause that structures the text's inclusions and exclusions, the critic restores to the surface the deep history that the text represses" (ibid., 88). Ultimately, symptomatic reading aims at

¹⁵ In a similar fashion, Vietnamese American author Monique Truong (2012) has suggested that writing is essentially about exploring the possibilities and limitations of language as a medium of sharing, while reading, in turn, promotes empathy by giving the reader an opportunity to inhabit, as it were, a different mindset and a different body. This conception of reading is in line with Feng's (2010, 18) insight that "being attentive to a literary text creates a 'habitat' – an accustomed place and home-like space – for the practitioner of ethical criticism and [...] the text that she or he reads."

instigating social change through the unveiling of hidden or repressed meaning in a given text. In the last decade or so, the disillusionment fallen upon psychoanalysis as a “talking cure,” so to speak, seems to have extended itself to literary criticism and its potential for bringing about political change; the common realization regarding psychoanalysis, according to Cheng, has been that instead of offering a curative change or eliminating the symptoms that initially marked the need for therapy, psychoanalysis is more about “learning to live with one’s symptoms” and making an effort “to reconcile one to the very impossibility of change,” as she writes (*ibid.*). Here, I subscribe to Cheng’s critical insight that even if literary analysis cannot elicit social change or eliminate material injustice, its most important contribution may lie, instead, in its ability to “voic[e] that which political expediency cannot afford to acknowledge” and to bestow upon us “the difficult gift of being uncertain” (*ibid.*, 91). I think that it is precisely here, then, in the state of being uncertain and not knowing, where ethics comes to play. It is in this uncertainty where the possibility for affective and ethically invested reading opens up, reminding us that although there might not be a final cure for the social and political divides and discrepancies that cause friction both on an individual and on a communal level, the ethical choice available to us is to stay alert to the social, political, and material effects of these divides, while simultaneously acknowledging their constructedness and aspiring to look beyond them.

The relationship between literature and ethics remains somewhat elusive despite the fact that several attempts have been directed toward making it more tangible. Liesbeth Korthals Altes (2005, 142) distinguishes between three major lines of thought concerning the role of ethics in literary narratives. Some theorists, most notably Martha Nussbaum (1990), have argued for an approach based on the humanist tradition that builds on an Aristotelian and pragmatic notion of ethics, thus regarding narrative fiction as a valuable companion to moral philosophy and an important source for experiential learning with an inherent ability to enhance our ethical awareness. Nussbaum, for instance, is interested in exploring the myriad ties that connect philosophy to literature and vice versa: the relationship of ethics to the form and content of literary narratives, the character of ethical knowledge and its relation to formal and stylistic features of literary texts, and the role of emotions and affects in advancing ethical awareness (Nussbaum 1990, ix). The humanistic understanding of literary ethics is also at the heart of the more formally invested efforts in rhetorical narratology to examine the narrative techniques and devices that contribute to the reader’s ethical engagement with a given text (for instance, Booth 1988; Phelan 1996). The humanistic roots of the kind of literary ethics described above become suspect in the deconstructive ethics developed by theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Paul de Man, among others. In this line of thought, the potential ethical insight offered by literary narratives is attributed to the ultimately undecidable character of language and meaning – and hence also moral values – as well as to “the radical strangeness of the other, the self, and the world” (Korthals Altes 2005, 142). The undecidability of the decon-

structive ethics arises from this understanding of language as ultimately ambivalent; because the meaning is forever deferred, there can be no closure nor any pre-inscribed moral values to be reconstructed from a literary text. In contrast, the ethical value of literary narratives lies precisely in this kind of undecidability and ambiguity of meaning. Finally, a similar suspicion toward the humanistic understanding of the relationship between ethics and literature motivates a number of critical perspectives focusing on concerns related to the representations of race, gender, and class in literature. These approaches, such as feminist and postcolonial literary criticism, do not necessarily subscribe to the deconstructionist idea of undecidability as the ultimate site of literary ethics, but they also reject the humanistic notion of literary ethics as complicitous with patriarchal and colonial oppression and as symptomatic of the unequal distribution of power that comes with it. (Korthals Altes 2005, 142.)

As Korthals Altes (2005, 145) correctly points out, both approaches – the humanistic understanding of language as a reliable vehicle of meaning and of literary texts as expressions of ethical values that have the potential of being reconstructed, and the deconstructive notion of language as ultimately ambivalent and literature as a site of undecidability, absence of meaning, and strangeness of the self – are arguably reductive. I am, therefore, inclined to agree with her observation that “there is no such thing as ‘the’ ethics of a text, only various ethical readings” (ibid., 145). The text by itself, I would argue, is neither a transparent carrier of moral values nor void of any ethical meaning whatsoever. I believe that through a careful reading that pays detailed attention, first, to the narrative and aesthetic features present in the text, and second, to the historical and cultural context of the text, it is possible to say something about the ethics of that particular text. This does not imply, of course, that other things cannot be said about it as well. However, if any kind of ethics is to be found in literary narratives, it lies in the dialogue between the text and the reader rather than in the text itself. As Nicholas Royle (2003, 52) has remarked, “intellectual uncertainty” does not necessarily have to be “a dead-end sense of not knowing or of indeterminacy,” but it can also be seen as “an experience of something open, generative, exhilarating” – or, in other words, as “the trembling of what remains undecidable.” Undecidability, then, does not undermine all and any efforts to say something about the ethics of a given text; rather, it reminds us of the fact that there is always something in literary narratives that remains hidden and out of our reach. The deconstructive approach to literary ethics that emphasizes the inherent strangeness of the other and the self and advocates the ultimate undecidability of language, meaning, and ethical values, is not sufficient for investigating representations of race, class, and gender in literary narratives – and these are not concerns that are only relevant for minority literatures – but, as Ien Ang (2001, 178) suggests, recognizing the ambivalence and partiality necessarily present in all critical efforts that operate on the axis between gender and race is a crucial condition for the possibility of ethically sustainable criticism.

The focus of the present study on loss and melancholia also bears a close relation to the study of affectivity, which is perhaps most apparent in Santa Ana's (2004, 25) notion of an "affect-identity" descriptive of the condition of the minority subject in ethnic American writing who "mediates commodified euphoria in postmodernism and historically based pain in material relations." The significance of affectivity for ethical and political considerations has been studied by several feminist scholars (for instance Ahmed 2004; Sedgwick 2003; Terada 2001). Similarly, questions regarding the interrelationship between affects, literary narration, interpretation, and ethics have become subjects of growing interest among literary scholars, particularly during the past decade (for instance Altieri 2003; Liljeström & Paasonen 2010; Ngai 2005; Palumbo-Liu 2005; Pearce 1997; Rajan 2006). Scholars of affectivity have given the interrelated terms 'affect,' 'emotion,' and 'feeling' diverse definitions, but Rei Terada's (2001, 4) distinction between 'emotion' as referring to "a psychological, at least minimally interpretive experience" and 'affect' as its physiological counterpart seems particularly fruitful for the purposes of the present study, which examines melancholia equally as a psychic and a bodily experience. 'Feeling,' in Terada's account, functions as a unifying concept that contains both the psychological dimension of emotions and the physiological dimension of affects (*ibid.*). This suggests that the bodily and the psychic dimension of affectivity are always intertwined so that it may not be fruitful to speak about them separately. Although I do not systematically rely upon any of the above definitions in this study, they may offer some heuristic insight into the different nuances of affectivity and how those nuances might relate to the study of melancholia in literary narratives.

This study does not investigate affectivity as a theoretical question pertaining to the reading process as such; instead, it explores the affective investments of literary characters in the fictional narratives it examines. However, by combining a historically (and thereby politically) informed reading with a simultaneous focus on the aesthetic quality of the narratives, it challenges any conventional notions of literary criticism as an activity that is primarily or solely interested in the cognitive and intellectual aspects of literature. While refusing to acknowledge the political as an important critical category for literary analysis, such readings would likely grant affective processes such as melancholia little attention; at best, melancholia might appear in such readings as a question belonging strictly to the realm of the aesthetic. More often than not, however, the aesthetic and the political cannot be meaningfully separated in the first place. To quote Rita Felski (2003a, 12), "trying to hold literature and the social apart is a Sisyphean task: however valiantly critics try to keep art pure, external meaning keeps seeping in." Feminist literary criticism, as Felski notes, has at times been criticized on the grounds that by considering the social and political aspects of literature, it turns its back to the aesthetic quality of literary texts, disregarding the literary in them. The idea behind such criticism is that one cannot do both at once. (*Ibid.*, 6.) The present study is one attempt to prove that it is indeed possible to do both at once, and that not only is it possible, but in many

instances, it is also the only way to begin to do justice to the complexity of the texts under discussion. Moreover, I believe that it is not only the political or the ethical aspects of literary narratives that are imbued with affects. Affectivity is a crucial dynamic behind any evaluation we make about literary narratives, whether they concern the ethical, political, or the aesthetic aspects of the text. Not only are affects responsible for why we want to read in the first place, but affectivity is also an important reason for literature making sense to us.

In an essay exploring contemporary South Asian fiction in North America with a special focus on writings by Indian American Jhumpa Lahiri and Indian Canadian Anita Rau Badami, Gita Rajan (2006) suggests that many recent South Asian North American literary texts convey an aesthetic insight she calls "an aesthetic of affect" (104), which often builds on a carefully articulated opposition between the symbolic or "representational" aspect of aesthetics, and the material or "real" aspect of ethics (110). This "narrative disjuncture," the discrepancy between the representational or the aesthetic level of the text and the 'real' or ethical level of the text – the latter standing for how things 'really' are in the storyworld as opposed to how they are represented by the narrator or the characters of the story – invites the reader to consider the ethical ramifications of the different choices that the characters of the story are facing (*ibid.*, 110). In a similar fashion, in many instances of Chinese American women's writing, the aesthetic features of the text create a narrative disjuncture which casts a melancholic light on what is narrated, thus prompting the reader to read the text with a reasonable amount of suspicion, so to speak.

One of the main challenges for Asian Americanist cultural criticism, during the past two decades or so, has been to decipher how to avoid repeating the political and ideological binaries that were characteristic of the early stages of Asian American cultural studies without losing the political potential inherent in humanist inquiry for advancing social equity and disrupting unequal power relations. In literary criticism, the above polarity has often resulted in a tendency of critics to approach literary texts in terms of either resistance to or compliance with the prevailing racial relations in American society. Colleen Lye (2007, 6) formulates the task at hand as follows: "the problem of theorizing 'Asian American literature' remains one of how to move beyond a dualistic conceptualization of American and Asian American cultures, [...] politics, and [...] subjects." Reading Asian American literature as inherently separate from what is regarded as mainstream American literature is one symptom of this persistent polarity, which often undermines scholarly efforts to focus on the aesthetic and literary quality of Asian American texts. Similar concerns regarding the ideological polarization of Asian American literary studies have been voiced by a number of scholars (for instance Cheung 1990; Nguyen 2002; Zhou 2005). According to Viet Thanh Nguyen, such "ideological rigidity" that leads critics simplistically to "evaluate resistance as positive and accommodation as negative" fails to see the ideological heterogeneity present in Asian American writing (2002, 7). In addition to that, this polarity has at times resulted in a relative disregard of the artistic complexity of the texts as well as in a disregard of "the

ways in which Asian American authors have resisted, subverted, and reshaped hegemonic European American literary genres" (Zhou 2005, 4).

The failure in Asian American literary criticism to account for the question of what sets literature apart from other forms of writing – the aesthetic dimension of literary representation – has been recognized by a number of scholars. Timothy Yu (2009, 7) argues that "conventional accounts of Asian American and other ethnic writings tend to proceed from the social to the aesthetic, positing an Asian American culture or experience that then finds expression in Asian American art." This tendency to foreground the social dimension at the expense of the aesthetic qualities of Asian American writing is evident from the vast amount of critical readings focusing on questions of identity at the confluence of race, class, and gender. Despite the continuing investment in sociologically oriented literary criticism among scholars of Asian American writing, an increasing interest toward the aesthetic dimension of Asian American texts has surfaced in recent years (for instance Davis & Lee 2006; Huang 2010; Lee 2012; Ng 2007; Park 2008; Zhou & Najmi 2005). Along with this shift in focus, the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and politics has garnered new scholarly attention. Kandice Chuh (2003, 27, emphasis original) argues for an approach that "direct[s] attention to critical methods and attitudes that attend to the literariness of 'Asian American,'" suggesting that the term 'Asian American' itself can be understood as "a *metaphor* for resistance and racism," and that as such, it possesses a certain literariness that literary studies may help illuminate. In line with Chuh's assertion of the literariness of the term 'Asian American,' Timothy Yu (2009, 5) maintains that Asian American culture itself is a fiction created amidst the social upheaval of the 1960s in order to assist Asian Americans of different ethnic origins in their shared political efforts. Rather than understanding it as an organic racial category, 'Asian American culture' should therefore be understood "as a modern rubric that yokes together different groups and individuals, regardless of ethnic or socioeconomic origin, for the purposes of political organization and dissent" (ibid.). Such an understanding of Asian American writing does not undermine the importance of reading Asian American texts from a socially and politically oriented standpoint, but rather allows us to see more clearly how different Asian American texts vary from each other with respect to both the social and the aesthetic dimension.

Mark Chiang (2006, 18) argues that politically oriented criticism in Asian American literary studies has neglected the aesthetic specificity of literary representation to such a degree that it has obscured critics' understanding of what makes literature different from other forms of writing. Sue-Im Lee (2006, 2, emphasis original) defines the aesthetic as "the *constructed* dimension of the literary" and contends that this category of analysis has been overlooked in a large part of Asian American literary criticism. Instead of proposing an analytical approach that would supersede political concerns related to questions of race, gender, sexuality, and nation, she argues for "the complementary possibility of a historically and materially engaged analysis that *also* recognizes the aesthetic as a rich critical variable" (ibid., 1, emphasis original). In a similar vein, Caro-

line Rody (2009, xiii) adopts a “political formalist” method of reading, a term that she borrows from Rita Felski, which relies upon an insistence on “the primacy and preeminence of aesthetic form” (Felski 2003b, 510) while at the same time engaging in ideological critique. One of the first explicit attempts to address the question of literary form in Asian American writing is Jinqi Ling’s (1998) study, which focuses on early Asian American narratives and presents a similar critique of the absence of form as an analytical category in previous analyses of early Asian American writing. Feng’s notion of attentive reading, which I have discussed above, is a more recent formulation of an analytical method that aims “to re-locate the aesthetic in Asian American literary discourse” while considering the historical and cultural traces in Asian American narratives (Feng 2010, 19). Christopher Lee (2012, 17) also warns against “the lure of realism” which assumes an unmediated access to social reality through art, thus masking the specific character of literary narration. “The problem with such claims, in and of themselves,” Lee writes, “is that they posit a seamless relationship between socio-historical knowledge and literary representation” (ibid., 18). Lee’s position, by contrast, is one that “treats the aesthetic as the terrain in which these relationships are constantly re-negotiated by attending to how form reveals the mediated relationships among knowledge, representation, and subjectivity” (ibid.). Similarly, it is not pure formalism, the form in itself, that intrigues me here; rather, it is what the form and the aesthetic features of a text can reveal about its thematic content, including its ethical import, that interests me in this study. In line with Lee’s suggestion that the aesthetic dimension of a literary text “denotes a mode of cognition that exceeds the parameters of rational knowledge and/or political agency” (ibid., 13), I believe that paying careful attention to the aesthetic in literary narratives allows us to engage in an affective and ethical encounter with the text. Here, I agree with David Palumbo-Liu’s (2005, 52) observation that accounting for the aesthetic in Asian American literary narratives is crucial particularly “because it leads to the production of an ethically informed affect.”

While questions related to history and ‘the body’ are among the subjects most frequently addressed in Asian American literary and cultural studies, they continue to offer relevant perspectives for literary analysis focused on Asian American writing (Pak & Tsou 2011, 171). My reading of the four Chinese American texts examined in the present study is a response to the recent calls for a more balanced application of formalist and historicist approaches to Asian American literature. Although my analysis explicitly addresses the aesthetic or formal dimension of the novels in question, it does not aspire to do so at the expense of the social and political. On the contrary, this study is guided by my conviction that it is precisely a combination of what may be called formalist and historicist approaches to literature that is needed at present to generate novel perspectives on Asian American writing and to better understand its transformative potential. This is not to say that I wish to advocate a politically instrumental view of Asian American literature, which has been the main source of criticism for the new “formalist movement” in Asian American literary stud-

ies during the past decade (Lye 2008, 94). Instead, I believe that whatever political or transformative power literature may have, it is best unveiled through an approach that fully appreciates its aesthetic and literary qualities. It is precisely the “complementary possibility” (cf. Lee 2006, 1) of combining a historically and politically informed analysis with an equally strong focus on the aesthetic that functions as the guiding principle for this study. Colleen Lye (2008, 95) advocates such “historical formalism” on the grounds that a “formalistic formalism” seems inadequate for conceptualizing Asian Americanness, “because there can be no such thing as an Asian American aesthetic form.” What “historical formalism” has to offer instead, Lye suggests, has more to do with asking relevant questions than with providing final answers to those questions.¹⁶

Because of the political investment that has characterized Asian American studies since its inception, Chiang (2006, 18) notes, “dominant liberal notions of the aesthetic as a domain apart from politics” do not readily sit with Asian American literary criticism, which is evident from the numerous controversies and debates over questions of authenticity and representation that mark the relatively short history of Asian American literature. However, the reason why the aesthetic has been a “missing category” (cf. Lee 2006, 5) in Asian American literary discourse is not that questions pertaining to the aesthetic have not been addressed by Asian Americanist literary scholars. Rather, the absence of the form and the aesthetic from critical readings of Asian American literature has seemed so pervasive because questions regarding the form and the style of Asian American texts have often not been addressed explicitly as questions of the aesthetic in their own right; instead, they have been subsumed under the realm of the political. Thus, the recent turn toward the aesthetic as a relevant category of analysis in Asian American literary criticism is above all a discursive shift. Representation has historically been conceived primarily as either political or aesthetic, Chiang (2009, 8) contends. This has resulted in a markedly polarized situation in which political and aesthetic representation are seen either as fundamentally different and therefore incommensurable, or as fundamentally the same, in which case aesthetic representation such as narrative fiction is viewed as ultimately reflecting “a particular structure of political representation.” Chiang suggests, however, an alternative position that “seeks to preserve the relative autonomy of the field of cultural production even as it explicates the complex articulation that nevertheless links it to the political field.” (Ibid.) I find his position in the debate particularly fitting for the context of the present study, which seeks to address the political and the aesthetic as two autonomous and equally important dimensions of literary representation that nevertheless connect in significant ways.

¹⁶ “If literature is a privileged medium for the documentation of subjectivity,” Lye writes, “literary criticism’s significant contribution to Asian American studies may lie in its ability to theorize the historicity of the Asian American subject, to ask, What is its historical status? What are the subject’s temporal and spatial locations? What are its determinate conditions of existence, the varieties of its social effects, the range of its political interests?” (Lye 2008, 95-96.)

The study at hand approaches the four Asian American texts under discussion from the vantage point of these recent developments, attempting to weigh both the social and the aesthetic dimension of the narratives equally, without prioritizing either. In literary criticism, the question of methodology often appears elusive; not because there is no clear method of inquiry, but rather because the method – reading and interpreting texts – seems too self-evident. Nonetheless, all reading and interpretation of literary texts rely on some theoretical and epistemological premises that impact on the outcome of the reading process. In addition, reading itself can be carried out in a number of ways that might be called different methods of reading, even if it is difficult to give a precise account of methodology in literary analysis. Based on all that has been said above, I would suggest that in reading minority literatures, the much criticized hermeneutics of suspicion has not become entirely vacuous, although it may require certain modifications as a methodological approach in order for it to retain its critical value.

As Sue-Im Lee (2006, 1-2) points out, sociological and cultural materialist approaches have dominated Asian American literary criticism for the simple reason that the birth and subsequent institutionalization of Asian American literary studies as a recognized field of literary inquiry “has depended upon its ability to represent the material realities of its marginalized [...] hitherto ‘invisible,’ ‘disenfranchised,’ or ‘silent’ subjects.” To a significant degree, this is still the case. One possible solution might be found in Cheng’s (2009, 99) proposal that we replace symptomatic reading and the attendant hermeneutics of suspicion with what she calls a “hermeneutics of susceptibility,” a critical approach less concerned with finding a cure for the symptoms than with acknowledging the melancholic “stuckness” and “the radical indeterminacy” (ibid., 91) of human subjectivity. Such an approach would encourage us to listen and remain open to ‘endings’ different from what we might expect. To this end, Cheng asks, quoting Faulkner’s *Light in August*: “Can we put ourselves in a state of hermeneutic uncertainty that might in turn place us in a position to listen and be susceptible to that which ‘pass[es] out of the realm of hearing’?” (Cheng 2009, 99). Combining the aesthetic and the ethical aspects of reading, as both Lee and Cheng seem to suggest, entails that it is indeed possible to imagine a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion without resorting to the negative as the only possible point of departure, even when there are political issues at stake. Responding to this challenge is a task that I wish to address in the present study. At the very least, this dissertation might be a beginning for a critical endeavor that seeks to address the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political as autonomous yet interconnected dimensions of literary representation without falling prey to the predetermined fixation on the negative that is characteristic of symptomatic reading. In this task, Feng’s concept of attentive reading and Sedgwick’s notion of reparative reading offer useful, albeit loose, methodological guidelines for the analysis carried out in the articles.

5 SUMMARIES OF THE ARTICLES

This chapter summarizes the content and the key findings of each of the four original articles that comprise this dissertation. The articles are presented in chronological sequence according to the order in which they were initially written. This decision has grown from the observation that during the process of conducting research for this dissertation, my thinking on the subject and the focus of this study has gone through a long journey that can best be retraced by examining the written products of that research in chronological order. While the general theme that conjoins the essays is melancholia and its relationship to ethics and aesthetics in the selected narratives, each of the four articles seeks to illuminate this common thematic from a particular angle, accentuating different manifestations of loss and melancholia depending on which authors and texts are given priority in each essay. Given their shared thematic focus on questions related to the notion of melancholia, some theoretical overlap between the articles is unavoidable, although I have tried to keep it to a minimum. This said, I believe that an approach that returns to the same narratives several times, each time from a slightly shifted angle, has something of value to offer to the study of Chinese American women's writing. Most importantly, it has enabled me to come to the wider conclusion that the fiction investigated in this dissertation is characterized by what I call an ethics and an aesthetics of melancholia. This conclusion, together with the overall findings of the articles combined, is discussed in greater detail in chapter six. Before that, however, individual summaries of each of the original articles are in order. The chronological sequence in which the articles and their summaries are presented unveils a scholarly journey through Chinese American women's fiction that begins with an aesthetically motivated focus on questions of displacement and emotional exile, continues through an ethically oriented investigation of history and the body, and finally arrives at the intersection of two conflicting motivations that characterize human existence: an impulse toward self-destruction, on the one hand, and a need to love and to be loved, on the other.

5.1 Inhabiting the In-between: Article I

The first of the four articles comprising this dissertation is entitled "Shifting the Center: Emotional Exile and the Aesthetic of Displacement in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*." Written in the spring of 2010, the article appeared later the same year as a chapter in the collection *Positioning the New: Chinese American Literature and the Changing Image of the American Literary Canon* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), edited by Tanfer Emin Tunc and Elisabetta Marino. This essay examines Chuang Hua's *Crossings* (1968) as an aesthetically innovative albeit often overlooked part of the Asian American literary tradition. *Crossings* remains Chuang Hua's only known written work; it has not been accorded the same scholarly attention as Maxine Hong Kingston's and Fae Myenne Ng's fiction, nor has it thus far occupied a central position in the canons of American or Asian American literature. The present reading of the novel nevertheless suggests that Chuang's narrative features a uniquely constituted literary aesthetic that mirrors its protagonist's melancholic emotional condition, and thus offers a stylistically and thematically compelling contribution to the body of Asian American literature. As such, the article posits, Chuang Hua's work appears as a significant thematic and aesthetic precursor for the subsequent tradition of Chinese American women's writing.

Reflecting the metacritical beginnings of the larger research project under which this article was born, it sustains a dialogic relationship to earlier readings of the novel. In an effort to provide a complementary perspective on the scholarship on *Crossings*, the essay approaches Chuang's narrative through a parallel focus on its melancholic thematics, on the one hand, and its highly expressive literary aesthetic, on the other. *Crossings* recounts its protagonist Fourth Jane's personal search for self through a long series of geographical, cultural, and emotional crossings, framed by an account of the progression of her romantic relationship with a married Parisian journalist. Despite all the geographical and cultural crossings she has undergone in her life, Fourth Jane nevertheless often finds physical movement insurmountably difficult; while movement and decision-making become increasingly difficult for Fourth Jane, time seems to become denser with overlapping memories, dreams, and fantasies that weave the past and the present together – so inseparably that one cannot always tell what is real and what is imagined. This article approaches Fourth Jane's melancholic condition through an examination of the aesthetic features of the text, suggesting that her psychic stuckness and sense of liminality, termed here as 'emotional exile,' are expressed in Chuang's narrative through an innovative and experimental use of narrative techniques and stylistic devices. This 'aesthetic of displacement' manifest in *Crossings* is in part marked by modernist tendencies, but most importantly, it is suggestive of the constant shifts in perception that characterize subject formation in diasporic conditions, particularly for gendered and racialized minority subjects.

5.2 The Melancholic Ethics of “Re-membering:” Article II

The second article is a revised version of a paper presented at a multidisciplinary conference on cultural studies under the theme “Panic and Mourning,” held in Lisbon, Portugal, in October 2010. Entitled “Negotiating Loss and Betrayal: Melancholic Ethics and Narrative Agency in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock*,” this article was subsequently published in the collection *Panic and Mourning: The Cultural Work of Trauma* (Walter de Gruyter, 2012), edited by Daniela Agostinho, Elisa Antz, and Cátia Ferreira. The article explores Ng’s two novels against the backdrop of two historically influential narratives of racial abjection, the so-called ‘yellow peril’ and ‘model minority’ rhetorics, surrounding Chinese immigration to the United States since the nineteenth century. It examines *Bone* (1993) and *Steer Toward Rock* (2008) as narratives of loss, suggesting that this narrative of loss operates in the novels on two interconnected levels. Both texts center around personal histories of loss as experienced by their narrators and main characters; these individual narratives are closely tied to the communal history of loss pertaining to the history of Chinese immigration to the United States. This historical undercurrent, which can also be conceived of in terms of betrayal, the article proposes, is not only characterized by a communal sense of loss, but also by racial abjection.

Racial abjection manifests explicitly in the discriminatory legislation which came into force in the late nineteenth century to restrict the influx of Chinese immigrants to the country, and in the essentializing, racist discourses that accompanied both the enactment of the exclusionary laws and their later repeal in the mid-twentieth century. These historical developments inform the family narratives recounted in Ng’s two novels, which are both situated in San Francisco’s Chinatown. In *Bone*, the grief fallen upon the Leong family after the middle daughter of the family, Ona, takes her own life, is interrupted by the family members’ personal struggles further aggravated by the material circumstances they have inherited. This melancholic undercurrent is reflected in the novel’s reverse temporality that defies the linear chronology of historical narrative. In *Steer Toward Rock*, the family narrative of loss is recounted from multiple perspectives, most pronouncedly by the novel’s protagonist Jack Moon Szeto, a man who has invented his identity to enter the country and later gambles his citizenship, to no avail, in the Chinese Confession Program to win over the woman he loves. Despite the strong presence of narratives concentrating on loss in both texts, Ng’s novels also express a more hopeful element conceptualized in the article as narrative agency. This is evident in the ‘melancholic ethics’ at work in the novels, at the heart of which is not only an effort to “re-member” and to recount individual and communal histories left outside dominant historical narrative, but equally to remain conscious of those histories that will not or can no longer be told.

5.3 Narrating the Hypochondriacal Body: Article III

Another end product of a process that began from a conference paper, the third article is based on a presentation given at the conference "Asian American Literature and the Legacy of Maxine Hong Kingston," held in Mulhouse, France, in March 2011. This article will appear under the name "Surviving the Loss: Abjection and Hypochondria in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*" in a collection edited by Sämi Ludwig and Nicoleta Alexoae Zagni (LIT Verlag, forthcoming). This article examines Ng's and Kingston's debut novels from a perspective that pays particular attention to the body as the material locus of racial abjection. It discusses abjection and hypochondria as manifestations of a specifically Chinese American inheritance of loss arising from the long history of exclusion and characterized by the affective formation of racial melancholia. Hypochondria emerges in the narratives discussed in the article as a severe bodily response to racial abjection, which renders the narrators of the two novels in a melancholic bind of being both the subject and the object of racial abjection, and, at the same time, neither the subject nor the object in national subject formation. In both texts, suicide plays a central role as a catalyst for the narrators' personal struggles with abjection and hypochondria, revealing a deep-rooted sense of guilt and a spiral of family conflict that adds to their psychic and bodily symptoms. Although of all the characters in the two novels, Kingston's narrator suffers from the most severe case of hypochondria, several other characters exhibit less obvious symptoms of this melancholic response in which what is either lost or rendered abject is internalized and projected onto the body as symptoms of a physical ailment.

In an effort to investigate the complex affective investments that manifest as physical symptoms in Kingston's and Ng's characters, particularly in their narrators, this article concentrates on a close reading of certain key episodes in both narratives. The article suggests that in both texts the dead and broken human body functions as a metaphorical, and, simultaneously, pronouncedly material image of the emotional brokenness that inflicts their first and second generation Chinese American characters. In a similar fashion, it further argues, the American national body is a 'broken body' as long as it fails to incorporate its ethnic minorities and racialized Others into its national self-image. Thus, the Chinese American legacy of loss articulated in this article appears as more than a simply negative inheritance; its artistic expressions may in fact contain transformative power directed at pointing out fractures and fissures in the national body that must be addressed if a sound and equitable national self-image is to be attained. Both works examined in the article are characterized by an opposition between a narrative of loss, abjection, and melancholic introjection, on the one hand, and a narrative of healing, self-reflection, and active ethical agency, on the other. As such, these two texts suggest that lodged within the very affects of grief and melancholia lies a prospect for agency and survival that can be reached through a variety of means.

5.4 In the Mood for Melancholia: Article IV¹⁷

Entitled “Displaced Desires: The Dislocated Self and Melancholic Desire in Chuang Hua’s *Crossings* and Fae Myenne Ng’s *Steer Toward Rock*,” the fourth article has been submitted for publication to *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*. This article investigates what I have termed ‘melancholic desire’ in Chuang Hua’s *Crossings* and Fae Myenne Ng’s *Steer Toward Rock*, two aesthetically innovative Chinese American prose narratives that have so far inspired relatively few scholarly readings. Although published forty years apart, these two texts share important thematic and stylistic features. Both novels convey a melancholic image of displaced desires – loved ones who are lost, beyond reach, or unresponsive – echoed by the complex narrative structure and rich stylistic repertoire at work in both texts. Further, both narratives address questions of memory and remembrance, suggesting that memory often operates through an undulating back and forth movement between the past and the present, which is also characteristic of melancholia. Drawing from the psychoanalytically informed notion of racial melancholia, this article argues that in both works, the dynamics of melancholia manifests itself most prominently in the ways their dislocated characters negotiate between a melancholic desire to preserve a lost object of love and a persistent quest for an integrated sense of self.

With the notion of racial melancholia as one of its key concepts, the theoretical framework of the fourth article is largely similar to the theoretical framework present in the first three articles. Its approach to the texts under analysis differs, however, from those of the other articles in important respects. Albeit informed by the difficult history of political, economic, and social exclusion pertaining to Asian Americans, the focus of this article is on the intimate relationships of the main characters in the two above-mentioned narratives. Moreover, in an attempt to respond to the recent calls in Asian American literary criticism for a greater emphasis on the literary form, the present article demonstrates specific interest toward aesthetic and stylistic features in its discussion of the novels. While exploring Chuang’s and Ng’s dislocated Asian American subjects and their melancholic desire as it manifests in the texts under discussion, the article pays specific attention to the corporeal form of their protagonists and to the narrative endeavor at play in the two novels. Through its emphasis on the narrative endeavor and its aesthetic expressions in Chuang’s

¹⁷ The title of this summary contains an allusion to the pronouncedly melancholic film “In the Mood for Love” (2000) by the Hong Kong-based film director and screenwriter Wong Kar-wai. Situated in 1960s’ Hong Kong, the film centers around an unfulfilled love affair between a journalist and a secretary for a shipping company, who move into the same apartment building, next door to each other the same day. Both protagonists often find themselves alone and longing for company, as their spouses travel in their work for extended periods of time. As time passes, it becomes evident that their spouses are having an affair with each other; yet, despite the fact that the two betrayed protagonists soon develop feelings for each other, the love they share remains forever unfulfilled. For a more detailed discussion on Wong’s film and on melancholia in contemporary Chinese cinema, see Ma 2010 (esp. 133-144).

and Ng's fiction, the essay further argues that melancholia is present in these two narratives not only as an ethical or political construct, but equally as an aesthetic element that significantly adds to the ethical import of Chuang's and Ng's fiction.

6 TOWARD AN ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF MELANCHOLIA

At the end of his article quoted in the first chapter of this introduction, Jeffrey J. Santa Ana asks a compelling question that is also of at the very heart of the present dissertation. With reference to the Korean American author Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker* (1995) and to the possible solution the novel offers to the apparent conflict between the minority subject's ties to her or his communal history, on the one hand, and the postethnic elision of such ties, on the other, Santa Ana (2004, 37) asks whether it is possible to imagine "a multiraciality that doesn't require the postmodern abjection of historical memory and the denial of material relations." With reference to his analysis of Lee's novel, he produces an affirmative answer. Such a multiracial identity does indeed exist, Santa Ana concludes, "as a structure of feeling,¹⁸ a complex entanglement of emotions that is tempered by and mediated through a relational sense of connection to immigrant community and history" (ibid.). It is here, then, that melancholia comes into play; it is in this "complex entanglement of emotions" that melancholia's most intimate and personal dimension becomes tangible, but this is also where melancholia reveals its political potential. The depathologization of melancholia does not signify the "nonpathologized, fluent and happy mixedness" (Palumbo-Liu 1999, 320) characteristic of the postethnic discourse, in which racial, ethnic, and other perceived differences between individuals are seen as having little or no political relevance in the postmodern logic of late capitalism. Quite the contrary, the depathologized notion of melancholia is inherently political. Rather than presenting melancholia as a pathological condition – that is to say, a condition in and of itself in need of a cure – melancholia, here, is understood

¹⁸ Santa Ana borrows the term from Raymond Williams, who defines "a structure of feeling" as "a particular sense of life" (Williams 1977, 48) or "a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating" that often finds its first expression in art and literature (ibid., 131-132; Nguyen 2008, 1562). According to Santa Ana (2004, 25), "a structure of feeling aptly describes the dialectical relationship between affect and racial identity in postmodernity; specifically, the range of emotions that global capitalism generates and that minority subjects mediate in late capitalism."

as a complex psychic response to both social inequity and the postethnic political rhetoric that denies the existence of such inequity. Melancholia thus appears as a “structure of feeling” with an intrinsic ethical and political potential to challenge the discourse of postethnicity by indicating some of its blind spots and painful contradictions.

I have consciously limited this study to female authors of Chinese descent despite the fact that loss and melancholia as thematic concerns, with possible aesthetic outcomes associated with their literary treatment, are by no means foreign to male authors of Chinese descent nor to writers of other Asian ancestry in Asian American literature. Aside from my personal interest, the decision to focus exclusively on Chinese American women writers was initially based on a hypothesis, though rather intuitive at the time, that their writing would express a uniquely constituted ethical approach to loss and melancholia that would be specific to the historical, cultural, and gendered context of its production. As the research progressed, it became increasingly evident that while the narratives selected for this study differ from each other in several significant ways, in respect to their thematic focus and aesthetic characteristics, my initial hypothesis did in fact seem to hold true. Although I do not attempt to make generalizations regarding the larger body of Chinese American women’s writing on the basis of the four narratives examined in this study, it is clear that these four texts do share certain affinities, as the four articles included in this dissertation suggest. One of those affinities is that loss, in one form or another, functions as a thematic point of departure in all of these narratives, and yet, instead of falling prey to ethical pessimism in the face of historical injustice, the selected texts and their characters convey a hopeful, albeit inherently melancholic, ethical view of the world that aspires toward a heightened understanding of the self and of the human condition. What, then, can be said about the relationship between melancholia, ethics, and aesthetics in the selection of Chinese American women’s fiction examined in this study?

Paradoxical as it might seem, it is not only loss and melancholia but death itself that acts as a catalyst for imagining a new political future in these narratives, a political future invested in a truly ethical appreciation of the historical and political past that has shaped racial relations in the United States. It is through an honest and at times brutal excavation of the past that a more just future may be imagined, these texts seem to suggest. In the same vein, Yoonmee Chang (2010, 134) has argued with regard to Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* that “it is through acts and hermeneutics of death and degeneration that *Bone* imagines a political future.” Ona’s suicide, Chang contends, can be interpreted simultaneously as markedly Chinese and not Chinese enough, depending on the cultural codes it is read against; therefore, Ona’s death denotes “the turning away from the racial-political essentialisms that we have relied on, to good end, but that have limited efficacy in imagining a political future” (ibid.). In all relevant aspects, the presence of death functions in a similar fashion in each of the narratives examined in this study. In *Crossings*, it is the death of Fourth Jane’s loving yet extremely controlling father that acts as a catalyst for the protagonist’s mel-

ancholic re-evaluation of her past and thus her future; in *The Woman Warrior*, the story of the narrator's No Name Aunt killing her newborn child and committing suicide by drowning herself in the family well, after quite possibly being raped and then accused of adultery, sets in motion the narrator's revisionary exploration of her formative years as the daughter of Chinese immigrants in a dominantly white society; and although in *Steer Toward Rock*, death is not as imminent as in the above three texts, its looming presence gives resonance to the novel's narrative reappraisal of a forgotten part of American history through the stories of several of the novel's characters.

There is an intriguing interplay at work between the notions of temporal and cultural distance in all of the four narratives. Often, the passing of time is echoed by the spatial settings of the narratives so that a certain geographical location becomes attached to a certain moment or episode in time. This is most apparent in Chuang's and Kingston's works; both in *Crossings* and in *The Woman Warrior*, China is a place that belongs to the past, whereas the United States is associated with the present and the future – Europe and France, in *Crossings*, standing somewhere in-between. But the relation of the present to the past is a fickle one, just as palimpsestic and filled with gaps as the narratives themselves. The past, as the narratives suggest, oozes into the present with little regard to any essentializing and fixed notions of culture, race, or history. As I have noted above, history and 'the body' have functioned as driving questions for much of Asian American criticism, and they continue to do so in the study at hand. What this study proposes to bring to the existing scholarship on these questions, in addition to addressing them in the particular context of Chinese American women's fiction, is to approach the problematics surrounding Asian American history and the question of the body from a methodological and epistemological position that might be described as "historical formalism" (cf. Lye 2008, 95), which not only pays close attention to the historical and material contexts of literary texts but also takes into account the peculiar aesthetic quality of those texts as a critical variable in literary analysis. Moreover, an important methodological guideline for this study has been to eschew such "epistemology of the given" (Pak & Tsou 2011, 171) that would regard literary representation as self-evident and presume a transparent relationship between literary narratives and socio-historical knowledge.

What makes the study of affectivity and structures of feeling such as melancholia an intriguing and potentially informative approach for literary analysis is that, as Viet Thanh Nguyen (2008, 1562) has noted, feelings and emotions are never simply matters of individual experience but rather are socially produced. It is precisely "the structural dimension of feeling," Nguyen suggests, that functions as a reminder of the fact that emotions are produced in dialogue with the social. "Racial and other formations of identity" are instances of such structures of feeling that are experienced individually but need to be understood collectively. (Ibid.) Nguyen is referring to Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (1994, 55) influential conceptualization of "racial formation" as signifying "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhab-

ited, transformed, and destroyed.” Omi and Winant suggest that in the United States this process has been contingent upon a dialectic between the state’s exclusionary racial politics and social movements seeking to oppose it. This indicates that even the most private or intimate affective investments, and their literary representations, are political in the sense that they can offer valuable ethical insight to the social formations in which they are produced. Chuang Hua’s *Crossings* offers an enlightening example of the ethical potential inherent in literary representations of private emotions as conveyors of socially constructed meanings: in the novel, the seemingly unconventional romance between its diasporic Chinese American protagonist Fourth Jane and the married French journalist she encounters during her exilic sojourn in Paris not only betrays his racist and sexist attitudes toward her perceived Chineseness, but also presents her own negative attitude toward her brother’s choice of an ethnically non-Chinese wife in a conflicted light. Thus, even though Fourth Jane eventually decides to escape from the unequal and contradictory relationship into which she has drifted, the novel’s double exposure of ethnic stereotyping nevertheless reveals the arbitrariness of any claims for ethnic authenticity or for an “original condition” (cf. Chow 2008, 572) such as culture or ethnicity. Further, the novel’s emphasis on the ambivalence pertaining to Fourth Jane’s diasporic experience highlights the constructedness of racial formations at large.

In the literary narratives discussed in the study at hand, loss may suggest several things. It can signify the “racialized loss or lack” (Shiu 2006, 4) of equal civil, political, economic, and social rights or opportunities, but on a more intimate level, loss also denotes the loss, or, in some cases, the absence of a loved person. Corporeality and hypochondriacal symptoms experienced by the novels’ characters thus become emblematic of the historical loss or failure of the Asian American subject to become incorporated into the national body; the dead or injured Asian American body comes to symbolize the failure or ‘ailment’ of the national body and self-image. Moreover, the loss or absence of a loved person – Ona’s death in *Bone*, the elusive love affairs in *Crossings* and *Steer Toward Rock*, the suicide and subsequent erasure from the family history of No Name Aunt in *The Woman Warrior* – that cannot be completely overcome and thus lingers on and keeps haunting the characters in these narratives, can be interpreted as symbolizing the difficult, partial, or failed integration of America’s racial others into its national self-image. Through the use of distinctive aesthetic devices such as an unusual temporal organization either in the form of reverse temporality or as abrupt shifts in time and narration, the use of markedly lyrical language and an abundance of arresting poetic images, and the intermixture of several generic registers including fiction, autobiography, and historical narrative, the narratives under discussion foreground the melancholic ambivalence that characterizes the Asian American subject both on a communal and an individual level. In the national imaginary, this ambivalence suggests that the ‘Asian American’ functions as abject in relation to the ‘American,’ thus vacillating between exclusion from and inclusion in the national self-image; on an individual level, the Asian American subject’s melancholic ambiv-

alence materializes in her unwillingness to let go of the lost object of love, whether in reference to a person or a cultural past. The parallel examination of corporeality and the narrative endeavor to recount lost parts of American history thus emerges as one way of responding to the recent calls to pay increased attention to literary form and the aesthetic in Asian American writing. It is precisely through their peculiar aesthetic quality, this study suggests, that these literary narratives draw the reader's attention to the ethical dimension of racial melancholia. Although the study at hand does not discuss the present selection of Chinese American women's fiction explicitly as trauma narratives, the texts examined in this dissertation each share a focus on the thematics of loss and recovery in the same way as trauma narratives, featuring a literary aesthetic that "highlights the painful ambivalence that characterizes traumatic memory" (Vickroy 2002, 3). Just as "trauma writers position their readers in the similarly disoriented positions of the narrators and the characters through shifts in time, memory, affect, and consciousness" (ibid., 28), Chuang, Kingston, and Ng move across temporal, affective, and generic boundaries, foregrounding the melancholic ambivalence descriptive of the American minority subject.

Lisa Lowe (1996, 6) argues that there is a distance that separates the 'Asian American' from the national culture, which "constitutes Asian American culture as an alternative formation." Instead of suggesting a failed integration, this distance "preserves Asian American culture as an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlike varieties of silence emerge into articulatory" (ibid.). Homi K. Bhabha (1996, 59), again, contends that "we have entered an anxious age of identity, in which the attempt to memorialize lost time, and to reclaim lost territories, creates a culture of disparate 'interest groups' or social movements," which often results in affiliation between those involved being "antagonistic and ambivalent" and being founded on "situational and strategic" solidarities that depend on contingent social and political interests. Bhabha's account of such antagonistic and ambivalent affiliations bears a resemblance to Ien Ang's (2001, 178) observation of the fundamental partiality and ambivalence inherent in feminist politics. From an ethical point of view, recognizing this partiality is essential; this is what dominant historical narratives often fail to do because of their tendency to universalize and produce grand narratives. As Terry DeHay (1994, 26) remarks, dominant society often tends to "negate the importance of a minority group's shared and different past in favor of a more universal reading," in which the dominant version of the past is presented as the 'official' historical narrative that incorporates all differences, thus producing "the myth of assimilation." The notion of "re-membering," a term DeHay (1994, 28) borrows from Mary DeShazer, contains an allusion to the body as an important medium for the workings of memory. It paints a very material image of how historical narratives are negotiated and revisioned in minority literatures, such as Chinese American women's writing. "Re-membering" also bespeaks the effectivity of 'the body' as a metaphor for different dimensions of communal history and memory; not only as the racialized, physical Asian American body, in this case, but equally as a

body of literature, art, or cultural representations. However, by virtue of its deconstructive connotation – because “re-membering” necessitates ‘dismembering’ – the term is also suggestive of the incoherence and limitations of any essentializing notions of an Asian American body in any of the senses listed above.

Reflecting on the divergent contributions that sociology and literature can bring to race studies, Susan Koshy (2008, 1545) maintains that while the “analytic tools” of sociological studies make it difficult to investigate racial formation “at the level of the desires, anxieties, memories, and dispositions that lie beneath the threshold of rational consciousness,” literature, and therefore literary studies, are “more receptive to the contingencies of racial formation.” This receptiveness to “the opacities of otherness, the partial light in which action and agency unfold, the ineluctable gap between intervention and outcome, and the temptations and perils of authenticity and full description” is symptomatic of “the tension between aesthetics and politics [that] goes to the heart of the production and reception of ethnic literature” but, however, has not been given enough scholarly attention (*ibid.*). The present study is one attempt to investigate this tension between aesthetics and politics in ethnic minority literature, namely, in a selection of Chinese American women’s writing. In all of the four narratives examined here, the aesthetic and the political indeed intertwine in ways that make it impossible to discuss one without the other. One might even conclude that in a significant portion of ethnic minority literatures the aesthetic is political, and if we are to produce ethically sound readings of texts representing minority literatures, it will only be possible through a critical approach that makes both the aesthetic and the political equally important analytical categories. Thus, ideological positions that seek to defend the alleged artistic purity of the literary text from contamination by the political would not do justice to the “aesthetic activism” at work in ethnic minority literatures (Lim & Herrera-Sobek 2007, 5). In Asian American literature, this “aesthetic activism” often operates in very subtle ways, and therefore it cannot be contained within conventional notions of literary politics. It might thus be justified to speak of literary ethics, rather than textual politics, in the context of Asian American writing.

Henry Yu’s (2002, 203) vision of a genuinely “democratic production of knowledge” offers an insightful alternative to the neoliberal discourse of postethnicity, and even though Yu himself is a historian, his suggestion can easily be extended to literary criticism. According to his view, it is imperative that we strongly consider the “profound legacies” that the long history of racial practices in the United States has produced (*ibid.*). These legacies are not merely symbolic, but continue to resonate in the disparate material realities of today’s American society. “The answer is not to ignore or forget race,” Yu argues, “but to confront its history and address the need to build a more equitable world that takes into account that history of racial exclusion and oppression” (*ibid.*). Yu’s vision reflects the premise formulated by Omi and Winant (1994, 54) that race itself should be understood neither as an essence nor as a mere illusion that can be wished away, as the postethnic rhetoric attempts to do. In the task of confronting this history and addressing these legacies of racial exclusion, litera-

ture, and, by extension, literary criticism can play an important role. One significant contribution that literature can bring to such endeavors lies in its openness to ambivalence. For instance, through a simultaneous inclusion of multiple and often competing perspectives by the use of several narrators, a narrative technique employed, in one form or another, in Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock*, Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, a literary text can critically reveal the positionality inherent in racial discourse and historical narrative. Owing to their specific aesthetic quality, literary texts can also help elucidate the mechanisms through which these historical legacies produce and sustain particular "structures of feeling" that are experienced individually but need to be addressed communally.

As Russell Reising (1986, 18) suggests in his critical study of American literary history, where he eminently distinguishes between three major schools of thought that have dominated modern attempts to define an American literary tradition, "in the quest to define American literature, recourse to the huge 'unusable,' or, more precisely, 'unused' past" is a task that new generations of literary critics must undertake to rewrite the grand narrative of American literature so that it will also include its forgotten and "unused" traditions. To a large degree, this task has already been taken up, to which the transnational turn in American literary and cultural studies testifies, along with the proliferation of the study of literature produced by America's ethnic minorities. It is clear that the task remains unfinished. Furthermore, the danger still persists that minoritized literatures are ghettoized and viewed merely as separate minor traditions that have had little impact on the grand narrative of American literature. This suggests that expanding the concept of American literature toward a more inclusive direction is a task that cannot be completed but must nevertheless be continually addressed. Not only is American literary history defined by its exclusions and omissions as much as it is determined by its inclusions, but the same is true for Asian American (literary) history as well. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana (1999, 176) correctly observe, Asian American history, too, is a historically produced narrative which has itself raised contestation over its exclusions. For instance, some critics have pointed out that several of the discourses surrounding the exclusionary era and its effects upon the Chinese American community are pervaded by heteronormative assumptions, often additionally imbued with a "naturalized racial dimension" that renders certain desires "culturally unintelligible or unacceptable" (ibid.). Thus, the question of widening our definitions of history, literary or otherwise, to be more inclusive, and thereby more ethical, is a matter of continuous negotiation and contestation with respect to its forgotten or "unused" dimensions.

7 CODA

The wonder of humanity lies not in the discernment of patterns of either similarity or difference but in the infinite varieties of human experience.

Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals* (204)

In Asian American literary criticism, as in cultural studies at large, the turn of the twenty-first century and the years following it have been an era of theoretical turns to be reckoned with. The affective turn, the ethical turn, the melancholy turn, the psychoanalytical turn, and the transnational turn are just the ones touched upon in this study, and others are still waiting to be discovered and named. One of the most recent examples of this rhetorical move is Christopher Lee's (2012, 8) notion of "the post-identity turn," as he refers to the dialectical, theoretical and discursive process of "the articulation and unraveling of identity" in Asian American history, culture, and politics. Instead of using the post-identity turn as a periodizing concept, Lee defines 'post-identity' through an analogy with the Lyotardian notion of postmodernism, which sees the post-modern as an internal rupture of the modern belief in the possibility of representation; in a like manner, 'post-identity' appears "as an inherent and integral dimension of identitarian thinking" that disrupts the notion of identity as a form "for making sense of and representing the relationship between the subject and the social" (*ibid.*). Lee's account of the post-identity turn is thus concomitant with what Rey Chow (2002, 128) has called "the difference revolution," or "the permanent unsettling of the stability of referential meaning, what had been presumed to be anchored in the perfect fit between the signifier and the signified" (quoted in Lee 2012, 4). As a result of this discursive shift, "difference rather than sameness now becomes the key to a radicalized way of thinking about identity" and "dislocation per se, as it were, often becomes valorized and idealized - as what is different, mobile, contingent, indeterminable, and so on" (Chow 2002, 134; quoted in Lee 2012, 4). In Asian American studies, one of the ramifications of the difference revolution has been that the lack of an unproblematic Asian American identity has made it difficult to determine the task and purpose of Asian American criticism as a legitimate field of study. In line with

Henry Yu's above observation, I believe that it is not "*either similarity or difference*" (emphasis mine) that sets limits to the task ahead for Asian American studies, but rather the myriad of human experiences that arise from particular histories of immigration, assimilation, and exclusion pertaining to Asian America.

Besides offering a rhetorical advantage, the above affinity with discerning and establishing new theoretical turns might bespeak a heightened need among critics to find new paths of interpretation unmarked by previous scholarship. It seems nonetheless more likely that the current abundance of theoretical turns reflects the chiasmatic relationship between many of the turns in question. It is worth noting that many of the recent theoretical turns, including those mentioned in this study, rest heavily upon pre-existing theory and scholarship. The psychoanalytical and the melancholy turn, for instance, quite explicitly draw on psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically inclined approaches to melancholia, while the affective, the ethical, and the transnational turns rest upon earlier philosophical thinking concerning ethics, affectivity, and nation, respectively. My study certainly capitalizes on a number of established theoretical turns, namely those mentioned here. However, I hope to have demonstrated that this choice is not coincidental. Rather, it reflects the myriad conceptual linkages between melancholia, ethics, and affectivity; psychoanalytical criticism and transnational studies, again, are two critical practices that have eagerly examined this nexus between affects, ethics, and melancholia.

The research project that eventually led to this dissertation initially began as something quite different from the study at hand, namely as a metacritically oriented effort to explore scholarly readings of Chinese American women's writing, produced mainly under the discursive framework of Asian American literary studies. In addition, my initial idea was to examine the dialogue between a selection of Chinese American women's fiction and literary criticism addressing those narratives, with the larger goal of investigating the relationship between literature, literary criticism, and politics in the context of Chinese American women's writing in mind. As time went on, it soon became evident that a more particular focus was necessary, if only because of the immense and ever-growing body of scholarship on Chinese American women's fiction. But most importantly, I became increasingly aware of the fact that it was the study of literature, not of literary criticism in itself, that I felt most compelled to engage myself in. Moreover, the selection of literature became more clearly defined as the research continued, eventually leading to a selection of narratives significantly smaller in scope than what I had originally envisioned. This was a conscious decision, informed in part by the changed and sharpened objectives of the study. Although some key elements of the original research frame are still present in this dissertation, the primary focus has shifted from criticism to literary texts, only four in number, which are analyzed from the specifically determined theoretical perspective of racial melancholia. When deciding on the number of literary texts to investigate in this study it has been my wish to maintain an equilibrium between what might be called the vertical and the horizon-

tal dimension of the selected narratives; that is to say, I have sought to include a sufficient number of texts that would still permit an analysis that extends beyond their immediate surface.

Of course, the line between literary criticism and metacriticism is often elusive, and it is difficult to remain solely within the realm of one without giving any consideration to the other. For reasons related to the shared history between Asian American cultural studies and Asian American political activism, it is especially evident that literary criticism addressing Asian American writing is more often than not replete with theoretization that has an intimate connection with Asian American political history and previously existing Asian Americanist criticism beyond disciplinary boundaries. In all simplicity, metacriticism signifies taking an analytical perspective to criticism, that is to say, criticism of criticism. Hence it is clear that metacriticism is not the primary concern of the present study, even though the study does engage in certain theoretical debates regarding the relationship between literature, literary criticism, and politics. Nevertheless, glimpses of those initial metacritical aspirations may be detected throughout this dissertation. The metacritical beginnings of this project are perhaps most clearly visible in the first article, which consistently seeks to enter into a dialogue with earlier readings of Chuang Hua's *Crossings*. Yet, despite the relatively low number of critical readings of Chuang's work that exist, it has not been my aim to offer a systematic account of earlier scholarship on *Crossings* in any of the original articles. Rather, in each of the four articles, I have attempted to maintain a critical dialogue with the existing research on the authors and narratives examined, particularly when earlier readings of the texts under analysis have addressed questions that are of crucial importance for my own consideration of the subject at hand, or when they have been in apparent conflict with my own understanding of the subject in question.

Although purely coincidental, the total number of the original articles included in this study, as well as the number of texts examined, bears an intriguing associative and symbolic significance when considered in the Chinese linguistic and cultural context: phonetically, the Chinese word for the number four is associated with death both in Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese. This undoubtedly melancholic connotation is repeated in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, which storywise builds around the suicide of its narrator's sister who jumps to her death from the rooftop of "the last of the four housing projects" in San Francisco's Chinatown (Ng 2008a, 12) and in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, where the protagonist is called Fourth Jane, whose deeply melancholic state of mind, bordering on clinical depression, appears as an emotional death of a kind. For the present purposes, however, such symbolism shall remain a sidenote, possibly one that might generate some novel considerations for future inquiries of melancholia in Chinese American literature. The compilation of articles in this dissertation has been established on less poetic and more pragmatic grounds; it is intended to form a coherent and concise entity that nevertheless illuminates the thematics of melancholia in Chinese American women's fiction from a number of complementary perspectives. The four articles are presented here in

a chronological order according to the temporal succession in which they were initially written. This decision, I hope, adds a certain transparency to the research process which has now materialized in this dissertation.

As I have mentioned elsewhere, the chronological sequence made up of the four critical essays reveals a scholarly journey through melancholia, Chinese American women's writing, and Asian American literary studies that has not always followed a linear progression but has in many ways been an enthralling journey. The journey begins, in the first article, with an inquiry into the necessity of forging one's own subjectivity independent of socially or culturally determined constraints; it continues, in the following two articles, with an investigation of an historical betrayal and its psychological, social, and bodily ramifications for the minority subject; and finally ends, in the fourth article, with an exploration of the difficult necessity of negotiating between the Self and an Other. Questions of ethics and affectivity, with a heightened emphasis on the literary form and the aesthetic in Asian American literature, are subjects that continue to require more detailed and focused scholarly attention. The first steps in that direction have already been taken, as is evident from the many calls in recent years for a complementary approach that would combine formal analysis and political critique in Asian American literary criticism. One possible line of research on Asian American literature in the future might capitalize on David Palumbo-Liu's (2005, 69) formulation of "an aesthetics of the global" as an effort to investigate how certain "structures of feeling may or may not have any ethical effect or ramification." Melancholia, of course, is only one instance of such structures of feeling.

Considering the number of original articles included in this study, it might seem that a shorter introduction and conclusion would have sufficed. However, because the issues touched upon in the articles reflect several other important developments in Asian American literary studies, which I could not discuss at length within the limits of the articles, I felt compelled to deal with some of these complexities in the present introduction. Needless to say, Asian American literary studies as a field of inquiry has come to encompass such an abundance and variety of critical approaches and debates that, at best, one dissertation can address only a small part of it; and even then, many questions and discussions that might bear on the subject at hand must remain beyond the scope of this study. I have nevertheless sought to address those recent developments within Asian American literary studies that are of most relevance to the textual analyses presented in the original articles. In addition to the fact that it has not been possible to engage in all critical and historical discussions that might be pertinent to my readings of the narratives under analysis in the articles, it is also evident that my own understanding of the questions addressed in the articles has evolved over the course of this project. For this reason, there are things that I might do differently were I to rewrite those articles from the position where I am now. Although this is a question of emphasis more than anything else, it is significant for the outcome of this research process. Most importantly, I would now place more emphasis on a detailed analysis of the aesthetic features and

narrative techniques used in the narratives under discussion: the linguistic, stylistic, and structural characteristics of the texts that together contribute to their specific literary quality. While attention to literary form and to what falls under the rubric of 'the aesthetic' has been a central motivation for my critical endeavor throughout this study, it has appeared somewhat unevenly between the articles. It is most evidently present in the first and the fourth article, whereas the second article, specifically, is characterized by an ethical and historical focus rather than an aesthetic one. Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, which is in many ways an aesthetically arresting work, has received more attention in the articles with respect to its aesthetic qualities than any of the other narratives examined in this dissertation; this is partly due to its peculiar position between the modernist and postmodernist literary traditions and its status as a pioneering work in the tradition of diasporic Chinese American women's writing. On the other hand, Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock*, in particular, deserves much more attention devoted to its inventive narrative structure and its sparing, lyrical expression than has been allotted in the present articles. The same, of course, is true for the rest of the narratives, all of which are aesthetically accomplished, highly innovative texts.

This observation in itself does not stand in contradiction to the initial objective of this study, which was to investigate the complex entanglements between melancholia, ethics, and aesthetics in the narratives selected for analysis in this dissertation. In fact, an important conclusion that this study has drawn might be that melancholia as a politically charged concept that is also invested with an inherently aesthetic quality operates on the often intangible border between ethics and aesthetics. Thus, even if ethics and aesthetics are treated as separate dimensions of literary inquiry, an exploration of both aspects is often necessary in order to understand the complexities of melancholia as a "structure of feeling" at work in literary representations. In what ways, then, are the narratives investigated in this dissertation "rewriting loss," as the title suggests? The term itself points to two distinct interpretive possibilities: for one, 'to rewrite' something quite simply suggests that what has previously been written is being written again; for another, it entails that what is being rewritten is now being written in a different way compared to its earlier expressions. In the context of the present study, rewriting alludes to both of these possibilities. First, it suggests that the texts examined in the articles narrate both individual and communal histories of loss, some of which have already found literary expressions in earlier instances of Asian American writing. Second, it suggests that the narratives under discussion are rewriting these histories of loss in ways that entail an alternative ethical approach to the historical legacies of loss they describe. This approach might be conceptualized as an ethics of melancholia, which refuses to let go of what has been lost. Indeed, Chuang's, Kingston's, and Ng's narratives suggest that it is important not to forget even the most painful parts of history, because only then can we avoid repeating it, and only then can we imagine a different, more equitable future beyond our own histories of loss.

YHTEENVETO

Tarkastelen väitöstutkimuksessani melankolian, etiikan ja estetiikan yhteenkietoutumia kolmen kiinalaisamerikkalaisen naiskirjailijan valituissa teoksissa. Tutkimuksen aineisto muodostuu neljästä proosateoksesta, jotka ovat Chuang Huan *Crossings* (1968), Maxine Hong Kingstonin *The Woman Warrior* (1976) sekä Fae Myenne Ng'n *Bone* (1993) ja *Steer Toward Rock* (2008). Tutkimuksen kohteena olevat teokset eroavat toisistaan sekä suhteessa kirjoittajiensa koko tuotantoon että niitä koskevan akateemisen tutkimuksen määrään. Kohdeteksteistä ensin mainittu jäi kirjoittajansa Chuang Huan ainoaksi koskaan julkaistuksi proosateokseksi, kaksi jälkimmäistä puolestaan muodostavat Fae Myenne Ng'n koko tähänastisen romaaniutuotannon. Ng'n esikoisromaanina lukuunottamatta kummankin kirjailijan teoksia on niiden kerronnallisesta innovatiivisuudesta ja moniulotteisesta temaattisesta sisällöstä huolimatta toistaiseksi tutkittu huomattavan vähän. Maxine Hong Kingstonin esikoisteos *The Woman Warrior* sitä vastoin lukeutuu useisiin amerikkalaisen nykykirjallisuuden kaanoneihin ja sitä pidetään yleisesti aasialaisamerikkalaisen kirjallisuuden tunnetuimpana teoksena, jota tutkitaan ja opetetaan yhä laajasti yhdysvaltalaisissa ja eurooppalaisissa yliopistoissa. Myös Kingstonin myöhempi, kirjallisten lajityyppien välisiä raja-aitoja murtava tuotanto tunnetaan laajalti niin Yhdysvalloissa kuin kansainvälisestikin. Tutkimuksen kohdeteoksia yhdistävät kirjailijoiden etnisen taustan lisäksi lukuisat sisällölliset ja temaattiset painotukset, joita tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan melankolian käsitteen kautta. Melankolian eettisten ja poliittisten ulottuvuuksien ohella tutkimus keskittyy tutkittavien teosten kaunokirjalliseen ja esteettiseen ominaislaatuun: muodon, kielen, ja tyylikeinojen synnyttämään kokonaisuuteen, jonka seurauksena kaunokirjallinen teos näyttäytyy muista kirjallisen ilmaisun muodoista erillisen taiteenlajin osana.

Käsillä oleva tutkimus koostuu yhteensä neljästä itsenäisestä vertaisarvioidusta tieteellisestä artikkelista sekä teoreettisesta osasta, jonka tarkoituksena on toimia johdantona tutkimuksen aihepiiriin, kohdeteoksiin ja kysymyksenasetteluun, paneutua tarkemmin tutkimuksen teoreettisiin ja metodologisiin lähtökohtiin sekä aikaisempaan tutkimukseen, ja lopuksi tarkastella tutkimustuloksia, asetettuja tavoitteita sekä yksittäisissä artikkeleissa saavutettuja päätelmiä kriittisesti suhteessa tieteenalan ajankohtaisiin keskusteluihin. Tutkimuksen teoreettisen osan tavoitteena ei siis ole ainoastaan toimia johdantona tutkimuksen artikkeleihin ja koota niissä saavutetut tutkimustulokset yhteen, vaan myös syventää artikkeleissa kohdetekstien analyysin kautta käytyä keskustelua kirjallisuuden mahdollisuuksista sekä kirjallisuudentutkimuksen suhteesta estetiikan, etiikan ja politiikan käsitteisiin. Tutkimuksen ensisijainen teoreettinen ja diskursiivinen viitekehys paikantuu aasialaisamerikkalaisen kulttuurin- ja kirjallisuudentutkimuksen alaan. Muita tutkimuksessa käytetyn teoreettisen käsitteistön kannalta keskeisiä tutkimusaloja ovat psykoanalyttinen ja feministinen kirjallisuudentutkimus. Metodologisesti tutkimus pyrkii yhdistämään historiallisesti ja poliittisesti motivoituneen lähestymistavan lukutapaan, joka ottaa yhtä lailla huomioon kohdeteosten esteettisen ulottuvuuden. Vaikka

tutkimus näin ollen kiinnittyy vahvasti yhteiskunnallisesti suuntautuneen kirjallisuudentutkimuksen kenttään, sitä luonnehtii samanaikainen kiinnostus kirjalliseen muotoon sekä tutkittavien teosten kerronnallisiin ominaispiirteisiin, jotka yhteiskunnallisesti suuntautuneissa tutkimuserinteissä ovat usein jääneet historiallisesti ja temaattisesti painottuneiden lukutapojen varjoon. Samalla tutkimus osoittaa, että sen kohteena olevissa teoksissa kirjallisuuden eettinen ja esteettinen ulottuvuus ovat suurelta osin yhteenkietoutuneita.

Neljästä tutkimukseen sisältyvästä artikkelista jokainen lähestyy artikkeleita yhdistävää melankolian tematiikkaa erityisestä, tarkemmin määritellystä näkökulmastaan. Siten artikkelit valottavat melankolian, etiikan ja estetiikan yhteenkietoutumia tarkastelun kohteena olevissa teoksissa useista eri suunnista, kukin painottaen eri ulottuvuuksia kohdetekstien suhteessa melankolian käsitteeseen. Tutkimuksen artikkeleista ensimmäinen tarkastelee Chuang Huan muodoltaan ja kerronnaltaan kokeellista, osin omaelämäkerrallisia aineksia sisältävää romaania *Crossings* temaattisesti ja tyyllisesti merkittävänä edelläkävijänä aasialaisamerikkalaisen kirjallisuuden nuorena kaanonissa. Artikkelit lähestyy kohdetekstiään yhtäältä sen melankolisen temaattisen sisällön ja toisaalta sen omaperäisen kaunokirjallisen estetiikan näkökulmasta pyrkien osoittamaan kuinka teoksen tyylliset, kielelliset ja kerronnalliset ratkaisut yhdessä muodostavat sille ominaisen paikaltaanolon estetiikan (*aesthetic of displacement*), joka heijastaa romaanin päähenkilön ristiriitaista, melankolian ja ambivalenssin sävyttämää sisäistä tilaa. Toisessa artikkelissa tarkastelen Fae Myenne Ng'n romaaneja *Bone* ja *Steer Toward Rock* kahden historiallisesti merkittävän diskursin (*yellow peril, model minority*) valossa, jotka ovat määrittäneet kiinalaissiirtolaisten ja heidän jälkeläistensä asemaa amerikkalaisessa yhteiskunnassa ja lainsäädännössä 1800-luvun jälkipuoliskolta alkaen; näitä näennäisesti vastakkaisia diskursseja yhdistää toisiinsa rodullistamisen käytäntö sekä abjektin käsite. Kummassakin tarkastelun kohteena olevista romaaneista päähenkilöiden kokema yksityinen menetyksen kokemus heijastuu vasten laajempaa yhteiskunnallista ja historiallista menetyksen narratiivia, jota määrittää edellä mainittujen rasististen diskurssien ohella petoksen teema. Tätä historiallista taustaa vasten luettuna Ng'n teosten voidaan tulkita ilmentävän ns. melankolista etiikkaa (*melancholic ethics*), jonka ytimessä on pyrkimys muistaa ja säilyä tietoisena myös niistä kansakunnan historian kätketyistä osista, joista vallitseva historiankirjoitus usein vaikenee.

Kolmas artikkeli asettaa rinnakkain Maxine Hong Kingstonin esikoisteoksen *The Woman Warrior* ja Fae Myenne Ng'n esikoisteoksen *Bone*, joissa molemmissa kulttuurisesti ja rodullisesti määrittyneeseen toiseuden kokemukseen kiinnittyvä melankolia ilmenee korostetusti ruumiillisen kokemuksen ja ruumiillisten oireiden muodossa. Artikkelit tutkii tarkemmin muutamaa keskeistä kohtausta kummassakin teoksessa, analysoiden niitä erityisesti abjektin ja hypokondrian käsitteiden valossa. Metodinaan historiallisesti kontekstualisoiva lähiluku artikkeli pyrkii osoittamaan, että sen molemmissa kohdeteksteissä kuollut, sairas tai haavoittunut ihmisruumis toimii samanaikaisesti sekä teosten kiinalaisamerikkalaisten päähenkilöiden emotionaalisen rikkonaisuuden kuva-

na että amerikkalaisen kansallisen minäkuvan vaillinaisuuden ja yksipuolisuuden metaforana. Artikkelit esittää, että Kingstonin ja Ng'n esikoisteoksista hahmottuva kiinalaisamerikkalainen menetyksen perintö pitää negatiivisen sisällönsä rinnalla sisällään myös muutoksen mahdollisuuden tekemällä näkyväksi kansallisen minäkuvan sisäisiä halkeamia ja murtumia, joiden olemassaolo on esteenä eettisesti kestävä, vähemmistöt osaksi itseään tunnustavan kansallisen identiteetin rakentamiselle. Tutkimuksen neljäs artikkeli jatkaa edellisen artikkelin vertailevaa otetta tarkastelemalla rinnakkain Chuang Huan romaania *Crossings* ja Fae Myenne Ng'n romaania *Steer Toward Rock*, joita yhdistävät toisiinsa omaperäisen kaunokirjallisen muodon sekä niihin keskittyvän tutkimuksen vähäisen määrän lisäksi samankaltaiset temaattiset painotukset. Molempien teosten keskiössä on tarina täyttymättömästä rakkaudesta, joka näyttäytyy tulkinnassani yksityistä kokemusta laajemmin historiallisesti, sosiaalisesti ja poliittisesti määrittyneen melankolian kuvana. Anne Anlin Chengin "rodullisen melankolian" (*racial melancholia*) käsitteeseen nojaten artikkeli esittää, että aasialaisamerikkalaisen subjektin melankolinen suhde kulttuuriseen ja poliittiseen menneisyyteen ilmenee analyysin kohteena olevissa teoksissa päähenkilöiden sisäisenä kamppailuna henkilökohtaisen vapauden ja melankolisen saavuttamattomaan tai menetettyyn rakkausobjektiin kiinnittymisen välillä.

Tutkimukseni suhtautuu kriittisesti Freudin varhaiseen näkemykseen melankoliasta patologisena reaktiona menetyksen kokemukseen; patologian sijaan melankolia tarjoaa tutkimuksessa poliittisen vaihtoehdon postmodernille postetnisyyden diskurssille, joka pyrkii häivyttämään näkyvistä rodullistamisen ja rasmin käytänteisiin nojaavien historiallisten diskurssien sekä niihin kytkeytyvien materiaalien erojen läsnäolon ja seuraukset oman aikamme amerikkalaisessa yhteiskunnassa. Kuten tutkimus esittää, sen kohteena olevat teokset uudelleenkirjoittavat historiallisesti määrittynyttä kiinalaisamerikkalaista menetyksen perintöä tulkitsemalla fiktion keinoin Yhdysvaltojen historian unohdettuja ja vaiettuina vaiheita alkaen 1800-luvun puolivälistä, johon ajoittuu kiinalaisten siirtolaisten ensimmäinen merkittävä muuttoaalto Yhdysvaltoihin, aina uuden vuosituhaten alkuun saakka. Tutkimus osoittaa edelleen, että sen kohdetekstejä on mahdollista lukea ja tulkita ns. melankolian etiikan ja estetiikan (*an ethics and aesthetics of melancholia*) käsitteiden kautta, joissa menneisyys on jatkuvasti läsnä perustavanlaatuisella tavalla. Melankolisesta kiinnittymisestä menneisyyteen tulee tutkimuksen kohteena olevissa teoksissa keskeinen subjektin rakentumisen mekanismi, jota luonnehtii läheinen suhde menneisyyteen sekä edeltävien sukupolvien kokemuksiin kulttuurisiin ja poliittisiin menetyksiin. Melankolia on läsnä tutkimuksen kohdeteksteissä paitsi keskeisenä eettisenä ja poliittisena konstruktiona, myös esteettisenä ulottuvuutena joka olennaisella tavalla syventää teosten eettistä sisältöä.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLES

I

SHIFTING THE CENTER: EMOTIONAL EXILE AND THE AESTHETIC OF DISPLACEMENT IN CHUANG HUA'S *CROSSINGS*

by

Anna Pehkoranta, 2010

In Tanfer Emin Tunc & Elisabetta Marino (eds.) *Positioning the New: Chinese American Literature and the Changing Image of the American Literary Canon*. New-castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, 69-82.

Shifting the Center: Emotional Exile and the Aesthetic of Displacement in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*

Critical readings of Chuang Hua's *Crossings* (1968) remain considerably rare, although more than forty years have passed since its publication, and Chinese American literature and criticism now occupy an important place in the field of American literature.¹ Amy Ling was the first to break the silence and remove *Crossings* from the critical oblivion that had surrounded the novel ever since its publication. In her groundbreaking article, fittingly entitled "A Rumble in the Silence: *Crossings* by Chuang Hua," Ling begins by positioning *Crossings* as parallel to Maxine Hong Kingston's innovative and award-winning works, particularly *The Woman Warrior*. While stressing the more than century-long history of Chinese American women's writing, Ling argues that most individuals would be hard pressed to name another American woman writer of Chinese descent besides Kingston.² Almost thirty years later, a great deal has changed in this respect. Since the 1980s, an entire generation of Chinese American women writers has made its way into the consciousness of a vast reading public both inside and outside of the United States. Yet, Chuang Hua's intense and avant-garde *Crossings* remains in the margins of Asian American literary criticism.

Crossings tells the story of Fourth Jane, the daughter of upper-class Chinese immigrants. As one of seven children, she carries the number four in her name to signify her ordinal position in the family, a common practice in traditional Chinese families. Jane's place in the middle is not restricted to birth order; her Chinese name, Chuang-Hua, is a combination of the Chuang given to all the boys in the family and the Hua given to all the girls.³ On the surface, *Crossings* recounts the history of a love affair between Fourth Jane and a married French journalist she encounters on her self-imposed exile to Paris. However, below the surface, this narrative is a constant stream of dreams, images, spontaneous thoughts, and past incidents which elucidate Fourth Jane's countless crossings in time and place, crossings that are both physical and emotional. The numerous crossings and uprootings, some involuntary and others willfully chosen, situate Fourth Jane within an emotional exile. The sense of loss arising from her

¹ *Crossings* is Chuang Hua's debut novel and her only known written work. Chuang Hua is the Chinese name of Stella Yang Copley, born in Shanghai in 1931. She fled the Japanese invasion with her family first to Hong Kong, then to England, finally settling in the United States. Chuang Hua graduated from Vassar College in 1951, and later lived in New York and Connecticut. She led a very private life, refusing both interviews and public recognition until her death on June 25, 2000. Apart from this, little is known about her. Chuang Hua, *Crossings* (1968; New York: New Directions Publishing, 2007, third ed.), 224; Hailing Xiao, "Chuang Hua." *Asian American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport CT: Greenwood, 2000), 117.

² Amy Ling, "A Rumble in the Silence: *Crossings* by Chuang Hua." *MELUS* 9.3 (1982): 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 30.

feelings of displacement sometimes transforms into physical pain or discomfort. This happens when Fourth Jane encounters a Chinese magazine with a hazy photograph of a farmer's house,

built up of mud...and roofed in tile standing in the middle of a neatly tilled field. A tree clung by the wall of the house, a line of mountains beyond the fields. With a shock she recognized the landscape, could smell the tilled soil, felt the embrace of the house, climbed the mountains. Unguarded, a seizure of loss struck her. For an instant she could not breathe.⁴

Since the 1980s, when the first critical readings of *Crossings* appeared, the literary heritage of Chuang's border-crossing novel has divided critics trying to position it within a specific literary tradition. Most notably, *Crossings* has been recognized for its modernist tendencies which, according to Amy Ling, make it the first modernist novel in Asian America. In her "Foreword" to the 1986 edition of *Crossings*, reprinted as an "Afterword" in the 2007 edition, Ling positions it firmly within the realm of literary modernism alongside works by writers such as Virginia Woolf, Gustave Flaubert, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and the imagist poets:

Experimental in structure and form, the fragmented narrative is a collage of dreams, nightmares, autobiography, and fantasy. Its prose is often elegantly spare, its punctuation and syntax often unconventional. Quotation marks may be omitted; fragments and run-on sentences abound, and characters are often referred to only by pronoun. Spatial and temporal settings are unspecified, and chronological leaps may occur even within a single paragraph.⁵

Ling's account portrays *Crossings* as a pioneering work in Asian American writing, one that has set an example for later modernist readings of works written by Asian American women. In fact, Ling states that Chuang's largely neglected masterpiece should be appreciated as the most obvious precursor to Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. For *Crossings*, the question has thus far not been whether or not it is included in the American literary "canon," but rather, whether or not it is recognized as an important landmark in the Chinese American tradition. The number of scholarly readings on *Crossings* has to date been limited to less than ten critical essays. Apart from the articles referenced or cited in this chapter, there are two other scholarly texts examining Chuang's novel: Wen-ching Ho's recent reading "Negotiating the Past: Gender Inequality in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*"⁶ and Karen A. Lee's "John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*: A Chinese American Woman's Categorical Liminality in a Cold War

⁴ Chuang, *Crossings*, 124.

⁵ Amy Ling, "Afterword," Chuang Hua, *Crossings* (1968; New York: New Directions Publishing, 2007, third ed.), 218. First published as a "Foreword" to *Crossings* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1986).

⁶ Wen-ching Ho, "Negotiating the Past: Gender Inequality in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 34.2 (2008): 155-175.

Society,"⁷ which investigates John Ford's 1956 film *The Searchers* as a subtext of Chuang's novel.

Monica Chiu supports Ling's arguments for a modernist interpretation of *Crossings*, maintaining that "[t]he work is exemplary of Modernism's eclectic forms, which often reflected a prevailing dissatisfaction of self in the world."⁸ Dissatisfaction does indeed seem to be the prevailing mood throughout Fourth Jane's numerous geographical, cultural, and psychological crossings, dissatisfaction so deeply embedded in one's existence that it verges on clinical depression, at times crossing that line. However, if the dissatisfaction expressed by the early modernists was a reaction to a "cosmic emptiness" weighing heavily on the human experience in the Western world during the turn of the twentieth century,⁹ the dissatisfaction characterizing Fourth Jane's existence is more about experiencing a piercing, psychological loss of meaning as a result of repeatedly being derooted.

Although the many dislocations undertaken by the novel's protagonist often take a very concrete and physical form, displacement in *Crossings* is also a mental state. This becomes perhaps most evident in descriptions of the depressive symptoms experienced by Fourth Jane who alternates between lethargy and insomnia, feeling restless yet physically unable to move. What Fourth Jane is experiencing is in fact more than mere dissatisfaction due to her life's predicaments; it is a sense of displacement so intense that it threatens her entire personality. On occasion, distant yet stunningly clear memories from Fourth Jane's childhood contrast with images that metaphorically reflect her current psychological or emotional state. In one such instance, Fourth Jane remembers her child-self lying still in the dark next to her *amah* (nanny) without being able to sleep, when a sudden disturbing image surfaces:

Death by bamboo. For certain offenses the prisoner was bound to stakes in the ground under which bamboo seedlings had been freshly planted. The prisoner was left a lingering death while young sprouts grew through flesh. Death by flaying. Bit by bit they cut away the skin till the entire body became one skinless lump of bleeding flesh.¹⁰

⁷ Karen A. Lee, "John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*: A Chinese Woman's Categorical Liminality in a Cold War Society." *Hitting a Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism* 4.2 (1997): 79-86.

⁸ Monica Chiu, "Motion, Memory, and Conflict in Chuang Hua's Modernist *Crossings*." *MELUS* 24.4 (1999): 107.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 107. The concept of "cosmic emptiness" comes from Ricardo Quinones, whom Monica Chiu quotes in her article. According to Quinones, the "dominant experience at the Modernist point of departure [...] is a suddenly revealed cosmic emptiness behind human experience, of the unresponsiveness of alien surroundings that seriously question humanistic ideals or simple endeavor, and even of the dissolution of the known, ordinary, solid world." Ricardo Quinones, *Mapping Literary Modernism: Time and Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 40. This "modernist angst" is closely related to the existentialist despair and absurdity arising from the human condition of coping with the world without the guidance of moral or religious norms.

¹⁰ Chuang, *Crossings*, 63-64.

This abrupt and seemingly out-of-context image conveys an important message, as do other similarly interruptive images throughout *Crossings*. Immersed in the stream of consciousness of the present, in the mundane but life-preserving tasks related to cooking, and in waiting for her absent lover, this image gives expression to Fourth Jane's sense of emotional displacement. Sleep symbolizes death and death depression; depressive imagery, again, refers to the emotional displacement experienced by Fourth Jane in the novel's present. To be more exact, her depressive state of mind can be understood precisely as a sense of emotional exile, which has a close conceptual connection to Anne Anlin Cheng's notion of "racial melancholia."¹¹ Consumed by a sense of detachment from her own life, her past, and therefore from herself, Fourth Jane is trapped in a physical and emotional immobility, as if she were "bound to stakes in the ground." She is caught between three continents, her present, and her past(s) in a way that resembles what Amy Ling has called the liminal, "between worlds" position expressed in a great deal of Chinese American women's writing.¹² As is often the case with depressive disorders, she remains in an emotional limbo, unable to decide between her competing motivations, which eventually transform into physical immobility: "On certain days moving from one room to another in her apartment was the only displacement she felt capable of undertaking."¹³

However, this detachment is in fact more than, as Lesley Chin Douglass has claimed, "the type of disinterested and dispassionate detachment with which the modernists wrote."¹⁴ The depressive detachment felt by Fourth Jane comes with searing emotional pain, so excruciating that it makes her feel as if she has been "hacked into one hundred pieces."¹⁵ Read against the above image of slow torture by bamboo sprouts, the emotional detachment experienced by Chuang's protagonist can hardly be considered dispassionate. This is not to say that *Crossings* does not demonstrate a modernist air of detached laconicism, but even the modernist sense of detachment often hides behind it emotions that are too disturbing or intense to verbalize. In a strikingly visual manner, the fragmented images present in *Crossings* break the illusion of Fourth Jane's calm exterior and the seeming indifference with which her life's predicaments are narrated.

Critics have interpreted Chuang's use of fragmented images and their abrupt placement within the narrative as exemplifying her modernist literary aes-

¹¹ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001). Cheng uses the concept of racial melancholia "as a theoretical model of identity that provides a critical framework for analyzing the constitutive role that grief plays in racial/ethnic subject-formation." Racial melancholia "affects both dominant white culture and racial others" and "describes the dynamics that constitute their mutual definition through exclusion" and is therefore a constitutive factor in racial/ethnic dynamics in American society (xi).

¹² Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990).

¹³ Chuang, *Crossings*, 116.

¹⁴ Lesley Chin Douglass, "Finding the Way: Chuang Hua's *Crossings* and Chinese Literary Tradition." *MELUS* 20.1 (1995): 54.

¹⁵ Chuang, *Crossings*, 64.

thetic and her reliance on Chinese literary tradition.¹⁶ In both cases, the narrative technique utilized in *Crossings* is seen as playing an integral part in mirroring Fourth Jane's innermost struggles. According to Amy Ling, the narrative style of the novel reflects the fragmentation of Fourth Jane's personality through a cinematic alternation between the present, the recent past, and the distant past. Although an "extended interweaving of two simultaneous actions" in different time dimensions only occurs once in *Crossings*, seemingly random images with "symbolic overtones" are quite frequent. Ling distinguishes between "progressive images" that, by definition, are integral to the progression of the narrative, and "arresting images" that seem to refer to nothing and to have no meaning other than interrupting the narration for a disturbing effect.¹⁷ Despite the initial discrepancy between these two types of images, they both function as the symbolic content of *Crossings*, contributing to the aesthetic of displacement at work in Chuang's novel.

Ling finds coherence in how the fragmented images in *Crossings* resonate with each other and the different narrative lines of the novel,¹⁸ whereas Lesley Chin Douglass, referring to a Chinese literary tradition based on Taoist philosophy and its inclination to refrain from seeking unity and consistency in human experience, asks "whether Chuang Hua's fragmented images are ever meant to achieve any coherence."¹⁹ Without making claims about the author's intention, it is clear that Chuang's use of fragmented images contributes to the reader's gradual understanding of Fourth Jane's emotional confusion. Furthermore, the fragmentation of narration in *Crossings* has an aesthetic function that is not restricted either to modernist literature or to any other pre-defined set of aesthetic principles. The dislocated condition of Chuang Hua's protagonist, in particular, invites a reading of *Crossings* that, drawing from postcolonial and transnational theory, surpasses the dichotomy between modernism and postmodernism and crosses several other canonical borders. As a diasporic work ahead of its time, *Crossings* calls for a formulation of a specific literary aesthetic of displacement. In this literary aesthetic, which can arguably be found in a significant number of Chinese American women's narratives, hybridity, in form—in structural, stylistic, and rhetorical choices—reflects the fragmentation and fluidity of identity formation at the intersection of several axes of identification.

The "aesthetic of displacement" is a concept perhaps more deployed in analyses of photography and cinema than in literary criticism. A literary aesthetic of displacement has been conceptualized before, however, in African American literary criticism. In scholarship about African (diasporic) literatures, for example, similar concerns have been subsumed under the formulation of a "poetics of displacement." Such explicit attempts to formulate a Chinese American aesthetic of displacement seem to be lacking in Asian American literary criticism, although there are several articles dealing with displacement, dislocation,

¹⁶ Ling, "A Rumble in the Silence" & "Afterword" to *Crossings*; Chiu, "Motion, Memory, and Conflict"; Douglass, "Finding the Way."

¹⁷ Ling, "A Rumble in the Silence," 33–34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁹ Douglass, "Finding the Way," 54.

and diaspora in *Crossings*.²⁰ Thus, *Crossings* offers a particularly fertile ground for an attempt to conceptualize such an aesthetic, which is often at work in texts by women writers of Chinese descent.

Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris reads Toni Morrison's *Jazz* through a discourse of displacement, contextualizing the novel in terms of the black diasporic tradition:

Morrison's sixth novel plays with what could be called an *aesthetic of displacement*. In the black diasporic tradition, displaced individuals embark on a journey of literal reconfiguring and remembering in New York's fluid framework.²¹

If in a considerable part of the black diasporic tradition the "reconfiguring and remembering" occurs in the fluidity of New York's ever-changing cultural surroundings, in Chinese American literature these activities could certainly transpire in San Francisco's Chinatown. Chuang Hua's *Crossings* presents an interesting exception to this by dispersing Fourth Jane's attempts to remember and to reconfigure her identity over three continents, and by keeping her in constant flux through abrupt geographical and chronological crossings. In her analysis of Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, Paquet-Deyris refers to the African American photographer James Van Der Zee's collection of black-and-white photographs of 1920s Harlem funeral parlors, arguing that in black diasporic literature, the city of New York offers the same kind of framework for the lives and stories of its inhabitants that Van Der Zee's photographs offer for the deceased.²² This kind of "framing" is not only characteristic of the black diasporic tradition but is also one of the key devices that Chuang Hua uses to paint a vivid image of Fourth Jane's emotional confusion. The narrative often functions as a frame for the fragmented images and flashbacks that characterize *Crossings*, yet it soon becomes evident that the same fragments underline Fourth Jane's emotional crisis, framing her sense of displacement.

In Toni Morrison's novels, musical and visual elements fuse into an original narrative style. Similarly, Chuang Hua makes graceful stylistic transitions in her narration by adding musical and cinematic segues to her literary expression. An example can be found in the episode in which Fourth Jane announces her plans to leave France and her emotionally absent lover. Chinese opera music playing in the background heightens the tense atmosphere of the scene:

²⁰ For instance, Wen-ching Ho, "Representing Diaspora and Identity Quest in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*." *Seeking the Self—Encountering the Other: Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*, ed. Tuomas Huttunen et al., (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 151–167; Monica Chiu, "Abjection, Displacement, and Psychological Dissonance in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*." *Filthy Fictions: Asian American Literature by Women* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2004), 25–58; Veronica C. Wang, "In Search of the Self: The Dislocated Female Émigré Wanderer in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*." *Multicultural Literatures through Feminist/Poststructuralist Lenses*, ed. Barbara Frey Waxman (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 22–36.

²¹ Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris, "Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and the City." *African American Review* 35.2 (2001): 220; emphasis added.

²² *Ibid.*, 220.

You won't come back.

She posed an ashtray on his bare chest. Lying on her stomach, propped on elbows, she kissed his shoulders, then looked at him.

Will you miss me?

He puffed on his cigarette and stared at the ceiling. Percussion rushed into the frantic fray of clacking sticks, the savage turbulence of cymbals and gongs quickening to madness. A sudden halt. The voice broke into the silence, two staccato notes, then a prolonged shriek of rage followed by three single clacks of a wooden clapper. He looked at her.

Is it over?

In sharp measured paces the staccato of clacks resumed. The clash of cymbals, resonance cut short by hands, entered on each fourth off-beat of the sticks. Another halt nicked the flow. The flutes merged with the rest in wild weaving wails of tearing anguish.²³

The image painted by Chuang's inclusion of a famous Beijing opera reflects the emotional trauma and disorientation that Fourth Jane is experiencing. She is perplexed by the opposing motivations between her need to defend her ethnic pride, and her wish to be appreciated by her capricious lover.²⁴ Her motivation to defend her pride, however, goes beyond ethnic or racial concerns. By deciding to leave her lover and to return to the United States, Fourth Jane makes a statement that preserves her self-worth. By not abandoning herself to the whims of her married and selfish lover, she refuses to be defined by others as an exotic and insignificant Other. By taking this action, she is defending her ethnic pride while simultaneously taking an important step towards defining herself on her own terms. In the process, she resists the pull of her emotional displacement and its centrifugal effect on her sense of self.

The Chinese opera in this episode is from the classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The plot centers on a clever military commander Kung Ming, "the chief strategist and commander-in-chief of the newly established Shue Kingdom," who by using his wit successfully prevents his city from being attacked by the triumphant Northern Army. According to Shu-yan Li, the story provides one of three key images of "architectural closure" present in *Crossings*, all of which consist of spaces surrounded by walls that both protect and isolate the people inside. The first instance of architectural closure is the walled-in family garden, which appears several times throughout the novel, and is eventually invaded by a "barbarian"; the second instance is the story of Kung Ming recounted in the opera performance; and finally, the third is a seemingly isolated image, near the end of the novel, of four walls facing the four cardinal points.²⁵ The third image reads as follows:

There are two gates in the north wall, three in the south, two in the east and two in the west. Winds blow from all sides. In the center is stillness. Winds blow from all sides. The gates are open. The center shifts.²⁶

²³ Chuang, *Crossings*, 130–131.

²⁴ Shu-yan Li, "Otherness and Transformation in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and *Crossings*." *MELUS* 18.4 (1993): 107.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 106–107.

²⁶ Chuang, *Crossings*, 204.

According to Li's interpretation, the gates in this passage represent Fourth Jane's childhood family, the parents occupying "the key northern position."²⁷ I suggest, however, that the image can also be read as a metaphoric expression of Fourth Jane's inner fragmentation and its looming solution—her act of self-definition. As formulated by Amy Ling, "the internal force pulling Jane apart is the conflict between the drive for independence and the need for love and security, the desire to please Father by being obedient and therefore good, and the need to be separate and individual, a person in her own right."²⁸ The dilemma is largely the same with her relationship with her French lover.²⁹ Being separate, individual, and *apart*, is necessary for self-centering. Chuang's allusions to Woolf are therefore not only stylistic or restricted to narrative technique; in the above sense, by leaving her lover, Fourth Jane is building her necessary "apartment," a virtual "room of her own."

Wen-ching Ho compares Fourth Jane's fragmented consciousness to that of an exile, who can never completely surmount the sadness inherent in her diasporic life.³⁰ Fourth Jane's French lover perceives her as a Chinese woman above all else, an exile in her adopted homeland: "You have to go back. You have no future in America. You are an exile in America as you are in exile here."³¹ What is particularly interesting, however, is not her lover's verdict but her own perception of her displaced situation. Fourth Jane's realization, as she replies to his statement, functions as a foundation for the new "home" she is building for herself:

I couldn't live without America. It's a part of me by now. For years I used to think I was dying in America because I could not have China. Quite unexpectedly one day it ended when I realized I had it in me and not being able to be there physically no longer mattered. Those wasted years when I denied America because I had lost China. In my mind I expelled myself from both. [...] In that paralysis I lived in no man's land, having also lost America since the loss of one entailed the loss of the other. [...] I thought of giving up one for the other, I had such longings to make a rumble in the silence. But both parts equally strong canceled out choice.³²

On the surface, the paralyzed condition that Fourth Jane recounts in this passage refers to the Korean war, but it is also analogous to the conflict that Fifth James's marriage to a white woman has created between his (and Jane's) mother and father.³³ Fourth Jane feels equally torn in relation to her parents—the two reference points still left from her native China—who are fighting over Fifth

²⁷ Of the four cardinal points, north is the dominant one in Chinese architecture, as Shu-yan Li points out: "The gates are the original family members—parents and seven children—with the parents holding the key northern position...United they stand firm against influences from the outside, but when winds of change finally bring...her mother to a new attitude...and when Jane herself has acquired a better understanding of life, acceptance of a new family structure and new social patterns is to be expected." Li, "Otherness and Transformation," 108.

²⁸ Ling, "A Rumble in the Silence," 32.

²⁹ Wang, "In Search of the Self," 32.

³⁰ Ho, "Representing Diaspora and Identity Quest," 158.

³¹ Chuang, *Crossings*, 121.

³² *Ibid.*, 121–122.

³³ Ling, "A Rumble in the Silence," 32.

James' marriage. However, Fourth Jane eventually sides with her mother, who fiercely defends the purity of her family, refusing to accept the foreign intruder even after a grandchild has been born and Dyadya has given his blessing to the marriage.³⁴ Near the end of the novel, following the death of her husband, Ngmah finally changes her mind and acknowledges her white daughter-in-law as a family member and the mother of her grandson. Jane also finds reconciliation between her two places of identification, China and America, and establishes a way to unravel the paralyzing ties of her long-time sense of displacement.

The emotional "home" that Fourth Jane is creating for herself is no less imaginary than China is in her memory. The diasporic consciousness needs a place to plant its roots, and if such a place of origin is not readily available, it is constructed by way of memories, imagination, and hope for the future. Salman Rushdie, another diasporic writer and an exile, writes about such places:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back [...]. But if we look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation...almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, [countries] of the mind.³⁵

In a similar fashion, Fourth Jane creates for herself a "China of the mind," realizing years later that the China she is longing for no longer exists. Yet, she also understands that as long as she has access to this homeland in her mind, however imaginary it may be, her sense of displacement—the sadness of exile—cannot defeat her. The ability to imagine allows her to fuse past experiences into parallel worlds, which she can carry with her wherever she may be. With this realization, each crossing becomes a little less threatening:

The lights were on when she woke up. She saw white walls, ceiling, floor, some furniture about but did not know where she was. Certainly this must be death she thought. How strange yet natural to wake up dead with white walls, ceiling, floor, and pieces of furniture scattered about. She had managed to enter death wrapped in white sheets, a crossing not so difficult as one would imagine.³⁶

The white-walled room where Fourth Jane wakes up is not death, as she soon comes to realize, but her apartment in Paris. Although placed almost exactly in the middle of the novel, framed as an isolated incident recounted by Fourth Jane to her lover, it contains symbolic undercurrents that connect it to her displaced condition and to her later coming to terms with it. The room with white walls surrounding Fourth Jane wrapped in white sheets—white symbolically

³⁴ "Dyadya" (father) and "Ngmah" (mother) are "dialectical terms of endearment used by people in and around Shanghai and Ningpo in China's Jiangsu Province." Ho, "Representing Diaspora and Identity Quest," 155.

³⁵ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 10. Quoted by Ho, "Representing Diaspora and Identity Quest," 163.

³⁶ Chuang, *Crossings*, 124.

associated with death, on one hand; novelty, innocence, and purity, on the other—represents her waking up “from the dead” and finding an imaginary home—a place to belong to, a “room of her own.” With death and (re)birth inseparably intertwined, the above passage is part of the oscillation between the oppositional images and stark juxtapositions characteristic of *Crossings*. As Douglass notes, in the Taoist philosophical tradition, the unsavory and abject are ever present in the cyclical pattern of life. Similarly, in *Crossings*, finding the way out of emotional exile entails not denying life nor death, but rather embracing the constant flux of life’s unexpected ways.³⁷

The aspiration to create new perspectives, new futures, and, paradoxically, “new” pasts, is an essential aspect of Chuang’s aesthetic of displacement, as it is in much of Chinese American women’s writing. As Rushdie writes in another passage from *Imaginary Homelands*:

The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves—because they are so defined by others—by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.³⁸

This passage crystallizes, with remarkable insight, what is at the heart of diasporic literature. As a diasporic work, Chuang Hua’s *Crossings* masterfully exemplifies the above aesthetic, playing with simultaneous stylistic, thematic, and generic crossings. Negotiating the identity formation of a wandering Chinese American female émigré in terms of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, Chuang Hua’s *Crossings* is a work of remarkable aesthetic and stylistic innovation. Despite this, as Donald Goellnicht,³⁹ Helena Grice,⁴⁰ and Kandice Chuh⁴¹ have argued, Asian American literature, and Asian American women’s narratives in particular, have not been sufficiently explored as texts that are both theoretically informed, and theoretically informing. According to Goellnicht, reading Asian American texts as theoretically informed fictions that also actively contribute to theory construction is one way of undermining positions of privilege and subverting existing power relations within literary institutions and academia.⁴² It is critical, therefore, not to read *Crossings* merely as a work representing minoritized literatures and borrowing from modernist narrative tech-

³⁷ Douglass, “Finding the Way,” 60–63.

³⁸ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 124.

³⁹ Donald C. Goellnicht, “Blurring Boundaries: Asian American Literature as Theory.” *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴⁰ Helena Grice, *Negotiating Identities: An Introduction to Asian American Women’s Writing* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002), 92–93.

⁴¹ Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 18–20.

⁴² Goellnicht, “Blurring Boundaries,” 340.

niques, but as a highly innovative text that actively participates in creating a specific (Chinese) American literary aesthetic.

Crossings does not easily fit into pre-existing categorizations. Suggestive of this is the fact that critics have extracted traits of both Euro-American modernism and classical Chinese poetry in the novel.⁴³ Its border-crossing hybridity, demanding and avant-garde narrative style, and finally, the possible existence of a “canonical quota” may have contributed to the relative oblivion that has surrounded *Crossings*, especially during the first few decades after its publication. Coined by David Li, the quota suggests that at any given time, no more than one Asian American text or author can be accorded institutional recognition—a notion that has resulted in fierce contestations over representations of both Asia and “Asian America.”⁴⁴ As Monica Chiu notes in her analysis of displacement and abjection in *Crossings*, “the novel itself is bound by and to the *place* that academia creates for fiction that falls within or outside the purview of what is considered accessible and what is deemed appropriate material for the (Asian American) academic mill.”⁴⁵ Interestingly, it seems that *Crossings* has, until recently, been largely disregarded with respect to both the American and the Asian American literary “canons” precisely because it centers around racial and gender abjection as experienced by its protagonist Fourth Jane. Perhaps, however, the current interest in the notion of abjection in Asian American literatures might result in a reevaluation of American literary “canons” and a turn towards a more inclusive and hybrid conception of what is “American” literature.

The aesthetic of displacement exemplified in *Crossings* is essentially about shifts in perception. By way of constant stylistic, generic, and thematic crossings, breaks, and transitions, Chuang’s work challenges conventional conceptions about ethnicity, “race,” and gender. In addition, the aesthetic of displacement in *Crossings* emphasizes the racialized and gendered conditions of identity formation, and how deeply embedded they are in existing conceptions of “nature” and “culture.” Often, it is necessary to cross frontiers just “to see things plainly,” as Rushdie writes of diasporic literature. Fourth Jane’s story suggests that this act of shifting the center—of perception, of one’s identity—is an endless process, as there are no final truths concerning matters of identity. As Monica Chiu notes, “*Crossings* is, necessarily, a novel about placing only to displace and crossing only to return to a recalibrated territory as a changed and still changing individual.”⁴⁶

⁴³ For instance, Ling, “A Rumble in the Silence;” Douglass, “Finding the Way”; Chiu, “Motion, Memory, and Conflict”; Ho, “Representing Diaspora and Identity Quest.”

⁴⁴ David Leiwei Li, *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 65–66.

⁴⁵ Chiu, “Abjection, Displacement, and Psychological Dissonance,” 27; emphasis in the original.

⁴⁶ Chiu, “Motion, Memory, and Conflict,” 109.

II

NEGOTIATING LOSS AND BETRAYAL: MELANCHOLIC ETHICS AND NARRATIVE AGENCY IN FAE MYENNE NG'S *BONE AND STEER TOWARD ROCK*

by

Anna Pehkoranta, 2012

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Negotiating Loss and Betrayal: Melancholic Ethics and Narrative Agency in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock*

We know so little of the old country. We repeat the names of grandfathers and uncles, but they have always been strangers to us. Family exists only because somebody has a story, and knowing the story connects us to a history. To us, the deformed man is oddly compelling, the forgotten man is a good story, and a beautiful woman suffers (Ng 2008a: 33-34).

In *An Ethics of Betrayal*, Crystal Parikh contends that “betrayals [...] can perform a cultural critique of the social conditions by which the minority subject comes into being and of the possibilities for agency and transformation available to that subject once it has come into being” (Parikh 2009: 1-2). She further argues that betrayals “channel these questions of being, agency, and change through constitutive, if contingent, relations of responsibility” and that it is “only through such relations of responsibility that the emergence of minority subjectivity is actually possible” (*ibid.*: 2). But it is also only through these “relations of responsibility” that an ethics of any kind can come into being, and writing offers one way of forming such relations. With a similar approach, Leslie Bow suggests that betrayal, specifically in Asian American women’s writing, “can constitute [...] a subversion of repressive authority that depends on upholding strict borders between groups and individuals” (Bow 2001: 3). Asian American women’s narratives are particularly susceptible of revealing acts of betrayal, as they often address the social, political, and emotional ramifications of existing at an intersection of several marginalized positions, determined by one’s ethnicity, class, and gender and frequently complicated by generational conflict. Accordingly, betrayal can be conceptualized as taking a necessary choice between the conflicting demands arising from different loyalties produced by ethnic, class, and gender identification, as Bow has suggested.

Chinese American author Fae Myenne Ng’s novels *Bone* (2008a, org. published in 1993) and *Steer Toward Rock* (2008b) provide fertile ground for an analysis drawing from the notion of betrayal. Both novels call for a reading that emphasizes their deeply melancholic undercurrent and investigates the myriad ways they express and negotiate loss and betrayal. While the temporal setting and the narrative structure of the two novels are anything but similar, they share crucial thematic concerns. First, *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock* are both narratives of loss, that is, their narrative content is organized around a story of a harrowing personal loss as experienced by individual members of an immigrant family. Second, in both novels, these personal stories become emblematic of a more far-reaching national narrative of loss which, to a large degree, can be conceived of in terms of betrayal. As I attempt to demonstrate, this larger national narrative is deeply rooted in the history of Chinese immigration to the United States: the disillusionment experienced by many Chinese immigrants who left their native land and their families, often permanently, to pursue the

dream of the “Gold Mountain”¹ that America – California, in particular – represented; the highly restrictive legislation enacted in the United States from the late nineteenth century onward in order to control Chinese immigration to the country; and personal histories that were lost in exchange for paper identities that would make entry to the country possible.²

This essay examines Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock* as narratives of loss, situating them in the above historical context. By reading Ng’s two novels against the notion of betrayal and, more specifically, two historically influential narratives of racial abjection – the so-called yellow peril and model minority discourses –, it seeks to demonstrate that *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock* both exemplify what may be termed a melancholic ethics. Despite its melancholic tendency, this ethics does not signify the undoing of either individual or communal agency, as the abundant examples of active agency present in the narratives clearly demonstrate. Counterbalancing the language of loss and melancholia, the novels display another vein of narration characterized by self-reflection, active ethical agency, and a resilient quest for emancipation. Drawing from both narrative tendencies, this essay proposes that the melancholic response to loss and abjection calls for an understanding of grief and mourning as important aspects of agency in certain diasporic conditions. Finally, it suggests that despite its pathological origins, melancholia also holds potential for agency, as becomes evident from the melancholic ethics present in *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock*.

Stories Without an End: Narratives of Loss and Abjection

The most prominent loss haunting *Bone*’s characters is the self-inflicted death of Ona, the middle daughter of the Leong family, who jumps off the roof of Nam Ping Yuen, a Chinatown housing project, disillusioned by the bitter feud between the Leong and Ong families: after the laundry business shared by the two families goes wrong, she is forced to leave Osvaldo, Rosa and Luciano Ong’s son, who she desperately loves. Leila Fu, the novel’s narrator and the Leong family’s oldest daughter from her mother’s previous marriage, describes the family’s remaining members’ various attempts to come to terms with Ona’s suicide. The narrative structure of the novel reflects the difficulty each of them encounters trying to understand and eventually accept Ona’s choice. Just as the members of the Leong family continuously return to the past in their minds, hoping to find some acceptable explanation to why Ona decides to jump to her death, the novel takes the reader back in time chapter by chapter and unfolds the story with a reversed chronological order. Each chapter takes a step back in

¹ The first Chinese laborers arriving to the United States from the 1840s onward called California “Gam Saan,” a Chinese expression signifying “Gold Mountain” (Takaki 1998: 31).

² The history of Chinese immigration to America and the anti-Chinese legislation set in force in the United States during the late nineteenth century have been discussed extensively by a number of Asian American scholars. For further reference, see for instance Chan (1991), Takaki (1998: esp. 31-42 and 79-131), and Chang (2004).

time in comparison to the preceding chapters, yet moves forward toward the end of that individual chapter. Seymour Chatman calls this kind of temporal organization “sustained episodic reversal,” in which each episode – or, as in *Bone*, each chapter – is narrated “from its own earliest moment to its latest, but with the constraint that each succeeding episode must occur earlier in the discourse” (Chatman 2009: 34). The novel ends roughly where the story – as a chronological chain of events – begins; as there is no return to the narrative present at the end of the novel, it leaves the future of its characters open and displaced.

The end of the first chapter is where the chronologically organized story concludes. Having just disclosed to her mother that she and Mason were secretly married at the City Hall while visiting Nina, the youngest of the three sisters, in New York, Leila comments on her mother’s resentful response: “What could I say? Using Chinese was my undoing. She had a world of words that were beyond me” (Ng 2008a: 20). On one hand, Leila’s inability to respond effectively to her mother’s use of Chinese language reflects her sense of emotional stagnation and the melancholic response to loss that seems to afflict the entire family. On the other hand, her words betray a lack of closure, an openness to ambivalent if not conflicting meanings, which destabilizes any notion of final or unambiguous truth. If the novel’s organization around a reverse chronology builds up readerly expectations of a climactic unveiling of the fundamental cause for Ona’s suicide, such expectations are never met; instead, the reader finds “not a singular cause, but rather the diffuse unfolding of hardship, sorrow, and endurance” (Chang 2005: 114). The chapter ends on a similar note, as two sewing ladies from Mah’s workplace overhear the ensuing argument between mother and daughter. Witnessing the two women leaving the family store where the scene takes place, Leila concludes:

They were going to Portsmouth Square, and I knew they were talking up everything they heard, [...] not stopping until they found their sewing-lady friends [...]. And that’s when they’d tell, tell their long-stitched version of the story, from beginning to end.

Let them make it up, I thought. Let them talk. (Ng 2008a: 21)

Leila’s laconic remark “let them make it up” points to the difficulty, if not impossibility, of getting the story right and reaching the final truth to what has happened. The true story does not open itself for chronological narration proceeding “from beginning to end” (*ibid.*), but necessitates another kind of chronology that never forgets “to look back, to remember” (Ng 2008a: 191). While it may seem that by revealing a pessimistic submission to an assumed inevitability of unfavorable events, Leila’s words betray an all but archetypal melancholic response, there is also a more hopeful element to the possible unfolding of the story in such a haphazard way, as letting the women tell their “long-stitched version of the story” (Ng 2008a: 21) suggests. All the dismantling, reassembling, and fixing conducted by Mason at the garage and by Leon in his unlikely projects involving buying discarded appliances with a half-thought intention to recycle them, and all the stitching and sewing done by Mah both at the factory

and at home on Salmon Alley, can be read as attempts to negotiate, and finally accept, the tragedy of Ona's suicide. On another level, however, we can read these functions as representing a narrative endeavor that seeks to understand the diasporic experience and the emotional displacement facing the novel's characters in terms of continuous undoing, or unstitching, and fabricating the story of a neglected and partly silenced communal history, a story of displaced individuals balancing between racial abjection and a quest for cultural agency.

Questions of abjection and agency in Asian American literature cannot be discussed without considering two major discourses that have largely characterized the American racial rhetoric on Asian Americans from the second half of the nineteenth century onward: these are the much debated yellow peril and model minority discourses. Despite all the political and scholarly contestation they have raised, particularly among Asian American scholars, these discourses continue to resonate in discussions about the Asian American experience as an inseparable part of the history of Asian immigration to the United States.³ The yellow peril myth can be traced back to the anti-Asian rhetoric of the nineteenth century, which culminated in the enactment of a series of anti-Asian immigration laws in order to restrict the number of Asian immigrants to the United States. One example of such legislation was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which together with three follow-up exclusion acts set in force by the end of the same decade suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers and prohibited the reentry of those who had left and not returned to the U.S. before the enactment of the law (Lowe 1996: 180, n14). The Chinese Exclusion Act remained in force until 1943, but it was not until 1965 that race quotas in legislation gave way to nationality criteria and the immigration quotas for Asian countries were placed on an equal footing with those of others (Lim 1993: 575-576; Lye 2005: 6).

These are the harsh historical conditions that in part set the stage for the losses suffered by Ng's characters. In *Steer Toward Rock*, the presence of the racist history of anti-Chinese immigration laws is perhaps even more pronounced than in *Bone*. Ng's second novel explores the social, cultural, and emotional ramifications of the restrictive legislation – the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, in particular – through the kaleidoscope of one man's life in 1960s San Francisco. Jack Moon Szeto, bought into the family of Yi-Tung Szeto when he was five years old, lives his life under a false identity and enters the United States as the son of his paper father, who has also bought his name to enter the country as “the legal son of a gold miner” (Ng 2008b: 3). But the price Jack eventually has to pay for his life in America by far exceeds the four thousand dollars he owes Yi-Tung Szeto for his papers and passage to the United States. The first lines of the novel disclose the real price for his American life, as narrated by Jack:

³ For an extensive discussion of the genealogy of the yellow peril rhetoric and its literary manifestations from the late nineteenth century onward, see Lye (2005: 12-46), and for an elaboration on the yellow peril rhetoric in the context of contemporary Asian American women's writing, see Chiu (2004: 5-18). For an extended discussion of the model minority discourse and its repercussions for the Asian American subjectivity, see Palumbo-Liu (1999: 395-416).

The woman I loved wasn't in love with me; the woman I married wasn't a wife to me. Ilin Cheung was my wife on paper. In deed, she belonged to Yi-Tung Szeto. In debt, I also belonged to him. He was my father, paper, too (Ng 2008b: 3).

Yi-Tung Szeto has reported his paper son to the immigration officials as a married man, so that he can later use the "immigration slot" (Ng 2008b: 4) provided by Jack's alleged wife to bring to the United States a mistress for himself. Ilin Cheung is the woman Jack must now claim as his wife, but it is the San Francisco born Joice Qwan whom he truly loves. To prove his love for Joice Qwan, Jack enters the Chinese Confession Program, instituted in 1956, officially to "encourage and assist all aliens [...] who illegally entered the U.S. to adjust their status to that of an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence" (Ng 2008b: 244). Less poetically, the program offered the United States government an effective way to monitor certain residents of the Chinese community with the intention of investigating and deporting anyone who was considered pro-Communist (Takaki 1998: 416). Jack gambles his citizenship for Joice's love, and loses them both. Betrayed by state officials and by love, he learns "the reach of passion, the grip of rancor and the profundity of regret" (Ng 2008b: 5). Finally, it is Veda, the daughter he shares with Joice Qwan, who sees Jack for who he truly is; it is Veda who acknowledges how identities are made, how paper becomes blood. Fittingly, the novel ends with her words: "I chose Jack Moon Szeto. I chose his fake name, the name he lived half his life with, the name he made with his own sweat, the name he surrendered for love, the name that made him true" (Ng 2008b: 255).

The discriminatory legislation, the corollaries of which Ng explores in both of her novels, relied largely on the yellow peril rhetoric. As a systematic form of racial abjection, the yellow peril discourse rests upon the relationship it has forged between race and dirt (Chiu 2004: 5). Fictional yellow peril narratives that described Chinese immigrants as dirty and harboring diseases were frequent in the American rhetoric on race relations by the late nineteenth century (*ibid.*). Despite the initial fictional character of such narratives, the yellow peril rhetoric soon led to a "symbolic institutionalization" of Asian Americans within the "perilyzing" (as opposed to paralyzing) paradigm of racial abjection, as Monica Chiu has noted (Chiu 2004: 7). The effect of racial abjection is indeed paralyzing, as Chiu's wording suggests: officially classified as illegal aliens ineligible to citizenship, both Leon Leong and Jack Moon Szeto are trapped in a life in which survival equals forgetting one's true ancestry and paper identities are worth more than blood. The irony of the condition is apparent in Leon Leong's inability to survive the grief over his daughter's death because of an ancestral debt and a promise made to his paper father – a trick once performed to fool the American officials – to bring Grandpa Leong's bones back to China after his death.

While the yellow peril image present in the American racial rhetoric since the nineteenth century can be regarded as a particularly systematic form of racial abjection (see Chiu 2004: 5-8), the so-called model minority myth invites questions associated with agency. The model minority myth relies largely on

the alleged economic efficiency and upward mobility of Asian Americans as socioeconomic agents in American society (Lye 2005: 2). In the post-1960s racial rhetoric, Asian Americans have often been considered either as non-minorities or as minorities that do not suffer from oppression (*ibid.*). What the seemingly optimistic model minority rhetoric conveniently forgets, besides the obvious heterogeneity of Asian American minorities, is that the model minority myth is in fact the other side of the coin that is the openly racist yellow peril rhetoric. As Colleen Lye notes, “yellow peril and model minority are best understood as two aspects of the same, long-running racial form, a form whose most salient feature, whether it has been made the basis for exclusion or assimilation, is the trope of economic efficiency” (*ibid.*: 5). According to several Asian American critics (Cheng 2001; Eng 2001; Eng and Han 2003; see also Shiu 2006), this contradictory legacy has resulted in a chronically melancholic condition for the Asian American subject.

This is the rhetorical axis that has dominated the discourse on Chinese immigration to the United States for more than a century. It also plays a significant role in the Chinese American immigrant experience portrayed in Ng’s *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock*. In reference to the notable change in the production, marketing, and reception of Asian American literature that has taken place since the 1970s, David Palumbo-Liu notes that the birth of the model minority myth was made possible by a systematic disregard of differences in the “material histories and contemporary realities” (Palumbo-Liu 1999: 396) between different Asian groups in the United States, and attributes the recent success of certain Chinese American narratives precisely to this development, in which material and sociopolitical differences between the numerous Asian American ethnic groups are suppressed to give way to an “ideology of depoliticized self-healing primarily concerned with the psychological adjustments of ethnic subjects and enabled by a presumption of a particularly constructed ethnic malaise” (*ibid.*). Rather than reading such narratives as direct manifestations of the model minority myth, he considers the myth as an ideological construct that functions as “a mode of apprehending, decoding, recoding, and producing Asian American narratives” (*ibid.*). Fae Myenne Ng’s two novels are an interesting exception to this trajectory, as they portray a different image of the Chinese American immigrant experience: one in which loss, grief, and emotional displacement are not easily consolidated into a consistent process of psychological self-healing. This is reflected, for instance, in the lack of closure that characterizes *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock* both structurally and thematically. It also becomes particularly evident from Ng’s discussion of the betrayal inherent in the dominant historical narrative.

The Lost Bones of History: Betrayal in Historical Narrative

In his essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917), Freud presents melancholia as the pathological counterpart to “the normal affect of mourning” (Freud 1957: 243). Mourning, states Freud, is the common reaction to “the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such

as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (*ibid.*). What sets melancholia apart from this normal and healthy response to loss is that, unlike mourning, melancholia does not accept substitution of what is lost and is therefore indefinite in character (Cheng 2001: 8). According to Freud, the melancholic response may be more likely to occur if the lost object lacks clear definition: if what is lost is something rather abstract, or if some part of the loss remains unconscious (Freud 1957: 245). Another distinguishing factor between mourning and melancholia has to do with the subject's sense of self-worth which, in the case of melancholia, suffers serious damage. Freud captures the difference by stating: "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (*ibid.*: 246).

Building on Freud's discussion of melancholia, Anne Anlin Cheng begins her analysis of what she calls "racial melancholia" (Cheng 2001: xi) by drawing a distinction between 'melancholy' as an affect and 'melancholia' as a structural and identificatory formation (*ibid.*: 20). She further argues that racial melancholia exists for racialized subjects "both as a *sign* of rejection and a psychic *strategy* in response to that rejection" (*ibid.*; emphasis original). The dynamic of racial melancholia as an identificatory formation is inextricably linked to racial abjection. As David Li formulates, rearticulating Julia Kristeva's theory on abjection and the genesis of human subjectivity, the abject is simultaneously necessary for the formation of the self and what is rejected in the process, or, "the part of ourselves that we willfully discard" (Li 1998: 6). Thus, the birth of the self necessitates the constitution of what is considered as the "not-self" but what cannot be simply deemed the object or the alienated Other.⁴ Karen Shimakawa defines abjection as "an attempt to circumscribe and radically differentiate something that, although deemed repulsively *other* is, paradoxically, at some fundamental level, an undifferentiable part of the whole" (Shimakawa 2002: 2, emphasis original). To the extent that "Asian American," as both Li and Shimakawa suggest, functions as abject in relation to "American," some degree of racial melancholia can be regarded as a necessary result of such cultural dynamics. As Cheng notes, however, melancholia is not only predicated on the metaphorical loss of self, but is also an "active negotiation of it" (Cheng 2001: 20). Both melancholia and abjection are by definition interminable, indefinite, and incom-

⁴ David Li uses the concept of Asian abjection to signify the discursive processes through which certain forms of Asian American articulation are denied, sanctioned, and substituted with dominant authorities who are to speak for the Asian American (Li 1998: 8). Underlining the conceptual split between the object or the Other and the abject, Li suggests that the history of Asians in the United States can be roughly divided into two separate periods both characterized by distinct forms of representation, political culture, and modes of production. The period of "Oriental alienation" falls between the years 1854 and 1943 or 1965, depending on which one of the two landmark years in reforming U.S. immigration legislation is given priority. The second period named "Asian abjection" begins respectively in 1943 or 1965, and continues until the present. What differentiates the second period from the first, according to Li, is precisely the logic of abjection, which simultaneously excludes or rejects and includes or necessitates "the abject" (Li 1998: 5-6). Karen Shimakawa argues, however, that it is this "vacillation between extremes [...] rather than a developmental progression from excludable alien to tolerated abject" that has defined the representation of Asian Americanness from its inception (Shimakawa 2002: 166-167, n14).

plete; while abjection does not signal total and unambiguous exclusion, melancholia, in all its infiniteness, also lacks final answers. This lack of closure is where melancholia, despite its pathological characteristics, also holds potential for agency.

Questions of agency are often too easily left out from discussions addressing loss and melancholia in minoritized literatures. This is hardly surprising since, on the surface, melancholia seems to represent the antithesis of agency, indeed the antithesis of any activity. Pathological or not, melancholia can nonetheless provide a much needed opportunity for active self-reflecting in the face of a traumatic loss. Longing and remembrance, the movement that goes “*forward and forward and then back, back*” (Ng 2008a: 142, italics original), form an essential part of this self-reflective process. It thus becomes evident that time is not the only modality being reversed and transgressed in *Bone*. In fact, time and temporality in the novel are deeply enmeshed with motion – or the lack of it. Juliana Chang points out that in the Freudian dichotomy between mourning and melancholia, mourning “*exemplifies progress,*” whereas melancholia, in accordance with its pathological origins, remains improperly attached to the past and therefore holds the subject hostage, unable to move forward (Chang 2005: 115). Unable to let go of what is lost, the melancholic cannot achieve closure and remains caught in what once was. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely in the act of defying closure that melancholia retains an openness to new meanings and allows for an unfixed view of the world, as the reversal of both temporal and spatial movement in *Bone* suggests.

Although the most acute loss haunting the members of the Leong family – Ona’s suicide – is very matter-of-factly given to the reader no later than the first page of *Bone*, it gradually becomes apparent that Ona’s death is only the latest chapter in a long succession of losses in the family’s life. Leila’s laconic comment on the reasons that once led to her mother’s love affair with Tommie Hom bespeaks of a life structured by loss: “It wasn’t just death that upset Mah, it was life, too” (Ng 2008a: 79). For Leon, especially, loss has become a steady element in life: he has lost his birth parents and his biological past by becoming Grandpa Leong’s paper son upon immigration to the United States; he has suffered from a continuous flow of lost jobs; he has lost his wife to her affair with another man; and in the event of Ona’s death, he is faced with the prospect of losing his paternal authority with regard to his rebelling daughters (Lowe 1996: 123). In one significant episode, Mason accompanies Leon to the Chinese cemetery to look for Grandpa Leong’s lost bones – in Leon’s mind, a broken promise and thus the cause of so much misfortune. The incident functions simultaneously both as the culmination of Leon’s personal history of losses and as an allegory of all the lost histories hidden inside the homes and alleys of the world’s so-called Chinatowns. After initial difficulties in locating the cemetery, the two men maneuver themselves in through a hole in the fence surrounding the burial ground. Soon enough, a security guard drives over, announcing that the graveyard is closed and that, in any case, the men need a paper confirming that they have relatives buried in the ground of the cemetery. Later, Leila takes up the

task of approaching the Benevolent Association in order to hunt down the requested paper. What she finds out, to her astonishment, is that after “a list of abandoned dead” (Ng 2008a: 74) had been posted in local newspapers to inform the relatives, Grandpa Leong’s remains were disinterred and reburied elsewhere together with remains of other people sharing the same surname.

The incident draws a parallel between human remains that become debris – misplaced matter stripped of any personal meaning – when there is no one to claim them, and identities and personal histories becoming disposable. Both novels portray a character who has given up his birth identity and family ties for a paper identity and a life in America; these are the stories of *Bone*’s Leon Leong and *Steer Toward Rock*’s Jack Moon Szeto. In the above episode from *Bone*, the exhumation of bodies to make room for new ones and the fact that the bones are subsequently anonymously reburied to an unknown location are analogous to the building of *historical debris* as a sideproduct of the dominant historical narrative, constructed by and for those who are victorious in life, that Walter Benjamin discusses in his essay ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. Drawing from Lisa Lowe’s reading of *Bone* against Benjamin’s understanding of historical narrative, Chang calls *Bone*’s backward-looking temporal structure “a temporality of the remainder” (Chang 2005: 116; Lowe 1996: 126-127). This alternative temporality offers a competing perspective for the dominant historical narrative by acknowledging “that which is left behind by history, that which is covered over by history’s transformation of catastrophe into progress” (Chang 2005: 116). Leon Leong is in fact a Benjaminian “angel of history,” who sees “one single catastrophe [...] piling wreckage upon wreckage” where most people merely see a simple “chain of events” (Benjamin 2007: 257). His relentless search for the lost bones of his paper father in order to fulfill his promise and return them to China allegorically represents the “material memory of the unvictorious,” which “dialectically returns” to challenge the dominant historical narrative (Lowe 1996: 126). The melancholic lack of closure thus signifies both individual and collective ethico-political agency in the form of symbolic resistance to the dominant conceptions of the past.

The betrayal inherent in historical narrative does not annihilate the possibility for agency for the minority subject because, as Crystal Parikh maintains, “if there is no recovering oneself from the trauma of betrayal, there is nonetheless an “after” to the act, a new world of meanings and relations, brought into existence by betrayal, into which the subject is thrown” (Parikh 2009: 2). Abjection, on the other hand, is a betrayal of its own kind: a betrayal of oneself. As something that we “willfully discard,” to use David Li’s (1998: 6) wording, the object can be perceived as *emotional debris* of a sort. It is what we lose or give away willingly as a reaction to something that we value being taken away from us, or when confronted with a threat of losing something integral to our identity or subjectivity. To put it differently, abjection – and indeed melancholia – signals turning away from something as a response to being turned away. The backward-quality of abjection lies precisely herein: the mind’s defense against loss and rejection is, paradoxically, self-abasement and self-rejection. In this

sense, melancholia and its unfortunate ramifications, depression and suicide, are expressions of being caught in the abyss of abjection, of being haunted by the past, as happens to the characters of *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock*. Moreover, abjection is always a contradiction in itself, as it necessitates turning into the self and stripping down the excess, reaching to the bare bones of existence, and finally being left with the void after having destructed what one knows.

“Re-membering” the Past: Melancholic Ethics and Narrative Agency

The melancholic ethics exemplified by Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock* is essentially about stillness, staying quietly alert to hear the forgotten (hi)stories that no one bothers to tell. Leila’s words from *Bone* testify to this agenda: “I believe in holding still. I believe that the secrets we hold in our hearts are our anchors, that even the unspoken between us is a measure of our every promise to the living and to the dead” (Ng 2008a: 190). In this particular ethics, “holding still” (*ibid.*) implicates embracing the state of not knowing, the state of existing between places where meanings are produced, in a way that resembles May Friedman and Silvia Schultermandl’s (2011: 5) notion of a “transnational sensibility,” which “sees a lack of fixity as simultaneously inevitable and rich in possibility” and is “both a methodology and a mode of enquiry: a way of seeing and deliberately *not-knowing*, a way of inhabiting the spaces between questions and answers” (*ibid.*: emphasis original). The lack of closure and the absence of fixed meanings is also reflected in Veda’s coming to a realization regarding her father’s way of “holding still” (Ng 2008a: 190) in *Steer Toward Rock*: “*The heart never travels*. This was my father’s most elusive phrase. He used it whenever a question was too large. Now I understood, he was referring to the infinite possibilities of the *unanswerable*” (Ng 2008b: 216, italics original). Leila, Veda, and Jack each communicate a transnational sensibility of “not-knowing” (Friedman and Schultermandl 2011: 5), as a result of which the melancholic ethics of “holding still” (Ng 2008a: 190) becomes “rich in possibility” (Friedman and Schultermandl 2011: 5) and even betrayal can act as a catalyst for agency and subversion.

In *Bone*, ambivalence, contradiction, and lack of closure sometimes manifest as a pronounced polarity between motion and immobility. This polarity unfolds, for example, in Leila’s comments about Ona being “the middle girl and [...] stuck in the middle of all the trouble” (Ng 2008a: 136), even though she “had always been the forward-looking one” (Ng 2008a: 85). Although the novel betrays any readerly expectations of providing final answers to the question of why Ona chooses to die, the reverse chronology seems to suggest that what finally pushes her over the edge and into her death is not that she fails to look *forward*, but rather that she forgets how to look *back*. For as Terry DeHay writes, “the minority woman must look to her history, both to preserve it and to find out who she is. She needs to have a clear vision of her past, in order to re-vision her present” (DeHay 1994: 31). Tragically, Ona is unsuccessful in this “process of re-membering” (*ibid.*) and is left unable to re-vision her future after a loss too overwhelming – being forced to choose between her love for her parents and

that for Osvaldo. Perhaps, for Ona, the decisive loss is not having to give up Osvaldo's love, however, but the betrayal committed by her father; even though she eventually bends to Leon's will, her relationship to her father will never be the same because Leon no longer has her trust. Unable to connect with her father's past and her own cultural heritage, she resorts to the final act of agency that she, in her mind, has left in her life: taking her own life.

Along with the reversed temporal organization of *Bone*, the titles of Ng's two novels – *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock* – also direct attention toward the process of stripping down the excess and unveiling the lost corpses of historical narrative, the material memory of those whose stories remain forgotten in the grand narrative of history. Upon returning from her personal odyssey to her father's native land, a journey she had embarked upon hoping to find resolution to his Chinese past, Veda finally concludes: "My father's story was never complete in America, that's why I could never let it go. But in China, his story was so common it wasn't even worth telling" (Ng 2008b: 214). The melancholic content of racial abjection lies, to a great extent, in the tragedy of being excluded from the national histories that are told, repeated, and thus kept alive. For Jack Moon Szeto, the name of the woman he loves – 'Joice' – is a reminder of the *choice* he has to make: to tell his story, or to keep quiet. The weight of this decision rests heavily upon his shoulders: "This is a story I'm afraid to tell and afraid to keep" (Ng 2008b: 188). But unlike Leon, Jack chooses to tell his story by entering the Chinese Confession Program. Choosing not to stay quiet has irretrievable consequences, but it does not bring him closure, as Jack is soon to realize: "Telling can be a detour. Telling does not necessarily invite completion" (Ng 2008b: 190). What eventually frees him from the hold of his past is letting his daughter tell the rest, letting his story take root and grow in the memory of future generations of Chinese Americans: "My story is native to our history but it need not be our root. A naturalized plant is new life. So I hand over my story. Let her tell. Let her not. Let her find her way through the story so that it frees her" (Ng 2008b: 191).

The "relations of responsibility," which, according to Crystal Parikh (2009: 2), enable the emergence of minority subjectivity, are at the heart of Ng's both novels. This makes *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock* literary works characterized by a strong sense of ethical agency as well as a pervasive ethical sensibility rooted in a deeply empathetic understanding of the political, cultural, and historical injustice that Chinese immigrants to the United States have had to endure. *Steer Toward Rock*, specifically, is structured around the complex and fragile balance in social relationships; the novel is divided into five segments each of which takes a different perspective to the social consequences of Jack's predicament and eventual confession. More importantly, the novel is organized around a negotiation between betrayal and trust. True to Ng's melancholic ethics motivated by loss and betrayal, Veda describes her father as "a man who trusted too much" (Ng 2008b: 216). Jack himself, on the other hand, concludes his own story by passing the role of narrator to his daughter with the words "trust yourself" (Ng 2008b: 191). What Veda inherits from her father is in fact more than a lost

biological past or a forgotten cultural heritage: the real legacy is narrative agency – the freedom and responsibility of telling her own story and writing her own history as a second generation Chinese American. It is largely through the notions of betrayal and trust that the relationship between racial abjection and cultural and narrative agency is negotiated in Ng's two novels. *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock* both testify to the notion that while there is reason to maintain that agency necessitates a certain amount of trust, betrayal, too, may hold significant critical and transformative power, thereby indicating new possibilities for ethical and political agency available to the minority subject.

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III

SURVIVING THE LOSS: ABJECTION AND HYPOCHONDRIA IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR* AND FAE MYENNE NG'S *BONE*

by

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Surviving the Loss: Abjection and Hypochondria in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*

Loss and survival from loss are common issues in a large body of Asian American writing. Balancing at the edge between ethnic, gender, and sexual identities, Asian American women's texts are often predisposed to addressing questions associated with loss. In *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Kiran Desai poignantly examines the legacy of colonialism and its collision with the modern, neocolonial world from a South Asian and South Asian American perspective. My aim, in this essay, is to explore a somewhat different kind of inheritance of loss; one that, while not entirely detached from the colonial legacy and its material consequences, builds largely upon the symbolic and the affective, as they manifest in two landmark texts of Chinese American literature, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993). Loss is present in the lives of Kingston's and Ng's characters in numerous ways: as the loss of a love-object or a family member, as a sense of not belonging and as the lack of an integrated sense of self, and in the more abstract form of racial abjection, to name a few. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Ng's *Bone* both address loss as a complex set of issues that resonates with the cultural past and the manifold tribulations of the immigrant generation. Even when loss and grief have a manifest reference point in the present, such as the suicide of a family member, the losses of earlier generations and the trauma of the second and third generation are immanent in both texts.

In *The Woman Warrior* and *Bone*, racial abjection and emotional displacement experienced by the protagonists result in severe cases of hypochondria. Of all the characters in the two novels, Kingston's narrator suffers from the most severe case of hypochondria, yet less obvious cases of hypochondriacal response and abjection—the cause of such “melancholic self-allergy” (Cheng 65)—inflict several other characters in *The Woman Warrior* and *Bone*. Anne Anlin Cheng notes in *The Melancholy of Race* (2001) that metaphorical manifestations of hypochondria and hypochondria as a medical condition are frequent in Asian American literature, “where assimilation foregrounds itself as a repetitive trauma” (67). To treat hypochondria as “a form of melancholic self-allergy,” as Cheng (65) does, is to acknowledge that hypochondria and melancholia are symptomatically interconnected. “The Freudian melancholic” thus appears to us “as someone hypochondriacally *aware of* and *allergic to* the abjection lodged within” (65, emphasis mine). This combination of awareness and allergy is particularly interesting, because it brings to mind Freud's own notion of the “uncanny” as something that “lies within the field of frightening” without being synonymous to it; while it “arouses dread and horror,” there is something disturbingly vague about it (Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’” 219). In a similar way, hypochondria is a vague illness that may inflict very frightening symptoms which

nevertheless often escape clear definition or a diagnosis that would entail a cure for them.

This essay discusses abjection and hypochondria as manifestations of a specifically Chinese American inheritance of loss characterized by racial melancholia in *The Woman Warrior* and *Bone*. In "Melancholia in the Late Twentieth Century," David L. Eng argues that at the turn of the twenty-first century, melancholia has become the guiding principle in defining our self-perception (1275). He also remarks that like hysteria, which largely defined the self-perception of the Western subject at the turn of the previous century, the Freudian notion of melancholia renders itself as a characteristically female condition. In both novels under analysis in this essay, melancholia can be said to dominate the ways in which their protagonists think about their subjectivities and the surrounding world. However, these novels effectively challenge the Freudian conception of melancholia as a condition that may be pathological for men, but is characteristic of normative female subjectivity. Rather, Kingston's and Ng's works seem to suggest that melancholia might function as a "necessary, perhaps even continuous, stage of mourning" in socioracial dynamics, as Cheng argues (98), and that rather than signaling permanent damage, melancholia may translate as conflict, therefore entailing psychic and emotional healing (Eng and Han 363). But while racial melancholia, in particular, may be a process leading toward psychological healing, racial abjection and hypochondria are the price that racialized subjects pay for their part as perpetual Others in American society. Maxine Hong Kingston's and Fae Myenne Ng's first novels beautifully reflect upon this fragile balance: how to find and keep inner stability, while balancing on a thin line between loss and recovery, health and pathology, submission and agency.

Melancholic Responses: Abjection and the Asian American Subject

Freud presents his thoughts on melancholia in his 1917 essay named "Mourning and Melancholia," in which he describes melancholia as a pathological response to loss, and separates it from mourning as a healthy response to loss. Central to Freud's argumentation is the opposition between healthy relinquishment and unhealthy retention; while mourning allows for the relinquishment and eventual substitution of the lost object, melancholia does not accept substitution of what is lost and is therefore indefinite in character. Freud captures the difference by stressing that in mourning, the surrounding world becomes "poor and empty" for the person who has suffered a significant loss, whereas what loses its value in melancholia is not just the world but "the ego itself" ("Mourning and Melancholia" 246). Germane to the condition of Asian immigrants to the United States and their descendants, Cheng argues that for racialized subjects, melancholia exists "both as a *sign* of rejection and as a psychic *strategy* in response to that rejection" (20, emphasis original). Cheng's articulation of racial melancholia is inextricably linked to racial abjection, which characterizes the hypochondriacal condition inflicting Kingston's and Ng's narrators. In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva describes the abject as a stage in the development of individual subjectivity, in which a child rejects the mother's

love because it seems to threaten the child's nascent perception of self. This rejection of the mother extends to the mother's body, which now seems utterly repulsive to the child. Consumed by an insurmountable disgust toward the mother's body, yet unable to tell the difference between subject and object, the child is left with the anxiety and horror of the abject. In accordance with Kristeva's psychoanalytical account of abjection, David Li contends that the abject is simultaneously necessary for the formation of the self and what is rejected in the process; it is "the part of ourselves that we willfully discard" (Li 6). In other words, the birth of the self necessitates the constitution of what is considered as "not-self" but what cannot be simply deemed the object or the Other. In a similar vein, Karen Shimakawa defines abjection as "an attempt to circumscribe and radically differentiate something that, although deemed repulsively *other* is, paradoxically, at some fundamental level, an undifferentiable part of the whole" (2). Furthermore, Li (6, 10) and Shimakawa (3) both argue that 'Asian American' functions as abject in relation to 'American.' This is the dynamics underlying the Asian American hypochondria and racial melancholia manifest in Kingston's and Ng's writing.

Although, as Shimakawa (3) writes, "Asian Americanness" understood as abject thus plays a key role in national subject formation, it does not signify the birth of an Asian American subject, or even the formation of an Asian American object. For Kristeva, the abject "is simply a frontier," and therefore does not constitute an object (*Powers of Horror* 9). Rather paradoxically, as Sara Ahmed remarks, it is the border itself that becomes an object in Kristeva's theory, while the 'I' who speaks is being expelled (86). The abject is "the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 3) and "something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (4). The abject can therefore be perceived as ghostly, something necessarily present but unwanted; or, as Kristeva writes, as "imaginary uncanniness and real threat" that "beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (4). What causes much of the terror inherent in abjection lies in the fact that it is threatening, as it threatens the borders of the self. As in haunting, the threat within the abject is not an external threat as much as it is internal, for "what threatens from the outside only threatens insofar as it is already within" (Ahmed 86). This is the condition that inflicts Maxine, Kingston's narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, and several members of the Leong family in Ng's *Bone*.¹ It is the threat that already lies within, not an external threat as such that drives Kingston's and Ng's characters to their desperate acts and displays of cruelty toward themselves and others. Even the suicide of Maxine's No Name Aunt, which I will soon discuss in more detail, does not simply result from the villagers' violent raid against her and her family's property; without a

¹ In the following, I refer to the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* by the name Maxine "for critical convenience," when necessary, in the same fashion as King-Kok Cheung does in *Articulate Silences* (5, n8). As Cheung remarks, Kingston herself leaves the narrator unnamed throughout the text, thereby suggesting a symbolic connection between the narrator and her silenced aunt and foregrounding the indeterminacy of the young narrator's identity (ibid.).

threat that is “already within”—a threat internalized so thoroughly it has become her own—there might have been another ending to her emotional and, unquestionably very material, impasse.

While several critics have read *The Woman Warrior* and *Bone* as narratives of haunting, it is significant that the structural mechanism in haunting resembles the dynamics at play not only in abjection, but also in melancholia, as both haunting and melancholia are conditioned by the inability to let go of the past.² The pull of the past becomes especially evident in the narrative structure of *Bone*, as each chapter unfolds the story by taking a chronological step back until in the final chapter—where the chronological story begins—Leila’s burning need to keep reliving the past seems to dissolve as she drives away from her childhood home and leaves everything “backdaire” (Ng 191). The interplay of the temporal and the spatial is organized in the narrative structure of *Bone* in a manner that Seymour Chatman calls “sustained episodic reversal” (33-34), with the exception that in this case, an episode equals an entire chapter. With no obvious return to the narrative present, the novel ends where the story begins, and by doing so, it leaves the future of its characters open, displaced, and as disassembled as the cars in Mason’s garage. Haunting, more precisely, can be regarded as an effect of a constant search for the presence of somebody who is beyond one’s reach. *Bone* lays an entire web of longings before the reader, as the remaining members of the Leong family try their best to come to terms with the most acute loss in their life: the self-inflicted death of Ona, the middle daughter, who jumps off the roof of a Chinatown housing project after being forced to leave Osvaldo, whom she desperately loves. But as it turns out, Ona is not the only one in the family who is unable to accept her loss and escapes. Nina, the youngest sister, leaves San Francisco’s Chinatown in search of her independence to become a flight-attendant, and Leon, the girls’ father, takes up a job at sea, whereas Leila, the oldest one of the three Leong daughters and the novel’s narrator, spends a considerable amount of time either searching for her stepfather around Chinatown or waiting for him to return from the sea. Through the narrative of Leila’s futile but unrelenting attempts to survive her life’s great loss, her sister’s tragic death by suicide, *Bone* addresses issues relevant to both personal and collective quest for identity and survival, thus echoing some of the thematic concerns articulated in *The Woman Warrior* nearly two decades earlier.

One of the issues raised by Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* and later rearticulated by Ng in *Bone* centers around suicide. Yoonmee Chang (2010), Deborah Madsen (2008), and Donald C. Goellnicht (2000) all discuss Ona’s suicide in *Bone*, viewing it against its racially determined political and historical context. Goellnicht examines Ona’s suicide as an adaptation of the trope of fe-

² Haunting and the presence of ghosts is not unusual in Chinese American writing; particularly Maxine Hong Kingston’s and Amy Tan’s works have inspired critical readings that focus on haunting and spectrality. Recent readings of haunting and spectrality in *Bone* and *The Woman Warrior* include Lynn Ta’s “Haunting the Nation: Global Labor and Grief in *Bone*” (2007), Walter Lim’s “Under Eastern Eyes: Ghosts and Cultural Haunting in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*” (2004), and Janna Odabas’ article on Kingston in the present collection.

male suicide articulated before by Kingston in the character of the aunt called No Name Woman, whose story begins the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior* and is told to Kingston's narrator by her mother, Brave Orchid, as a warning to her daughter against the dangers of promiscuous sexual behavior. Back in China, Maxine's father had a sister who drowned herself in the family well after giving birth to an illegitimate child and after the villagers violently raid her family house, thus pressuring her to commit suicide. Whether the aunt's so-called adultery was committed willingly or not remains unclear from Brave Orchid's narrative, yet the ultimate punishment for her assumed crime is not the fact that she must take her own life and that of her newborn child, but the fact that her name is never to be mentioned again, not even by her own family (Kingston 16). Brave Orchid's version of the story and her depiction of No Name Aunt as a silenced victim of her own recklessness does not, however, satisfy Maxine, Kingston's American-born and feminist narrator. Defying her mother's adamant decision to "add nothing unless powered by Necessity" (6), Maxine re-imagines the story of No Name Aunt, recasting her in one version of the story as a feminist heroine who sacrifices herself by rebelling against the Confucian social norms, which allow little room for individuality and sexual autonomy for women. As Goellnicht notes, No Name Aunt becomes "the first symbolic female immigrant to America" (302), for "in America, it is possible [...] to recover from symbolic suicide, from denial of identity" (303). Re-imagining No Name Aunt's death as "a spite suicide—drowning herself in the drinking water" (Kingston 16), Kingston's narrator returns her aunt her subjectivity stolen by the family's long silence, and thus symbolically gives her back her name. In return, she finds in No Name Aunt a predecessor and a feminist role model, whose personal sacrifice allows her niece to discover her own feminist and narrative agency some fifty years later.

That Thing Inside My Head

What was there in the beginning: want, deprivation, original fear, or the violence of rejection, aggressivity, the deadly death drive?

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (38)

In *The Woman Warrior*, violent impulses torment Kingston's young narrator, driving her to verbally and physically abuse a quiet and withdrawn classmate. Such violent actions do not remain without punishment, and the narrator soon falls ill out of guilt. Guilt, again, is all too familiar to the surviving members of the Leong family in *Bone*. Interestingly, both novels display a similar scene, in which a school lavatory sets the stage for cruelty, guilt, and self-rejection. In *The Woman Warrior*, this scene takes up several pages and ends in poetic justice, as the novel's narrator falls mysteriously ill and stays confined to bed for eighteen months after having tortured her classmate in the lavatory. During the traumatic chain of events, the protagonist repeatedly uses physical and verbal violence in an attempt to force her quiet classmate into speaking and uttering her name. What drives Kingston's narrator to these acts of cruelty is very much a hypo-

chondriacal response to the pressures and “intrasubjective threats” of being a racially differentiated subject in a world that is both racist and sexist, as Anne Anlin Cheng concludes (68, 73). The pressure for young Chinese American girls is to invent “an American-feminine speaking personality,” as Kingston’s narrator puts it, which usually means whispering and often leads to whispering “even more softly than the Americans” (172), and occasionally, to complete muteness, as in the case of her silent victim. But more than that, the narrator feels uncontrollable repugnance toward the other girl’s appearance: she hates her soft features, her “pink and white” (176) cheeks, her “China doll haircut” (173), and she hates the weakness of her neck, “the way it did not support her head but let it droop” (176). It becomes evident, however, that with her actions Kingston’s narrator does not only repudiate her victim, but while hating her for her silence and for her entire physical being, she also rejects herself and her own racialized body. Her dilemma arises from racial abjection and is not easily resolved, given the pressures of assimilation and the fact that her subjectivity in American society is largely constituted by racial difference. Relevant to the condition of Kingston’s narrator, Cheng asks a compelling question: “How is one to love oneself and the other when the very movement toward love is conditioned by the anticipation of denial and failure?” (74).

Disowning a fundamentally inalienable part of oneself is also at the heart of Sau-ling Wong’s (1993) account of the “torture incident” (86) in *The Woman Warrior*. Wong approaches the episode through the concept of the double, the alter ego, or the “racial shadow” (86), as she terms it for the context at issue. According to her definition, “the double is symptomatic of a crisis in self-acceptance and self-knowledge: part of the self, denied recognition by the conscious ego, emerges as an external figure exerting a hold over the protagonist that seems disproportionate to provocation or inexplicable by everyday logic” (82). In other words, the disowned part of oneself—that is, the abject—is projected onto the double. In a manner of speaking, the double (or the racial shadow) thus becomes a container for the first self’s psychological dirt. For the present discussion, torture and suicide can be considered as two extremes of a hypochondriacal response to loss and abjection. While Kingston’s narrator seems to succeed in projecting the disowned part of herself onto the girl she tortures in the school lavatory, Ona tragically fails to project her emotional debris onto an external figure. Internalizing her loss, she eventually resorts to suicide. Of course, the issue is more complex than it might seem on the surface. The fact that Kingston’s narrator ends up bedridden with a vague illness supports the notion that as a hypochondriacal response to loss and abjection, melancholia is a bodily experience as much as it is psychological.

The corresponding episode in *Bone* is part of a two-fold temporal structure, in which the narrative present alternates with palimpsest-like traces from the past. Seamlessly weaved into the chain of events that follows when Leila first learns the news about Ona’s death, the scene, an unexpectedly surfaced recollection from her childhood, takes place at a crucial point in the novel’s narration. In a haze of disbelief and anguish, Leila leaves the school office and walks

downstairs and into the girls' bathroom. There, in the quiet solitude of the restroom stall, she lets the horror of what has happened to Ona take over. Paradoxically, at the moment of greatest despair, her mind seizes upon any familiar sense of safety it can find: "Inside, I felt refrigerator-safe. I wanted to sink into the coolness, to freeze time" (Ng 133). It is in the stall, curled up in terror, that Leila remembers how she once found Ona hiding in the same bathroom, devastated by some unknown loss, crying and her new dress ruined. As the two temporally distinct scenes set in the school bathroom unravel by turns, time seems to be stripped off of its meaning. Leila's guilt and self-accusations for not asking Ona the reason for her devastation and for scolding her instead take turns with a detailed account of the white dress Ona wore that day. The white dress that Leila has helped their mother sew for her sister the night before becomes the symbol of Ona's innocence, and its perfection becomes the measure of Leila's guilt and self-rejection: "Mah hung the perfect and pressed white dress right above Ona's bed so that it would be the first thing she saw. / I should have asked Ona, Why are you crying? What are you sad about?" (134).

Loss and abjection knit together like bone in this episode, and the unbearable, numbing quality of the pain induced by that is set against the image of time losing its substance, as happens when Miss Lagomarsino first brings Leila the tragic news about her sister: "Time rushed ahead, swelling, and then snapped still, stopping. [...] It felt like I'd drifted to the slow edge of the world, where time froze, then became liquid and then vapor" (132-33). The chapter ends on a similar note, as Leila picks Nina up at the airport for Ona's memorial gathering and the two enter an elevator, significantly heading to the fourth floor—phonetically, the number 'four' resembles the word for 'death' in Cantonese: "I pressed the number 4 and the big doors shut. Inside the elevator, the smooth descending momentum made me feel as if I was going way deep down into the vacuum-safe depths of an ocean liner, that we were sailing away" (152). The episode expresses Leila's persistent desire to escape the traumatic events, to stop time from running, and to avert the unbearable reality of her sister's suicide. Again, an image of sinking, sliding deep down into a stillness where time has no resonance and all movement has stopped, represents safety. But at the same time, the image also seems to suggest that there is some certainty, however fragile, in allowing oneself to face the grief in all its vastness. The ocean liner sailing away compares with sorrow moving through the heart, as the image resonates against Leon's words: "Ships are massive, but the ocean has simple superiority" (142). In another passage, Leila verbalizes her wish to detain the inevitable with remarkable candor: "What I wanted was to hold everything still. Soon, I knew, the sorrow about Ona's death would come on like jet lag" (98). The abundance of images conveying temporal and spatial stagnation—images of falling, sinking, freezing, or "holding still"—can be attributed to the inability of the characters to let go of the past, indeed to let go of the lost object of love. Despite the initial false safety of not having to face the reality, the stagnation and immobility portrayed by these images create a sense of being thrown into an abyss or a black hole that pulls you in—a melancholic state par excellence,

and analogous to the “mysterious illness” (182) Kingston’s narrator suffers from after the torture incident.

It is clear that Maxine’s severe case of hypochondria and Leila’s melancholic stagnation both arise from a deep sense of guilt. Guilt this overwhelming cannot set in without inducing bodily symptoms, even though they may be extremely vague in character, as they are in Maxine’s case. Leila, too, discovers odd symptoms that she at first believes to have resulted from a physical injury: “For months, I’d had these pains. When they first came, I thought I’d strained my back at school lifting something or chasing kids on yard duty. / But it wasn’t that. It was more like in my head” (Ng 46-47). Leila is not the only one in her family to be consumed by guilt over Ona’s suicide. Rather, guilt inflicts all family members collectively, often manifesting in the form of anger and resentment. Despite the fact that the guilt felt by the Leong family is a shared and collective burden, it divides more than it unifies. Aside from the guilt and grief over losing her sister, Leila is faced with a growing worry over the newly surfaced rift in her mother’s and stepfather’s marriage; in the wake of Ona’s death, “Leon and Mah fought all the time, about everything, everywhere” (87). In their grief, each member of the family is left to overcome their loss alone because with Ona, each of them has lost something different. In Leon’s mind, guilt equals bad luck, for bad luck as well as good luck must be earned, and if someone feels guilty, he must have done something to induce bad luck. Although Leila keeps a narrative distance to Leon’s conviction that his failure to bring Grandpa Leong’s bones back to China after his death is what has caused such misfortune to settle into Leon’s family, his words have a way of “getting under [her] skin, too” (87). She, too, feels haunted by Ona’s self-inflicted death: “That’s the thing that was in my head. Everything went back to Ona. And beyond Ona there was the bad luck that Leon kept talking about. What made Ona do it. Like she had no choice” (47). Kingston’s narrator, Maxine, is equally haunted by the past—not only by her personal past and her own actions, but also by the cultural past that her mother keeps alive in her talk-stories, and even more significantly, by what she remains silent about: “My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her” (Kingston 16). The silence surrounding her No Name Aunt’s fate bothers her pronouncedly, not least because she feels in part responsible for her unfair treatment: “[T]here is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have” (16). Beyond the feminist incentive to rewrite No Name Aunt’s story in an empowering way that acknowledges her as not only a sovereign but also as an unusually courageous subject, Maxine has participated in her silencing by doing precisely what she could not stand in her defenseless classmate: withholding her name. By abusing the little girl in the school lavatory, she has become one of the raged villagers raiding her aunt’s house, torn by the destructive forces within. Knowing that such a crime does not remain without consequences, she recognizes how “one human being flaring up into violence could open up a black hole, a maelstrom that pulled in the sky” (12).

Broken Bodies: The Chinese American Inheritance of Loss

In the beginning of this essay, I set out to explore *The Woman Warrior* and *Bone* from the perspective of a specifically Chinese American inheritance of loss, deeply rooted in the symbolic and the affective but equally defined by an acute awareness of the differences in material histories and in the material consequences of historical injustice. The most striking expression of this melancholic legacy, in both novels, lies in the act of suicide. In Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Brave Orchid's cautionary tale of the suicide of Maxine's No Name Aunt begins the novel and sets the tone for the rest of the narrative; in Ng's *Bone*, Ona's fatal jump from the rooftop of the Nam Ping Yuen, the last of the four local housing projects, motivates her sister's narration and functions as a structuring principle for the novel. In both texts, the dead and broken body becomes a metaphorical and at the same time very literal image of the brokenness that inflicts their first and second generation Chinese American characters. In *Bone*, as Donald C. Goellnicht suggests, Ona's broken body functions as a metaphorical expression to the novel's first generation immigrant parents of their "failure to claim 'America' [and] to be incorporated into the national body" (317). The failure to be incorporated into the national body refers not to assimilation but to the denial of access to the national self-image from those who are deemed perpetual Others, "depicted often as a type of disease that poses a threat to the national body and so must be controlled, at times even eradicated" (Goellnicht 327, n17). The American national body, however, is also a 'broken body' insofar as it fails to incorporate into itself its ethnic minorities and racialized Others. As Kristeva writes in *Strangers to Ourselves*: "The foreigner is within us. And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious—that 'improper' facet of our impossible 'own and proper'" (191). In this sense, 'Asian American' understood as abject in relation to 'American' is a constant rem(a)inder of the brokenness of the American national body with regard to its self-image. The Chinese American legacy of loss, then, is not simply a negative inheritance, but its expressions, such as Kingston's and Ng's works, contain transformative power that actively seeks to point out some of the fractures and fissures within the national body that need to be addressed if healing is to be possible.

At times it may seem that a melancholic response to the losses burdening the protagonists' families is more likely to inflict the female characters of the novels than the male ones, because the relationships between the female characters—sisters, mothers, and daughters—are at the center of both works. But perhaps the most striking example of a melancholic response that is less a pathological reaction to loss than it is a continuous mode of existence lies in fact in Leon Leong's character in *Bone*. Of all the characters in *Bone*, the 'foreigner within' is perhaps most acutely present in Leon's character, for he has arrived in America under a false name as Grandpa Leong's son, leaving his true identity, birth family, and Chinese past behind him for good. He has paid five thousand dollars to his paper father for his entry into the United States, but as his step-

daughter testifies, “of more consequence was the promise to send Grandpa Leong’s bones back to China” (Ng 47). Not only has Leon failed to return Grandpa Leong’s remains to his native country, but more significantly, he has lost track of Grandpa Leong’s bones altogether, thus missing the opportunity to ever correct his mistake and earn back the good fortune. Leon evidently suffers from the condition that Anthony Sze-Fai Shiu has described as a “racialized loss or lack” characterizing the Asian American subject: a loss or a lack “of citizenship rights, legal protections, economic opportunities, and an unfettered ‘self’” (4). This racially based loss or lack is also a crucial aspect in what Jeffrey J. Santa Ana calls an “affect-identity” emerging from the dialectical process of “articulating and resolving the contradictions between historically painful emotions and the euphoria of commercialized human feeling in consumer postmodernism” (25).

Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* are both characterized by a pronounced polarity between a language defined by loss, abjection, and melancholia, on one hand, and a narrative inclined toward self-reflection, active ethical agency, and a relentless quest for personal emancipation, on the other. Melancholia, for one thing, often means “holding still,” as Leila Leong would put it. Pathological or not, it can also provide a necessary opportunity for active self-reflecting, of which longing and remembrance are an essential part. Remembering and longing for places, times, and affects of the past are equally constitutive of the sense of emotional exile that resonates through these two narratives. While loss and abjection are by no means synonymous and should not be treated as such, there are certain affinities between the two concepts. One of those affinities is that loss and abjection both sometimes result in hypochondria, itself a condition of internalized grief, as happens to the narrators in both of the novels under analysis in this essay. However, these two texts also suggest that feeling grief—and even melancholia—to *the bone* does in fact entail a prospect for agency and survival instead of a melancholic resignation in the face of a continuous flow of losses and the legacy of a racialized loss or lack. While Maxine attempts to see beyond the taboo, to voice the unspeakable by rewriting No Name Aunt’s story, Leila finds strength needed for survival in stillness and in words left unspoken: “I believe in holding still. I believe that the secrets we hold in our hearts are our anchors, that even the unspoken between us is a measure of our every promise to the living and to the dead” (Ng 190). Like Maxine’s rewriting of the story surrounding her aunt’s suicide, Leila’s wish “to remember Ona alive, whole” and not “to see her broken” (149) resonates against her immigrant parents’ wish to succeed in their efforts to claim America, “to be incorporated into the national body” (Goellnicht 317) of their new homeland.

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