LANDSCAPES, LANGUAGES, AND LEGACIES:
TRAVERSING THREE ASIAN AMERICAN TEXTS

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CHAPTER ONE: The Journey Begins

In June 1993, I stepped off a plane in Taipei, Taiwan, and my first thought was that I had made a big mistake. I was a year out of college, where I had spent a great deal of time and energy exploring and shaping my Asian American identity. A third generation Chinese American raised in the then-predominantly white San Francisco suburbs, I did not grow up steeped in Chinese culture, only English was spoken in my home, and I had only a vague consciousness of my ethnic “difference.” As I read texts by Maxine Hong-Kingston, Nellie Wong, Frank Chin, John Okada, and other Asian American writers, I began to form a sense of ethnic identity and a growing interest in the complex issues surrounding Asian America: our association with the foreign Other, our stereotypical or non-existent representation in the media, our desires to be included in the American cultural landscape, and at the same time, our insistence that we should not have to assimilate. Nonetheless, I constantly questioned the nature of such an identity that seemed grounded less in Asian “culture” than in political consciousness, in collectivity, in a personal heritage tied to a common immigrant history.

Seeking a connection to my ancestry, to Asia, I applied to a program to teach English in China, was rejected, and sent to Taiwan instead. I had been out of the United States once, for a music festival in Austria, and had no sense of what Taiwan, or Asia as a whole, was like culturally, politically, or environmentally. Arriving in the middle of summer, I landed on the Taiwanese landscape and was hit forcibly by heat, pollution, cars, people, lights, smells, and
sounds rising and rushing out of a jungle of concrete and rapid industrialization. And I never felt less Asian in all my life.

Amy Tan once said, “the moment my feet touched China, I became Chinese.” But during my year in Taiwan, and later in China, where I eventually studied for half a year, I was surprised by the many experiences that made me feel less connected to Chinese culture, more aware of my difference on these Asian landscapes, more aware of my “American-ness.” At the same time, I found a deep comfort in the relationships I formed with other “overseas Chinese,” not only from the United States, but from Holland, Italy, Canada, France—those of us who existed on the boundaries between “east” and “west,” able to, if not blend in, then pass below the radar when our white peers attracted unwanted attention.¹ This “passing” was luxurious, a chance to let down my guard, go unnoticed, and simply exist without considering the politics of my identity, of my physical difference. Quite simply, I could exist in both worlds, socializing with foreign friends while feeling a sense of belonging to the dominant cultural landscape afforded by my ethnicity.

My experience in Asia profoundly shifted my sense of Asian American identity, underscoring a sense that this identity was clearly, unequivocally, American in nature, that it was deeply tied to not only my personal experiences

¹ The notion of East and West in Asian American discourse extends beyond the geographic locations of nations to include Orientalist cultural constructions that define a Eurocentric perspective in opposition to Asian difference, or Otherness. For this reason, I place East and West in quotes to suggest this conceptual location of overseas Asians situated within cultural boundaries removed from physical location.
as an Asian on the American landscape, but to the experiences of Asian Americans collectively. So my inquiry began on that day in June when I stepped off that plane: to what extent is identity tied to location, both cultural and physical; how have we Asian Americans sought to claim romantic images of Asia in order to preserve the tenuous connection many of us have with Asia itself; and how will Asian American identity change in our era of increasing globalization, when the distances between these locations is significantly compressed?

* * *

Asian American identity is, in many ways, an articulation of ourselves through a connection between landscape, language, and memory—a connection that begins with a deep desire for belonging within an American national paradigm and a profound collective memory of the ways in which we have been excluded from the rights of first legal, then cultural, citizenship. As Lisa Lowe suggests, immigration exclusion acts and naturalization laws have historically "regulat[ed] the terms of the citizen and the nation-state," employing an "orientalist construction of cultures and geographies [in] which Asian immigrants [come to be viewed] as fundamentally ‘foreign’" (Lowe 5). This "foreignness" in turn serves as the basis for cultural exclusion even after legal citizenship is granted. Lowe articulates this phenomenon as a “national memory” that “haunts the conception of the Asian American, persisting beyond the repeal of . . . laws . . .” (Lowe 5). In this Orientalist rendering of the Asian American, the immigrant negotiates “home” in opposition to “homeland.” For subsequent generations, who
are aware of this "national memory," the struggle then is to form an identity that is racialized, with ethnicity and ancestry as a source of pride, yet at the same time adamant in a rightful place in the American cultural and political sphere—an identity that rejects both the nation's expectations of assimilation and its assumptions of an essential cultural identity tied to race.

In this context, Asian American literature has been a primary site in which we have articulated our Asian American geocultural space—a space where citizenship, history, and home are negotiated within an American concept of nationhood that excludes us. In this paradigm, the focus of cultural production and identity formation is on a claiming of America as the specific geographic landscape in which we reside. The struggle to shape identity relative to race and nation remains a common theme throughout, making the literature itself inherently political—a politicism encompassed in the act of writing the self and asserting the Asian American experience in the American literary field.

Nowhere can this connection between literature and the political assertion of rights of citizenship be seen more clearly than in Aiieeeee!, the first anthology of Asian American writing. In 1974, faced with, and outraged by, the continued association with Asian "foreignness," editors Frank Chin, et al, selected writings with a narrow set of criteria meant to define a concept of "Asian America" that was political, unapologetically American, and set apart from the immigrant experience. Yet this anthology also represents the ways in which the struggle to "claim America" creates a significant tension between the immigrant experience
and the experience of Asian Americans born in the United States. The editors were narrow in their definition of Asian America, asserting that their anthology was "exclusively Asian American; that means Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese Americans, American born and raised."

Asian American identity, then, was defined as American born and English-speaking—a definition that clearly excludes the immigrant writer, making immigrant subject formation the task of American born generations. Sheng-mei Ma explores this problematic relationship and the specific ways in which it has manifested itself in Asian American and some Asian diaspora literatures. Ma argues that Asian American writers, "swept up" by the Civil Rights Movement and the coalitional efforts to demand full rights of American citizenship, "orientalize immigrant characters" in order to distance themselves from the Oriental Other, yet at the same time, suffer from a "psychic need to assert one's difference from the American majority and one's ethnic pride in these points of difference" (Ma 4). The result, Ma argues, is a body of literature in which Asian Americans "demarcate themselves from Asians, while empowering themselves in the midst of a white society through immigrant memories and the mythic Asian past" (12). For Ma, the relationship is "triangular" between the Asian American "raconteurs," the American market, and the "alien(s') story" as a source of ethnic pride (Ma 11).

Cynthia Sau-ling Wong concurs, noting that for those, such as the Aiiieeeee! group, who spearheaded the early "cultural nationalist" projects,
“anything that threaten[ed] to undermine the demonstration of the ‘indigenization’ (the ‘becoming American’) of Asian Americans [had to] be scrupulously avoided” (4). This profoundly impacted the boundaries of Asian American literature, for “fear of eroticisation so prevailed that literature produced by immigrants in the Asian languages has, for a long time, been neglected” (Wong 4).

The placement of the American market in Ma’s paradigm is significant, for it raises a particular concern that Asian American writers themselves fall victim to an Orientalist perspective of their own—a perspective that imagines and articulates Asia and the Asian in textual form for consumption by white audiences. The parallels to Edward Said’s theories on Orientalism are striking; for Said, what makes Orientalist discourse particularly problematic is its reliance, not on actual experience, but on a body of text through which knowledge of the Other is articulated, disseminated, and expanded on. Considering a writer such as Maxine Hong Kingston, we can see how this plays out in the Asian American literary landscape. Hong-Kingston’s Woman Warrior, a text that brilliantly imagines the mythic past and explores themes of history as story-telling, has been categorized as non-fiction. Writers such as Hong-Kingston and Amy Tan have been criticized for their roles as “tour guides,” ethnographers, or “native informants” for an exoticized, Orientalist rendering of Asia. While it’s arguable whether these criticisms are well-founded relative to the writers’ intents and purposes, it does exemplify the unique relationship between immigrant and American born generations.
It is within this context that we now consider Asian American identity and subject formation as we progress through an era of increasing globalization. Individuals, information, and capital now traverse borders and boundaries with remarkable speed and ease, and the nature of identity as we have traditionally defined it is further complicated. Different from the type of identity defined less based on cultural bonds than on "political and social processes" occurring on the American landscape, identity formation is moved to a global site and articulated in humanist terms. Pico Iyer, himself ethnically Indian, born in Britain, raised in Los Angeles, and now living in Japan, comments on this new world identity, identifying a "global soul" as one who grows up in many cultures all at once and who has a "porous sense of self that change[s] with her location" (18). Describing himself as an example, he states: "I can't call myself an exile . . . or an expatriate; I'm not really a nomad; and I've never been subject to the refugee's violent disruptions: the Global Soul is best characterized by the fact of falling between all categories" (24). In this new global paradigm, culture is no longer tied to nation, and home, language, and memory are thus problematized. As Iyer comments, "the very notion of home is foreign to me, as the state of foreignness is the closest thing I know to home" (24). At the same time, "memory itself seems accelerated, and yesterday's dramas become as remote as ancient history" (Iyer 13).

The implications of this new focus on cosmopolitanism and concepts of a world citizenry on Asian American subject formation and cultural criticism are
profound. Globalization has specifically changed the nature of the relationship between Asian nations and the United States, as the Pacific Rim has risen in economic and cultural stature. As Iyer discusses, the economic drivers of globalization have significantly changed our traditional notions of Asian "immigrant." Wong calls our attention to the phenomenon of "parachute kids," children of affluent Chinese families who are sent to study in U.S. schools, and the increase in Asian-born information workers, who "regard the U.S. as simply one of many possible places to exercise their portable capital and portable skills" (Wong 5). As Wong notes, while "trans-Pacific families" have been a long-standing reality among Asian Americans, immigration today is less a "one-way experiment in adaptation" and "today's voluntary immigrants and their descendants, especially middle-class ones, lead a kind of life that tends to blunt the acute binarism between Asian and American with which earlier generations have had to contend" (7).

The possibilities of a diasporic Asian identity are indeed exciting, for by establishing these links, we might address some of the limitations with which Asian American identity has been defined. As Wong notes, criticisms from within the Asian American studies community of the "indigenization model" of Asian American subject formation has highlighted the ways in which early nationalist projects both disregarded issues of gender, class, and sexuality, as well as marginalized other groups of Asians, such as southeast Asians and south Asians, for whom "cultural specificities and historical relationships with U.S."
imperialism may be much more complex than has been recognized in an identity politics derived from East Asian American experiences" (Wong 5). Further, “a recognition of transnational realities means acknowledging that certain groups classified as Asian Americans by post-1960s practice—Americans of Asian ancestry residing permanently in the United States, regardless of nativity—have concerns not addressed by that categorization” (Wong 10).

With Asian American identity and subject formation so deeply rooted in literary articulations of self and ancestry, it’s not surprising that this denationalization would profoundly impact Asian American literature, moving from a “culture based on putting down roots on American soil” and opening up the possibilities of identity based on “world citizenship.” Wong highlights Filipina writer Jessica Hagedorn as an example, noting that Hagedorn herself has described her works as filled with “edgy characters who superficially seem to belong nowhere, but actually belong everywhere.” It’s important to note that Hagedorn’s perspective maintains a political edge, as she asserts that “as Asian Americans, as writers and people of color in a world still dominated by Western thinking,” we should affirm “a literature that attempts to encompass the world” (Wong 11). For Hagedorn and others, denationalization enables the deprivileging of American (and Western) cultural dominance and authorizes a truer sense of plurality.

But along with possibilities and benefits, there are compelling pitfalls to consider in denationalist, diasporic identity formation, the most important one
being economic. While we may discuss globalization and increased mobility as positively opening up access to diverse cultures, this mobility remains stratified by class and economic privilege—a privilege that “world citizens” such as Iyer appear to forget. While in Kyoto, in a Holiday Inn, Iyer has a dream:

I returned to LAX in a dream, and found myself taking the shuttle bus round and round looking for a hotel in which to stay. The other people on the bus were all disheveled immigrants, looking for a job, and speaking not a word of English, and so all of us went round in circles, archetypal residents of that running in place that becomes part of the airport state of mind. (52)

Iyer has chosen to identity himself as one of a new collective of immigrants, yet we might question the extent to which Iyer’s position as traveler significantly differs from the position of immigrants, who remain at the mercy of economic labor dynamics and national immigration policy. Wong also notes this discrepancy, wondering to “what extent class bias is coded into the privileging of travel and transnational mobility” (15). We might compare the “parachute kids” and Asia’s mobile information workers to another economic reality of globalization, in which Asian immigrant women’s work embodies a “racialized feminization of labor” (Lowe 158) and travel remains an uncontested site of privilege that ignores unequal access across national boundaries (Franklin 245).

As identity formation moves from a national to global paradigm, we must also question to what extent this denationalization of identity for Asian Americans diminishes political projects that remain important within a national context. As Wong notes, the very basis of Asian American identity is collective and political in
nature: “explicitly coalitional, more anti-essentialist than it has been given credit for, it grew out of a specific history of resistance and advocacy within the United States” (17). Wong’s focus is on political action, and her concerns center on the reality that “not only are one’s time and energy for action finite, but whatever claiming one does must be enacted from a political location—one referenced to a political structure, a nation” (19). Global identity, while articulated as one of inclusion, in many ways is actually one of seclusion, a notion of the self as separate from political responsibility—a responsibility that remains tied to nation and citizenship. As Wong notes:

Nations dispense or withhold citizenship, identity cards, passports and visas, voting rights, educational and economic opportunities. For every vision of a borderless world extrapolated from the European Union or NAFTA, there are countless actual instances of political struggle defined in terms of national borders and within national borders. (19)

Indeed, Iyer seems to exemplify this problem. While he comments that a “true cosmopolitan . . . is not someone who’s traveled a lot so much as someone who can appreciate what it feels like to be Other” (210), he doesn’t posit so clear a vision as to how this seeming coalition between the world’s “Others” might be put to use. He’s “never been in a position to vote,” he’s “grown up . . . with a keen sense of the blessings of being unaffiliated,” and enjoys the benefits of perpetual foreigner, who “is in the rare position of being able to enjoy the facilities of a place without paying the taxes, and can appreciate the virtues of anywhere without being wholly subject to its laws” (24). As he notes, his own mobility is
really a sense of uprootedness, and this uprootedness precludes him from the political responsibilities of citizenship. He reflects on the ways in which a "lack of affiliation may mean a lack of accountability," that the "Global Soul may see so many sides of every question that he never settles on a firm conviction" (24).

* * *

It is within these contexts and with these questions in mind that I write this thesis, focusing on themes of landscape, language, and memory in two travel memoirs, David Mura's *Turning Japanese* and Andrew Pham's *Catfish and Mandala*, and Karen Tei Yamashita's work of fiction, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*. For me, the act of travel, of physically crossing geographic and cultural boundaries, is a compelling way in which to define the self and "home" relative to nation and citizenship. In these texts, I am interested in exploring landscape as both the physical and cultural environments encountered and imagined by these Asian American authors. Within these imaginings, I explore how language serves as the means through which these authors negotiate their own location within the cultural/physical landscapes. And finally, I explore to what extent memory provides the conduit through which these authors construct and articulate their public and private selves along a trajectory of personal, national, and in the case of Yamashita, global legacy.
CHAPTER TWO: Turning Japanese

David Mura's 1998 travel memoir, Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei provides a compelling look at both pitfalls and possibilities as literature, political collectivity, and the self in the Asian American geocultural space are denationalized. At its simplest, the text is a narrative of Mura’s experiences while in Japan as the recipient of a Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship. But Mura's memoir represents an even more compelling journey—an inquiry into his political, social, and private selves motivated by his travel not only outside of American borders, but within specifically Japanese contexts. Through his evolving perspective on the culture and physical landscape, his negotiations with language, and his confrontations with memory (both national and personal), Mura’s memoir represents a negotiation of identity that moves between intellectualism, politicism, and finally, a more intimate sense of personal legacy and self.

Mura, in many ways, represents a traditional Asian American writer, a sansei poet whose subject matter incorporates his Japanese American experience and ancestry—his “grandfather, the relocation camps, the hibakusha, a picnic of Nisei” (9)—and who seems to possess a personal, if not political, consciousness of Asian American identity. Yet, at the same time, Mura also exemplifies a clear disconnection between this Asian American identity and the cultural specificity and reality of Japan itself. While his poetry centers on his
Japanese ancestry in content, it does not follow the traditional Japanese form, written “in blank verse, rather than haiku, tanka, or haibun” (9).

As Mura embarks on his journey, his sense of himself as a Japanese American is not only distanced from Japan, but the image of Asia he does have is decidedly western in perspective, demonstrating an arguably Orientalist leaning. Learning that he has won the fellowship, he views the prospect of his journey in intellectual terms, and these terms are clearly Eurocentric in nature, with a part of him wishing “the prize was Paris, not Tokyo. [He] would have preferred French bread and brie over sashimi and rice, Baudelair and Proust over Basho and Kawabata, structuralism and Barthes over Zen and D.T. Suzuki” (9). And true to the Orientalist intellectualism that Said describes, Mura is one who prefers to gain cultural knowledge through textual means over actual experience. A self-described “landlocked Midwesterner,” Mura admits that he had always wanted to “read about the world. But go there? Never” (9). In this way, Mura begins his relationship with Japan as a reluctant tourist, beginning his journey not as an ardent pilgrim, longing to return to the land of his grandparents, but more “like a contestant on a quiz show, who finds himself winning a trip to Bali or the Bahamas” (9).

Mura falls into the role of ethnographer, or anthropologist, and many of his initial descriptions of the landscape mirror the ethnographers’ “objective” distance—a distance that Sheng-mei Ma argues the Asian American community has been guilty of before. “Being products of the West themselves,” Ma argues,
"Chinese Americans frequently conceive of China in the Orientalist way" (Ma 25). This is not only a function of being from the West, but a key aspect to the way in which ethnic identity has been defined in the face of cultural exclusion from the American national landscape. As Ma suggests, "many [Chinese Americans] seek to assimilate by adopting the white gaze and by projecting onto China and Chinese immigrants Orientalist—often racist—stereotypes" in order to "separate themselves from what they deem to be the true Other" (Ma 25).

While Ma focuses his discussion on Chinese Americans specifically, his argument might be extended to the Asian American community overall, most of whom also struggle with issues of national belonging. Indeed, Mura's own perspective on the Japanese prior to his travels demonstrates this tendency. For him, "Japan was cheap baseballs, Godzilla, weird sci-fi movies like Star Man . . . endless hordes of storming G.I.'s in war movies" (Mura 8). And like Edward Said's Orientalist, Mura's perceptions are not only shaped by the imagery he experiences in textual form, via the movies and books of American pop culture, but also serve to condense all of Asia into one body of knowledge. For Mura, "sometimes the Japanese hordes got mixed up . . . with the Koreans, tiny Asians with squinty eyes mowed down in row after row by the steady shots of John Wayne" (Mura 8).

Mura begins his journey with a clearly American image of Japan, and while his poetry reflects a negotiation with his Japanese ancestry, he lacks an identity that connects with a concept of Asian American collective experience—a
lacking he later suggests is due to his physical distance from the west coast, the birthing ground for Asian American cultural discourse. Nonetheless, his poetry reveals, if not a consciously political process, then an individual attempt to reconcile his relationship with his grandfather’s Issei experience. Though he feels “proud [to] know no Japanese,” he realizes that his “Japanese ancestry was there in [his] poems,” revealing the ways in which his “imagination had been traveling [to Japan] for years, unconsciously swimming the Pacific, against the tide of [his] family’s emigration, [his] parents’ desire, after the internment camps, to forget the past” (9).

In this way, Mura’s experience in Japan, and his memoir itself, is a complicated negotiation between his Japanese ancestry, his Midwestern upbringing, where he is “the only Asian-American writer [he] knows” (153), and an articulation of his own identity vis-à-vis a concept of community and group consciousness. As he moves through the recursive processes of “writing the self,” his narrative reveals multiple conflicting emotional and intellectual processes in which he first attempts to distance himself from the ethnographic “objectivity” his role as traveler prescribes, to a position of subjectivity—a subjectivity that serves as the basis for a diasporic Japanese identity tied less to nation, to geographic space, than to commonalities based on race.

In many ways, Mura’s attempt to achieve his own Japanese subjectivity is driven by the ways in which his own role as ethnographic observer/traveler/tourist is problematized by his visual similarities to the culture and people observed.
When he arrives in Japan and finds himself amidst a sea of faces “just like his,”
his desire for Japanese subjectivity translates to a desire to experience the
Japanese landscape not as a tourist, not as an ethnographer. He doesn’t want
to experience Japan “simply as a sightseer or an information gather, making the
humanist assumption that human beings are all alike beneath the skin, all desire
the same things, all think in the same basic ways” (Mura 41). Rather, he seeks a
subjective understanding of Japan, its people, and its culture. Mura believes his
visual “blending in” is the key to finding this cultural commonality. He believes
his “background” allows him to “look at Japan without the blinders of prejudice
and ideology that hampered many of the accounts [he’d] read” (Mura 41).

Mura’s visual similarity with those whom he encounters in Japan also
makes him realize the ways in which his visual difference on the American
landscape is what prevents him from belonging entirely to the American culture–
a realization that serves to spark a more political, angry, sense of self. Thus, the
bond he seeks with Japan and the Japanese is situated in opposition to his
sense of belonging in America. A diary entry reflects this visual nature of race
relations:

You are unnoticeable here, you have melded in, you can stand not
uttering a word and be one of this crowd . . . and you are no longer
budgeted by your color, parceled out into certain jobs, certain
places of non-power, certain ghettos of the aesthetically backward
and unappealing, of the dull and downtrodden, of the inarticulate
and the invisible. (Mura 42)
As Mura continues to experience the "unexpected bonus" of "fit[ting] in" (36), he seeks to distance himself from his white counterparts, who "remind [him] of the America [he] wanted to leave behind" (299). When two white American friends, Hal and Shauna, a "literary couple," both "committed New Yorkers [who] lived on the Upper West Side," express a "vehement distaste for Japan," Mura feels his "anxiety rise" and a need to "defend the Japanese" (21). In this way, Mura's attempts to reclaim a "homeland" occur through a rejection of his American "home"—not a "home" at all, but "an absurdity, a sham" (33).

Mura's attempts to distance himself from his American home significantly impact his relationship with his Caucasian wife, Susie, and in doing so, also reveal the ways in which Mura falls victim to a gendering of nation common in discussions of race and power. As Ma notes, "white female bodies have consistently served, in Asian American literature by male writers, to help define male subjectivity" (Ma 64). This gendering of nation, specifically for Asian Americans, works in several interrelated ways. From the Orientalist perspective, eastern nations are often referred to in feminine exotic terms and Asian men, by nature of their race, thus undergo a feminization, which from a common patriarchal perspective translates to emasculation in sexual terms. In parallel with this symbolic emasculation are the very tangible anti-miscegenation laws—an "infrastructure of domination which underlies interracial eroticism and . . . Asian American males' fascination with white female bodies" (Ma 65). This fascination
with the white female body is representative of a desire for American national belonging.

As Mura develops a sense of political consciousness relative to his Asian American exclusion from the American national landscape, he becomes "angry at the white world" and "unable to separate [Susie] from the ghost of a million others" (23). And later, as Mura reflects on his past, we learn of other, more disturbing, ways in which his relationship with Susie has been influenced by racial/political motivations in the past. As he reveals his own sexual exploits and the ways in which they humiliated Susie, bringing their relationship to the brink of destruction, his revelations are those of an emasculated Asian American man making claim to the white female landscape. Reflecting on his college life with Susie and lamenting that as an Asian male he is placed in a "category of neutered sexuality" (149), Mura notes how "each beautiful white woman had seemed a mark of [his] exclusion" (148) and he becomes increasingly aware "of [sexual] powers growing inside [him] over which [he] had no control" (149), of a "knowledge" that he can possess what is "forbidden" (150). And even as he seeks to distance himself from the United States, as he finds himself "suddenly" attracted to Japanese women (148), he cannot help but continue to feel "flattered" when Japanese men admire Susie in his presence, as if he "recognized in their glances [his] American privilege, possessing what they could not" (38).
Despite this pleasure in his own American privilege, Mura not only seeks to distance himself from his American cultural home, but he seeks also to identify with the Japanese. Yet, finding that he lacks a “clear emotional or familial tie to the country,” he focuses instead on the “intellectual idea of Japan” (41). Yet, in doing so Mura does not succeed in reversing his prior Orientalist perceptions of Japan as “cheap baseballs, Godzilla, weird sci-fi movies.” Rather, he falls victim to an essentialist “claiming” of Japan that, while a compelling means through which to empower himself vis-à-vis American racism, comes dangerously close to a mode of intellectual inquiry through which to “know” a culture becomes a subtle form of power over that culture. Throughout his narrative, Mura claims to “know” Japan and this knowledge is grounded in what he believes to be his inherent, essential Japanese-ness, how he “keep[s] discovering ways [he]... feels Japanese” (270). He contends that when he writes in the future he will “almost certainly carry an even greater sense of Asia as a continent,” that he “find[s himself] feeling a sense of rightness, a claim to a body of material that other white writers do not have, ... an intuitive feel and pleasure in Japanese culture that white Americans sometimes lack” (292). So while he desires to experience the Japanese landscape not as a tourist nor as an ethnographer, by framing his essentialist affinity with Japan in textual/intellectual terms, he falls dangerously close to the Orientalist project Edward Said himself deemed “an area of concern defined by travelers ... to whom the Orient is a specific kind of knowledge about specific places, peoples, and civilizations” (Said 203).
Mura desires to belong to a group and having realized his own exclusion from his American home, seeks to find a sense of belonging through a cultural affiliation with Japan. He is unable to do so, however, and the primary barrier that prevents him from doing so is language. Unlike the “minor epiphanies,” such as having a small bladder, that he identifies as proof of genetic links to an essential Japanese-ness, language remains confrontationally inaccessible to him. Studying Japanese at Columbia prior to his departure from the U.S., Mura finds the language “impenetrable,” finds it ironic that as he studies “the language of [his] grandparents, . . . the hakujin in class were beating [him],” and wonders what the Japanese would “say about such an obviously non-Japanese Japanese” (45). Later, even as he enjoys blending in with the Japanese, he remains “self-conscious about speaking English on the train” and “crunched in among the Japanese, [he] like[s] the way [he] could blend in if [he] remains silent” (22, my emphasis). In the context of early Asian American writers, who sought to lay claim to the English language as a means to establish American national belonging, Mura’s choice to remain silent is ironic. For a writer whose endeavor is to find voice for his own identity, using language as the means to give meaning to cultural commonalities and shared histories, this “silence” is profound.

Straddling the boundaries between “home” and “homeland,” finding “belonging” in neither, Mura explores a cosmopolitanist notion of world citizenship instead, and this cosmopolitanism is, at least in one key passage,
framed as a direct resistance to the notion of Asian American literacy and collectivity. Speaking with Yuri, a Japanese national who spent most of her childhood in the United States, the two discuss the limitations and constrictions of this community. Asked why she had returned to Japan, Yuri comments that she had "gotten tired of the petty squabbling among the Japanese-American writers" and was "treated . . . like a traitor" after criticizing the "too narrow a definition of what Japanese-American writing should be" (152). Mura expresses his own alienation from the Asian American community he "never knew existed," commenting on the ways in which Japanese-American novels and poetry he'd read often felt "distant, almost mythical, unconnected to [his] experience in the white Midwest" (153). For both, the notion of collectivity is situated in opposition to a notion of individuality. For Mura, Yuri is admirable for her "willingness to speak out" and her ability to "stand apart from the group" (153).

Mura's diasporic, essentialist pursuits in many ways exemplify Asian Americanist critic Sau-ling Wong's concerns that the "loosely held and fluctuating collectivity called 'Asian Americans' will dissolve back into its descent-defined constituents as soon as one leaves American national borders behind" (Wong 17)—a dissolution that threatens the political power an Asian collective consciousness embodies. Throughout the memoir, Mura articulates his newly-formed ethnic pride as specifically Japanese. When he arrives in Japan to find a "change in political power, a shifting of the economic ground; the rise of one country, Japan, and the decline of the other, America," he is "pleased by this
conclusion” (36) and proud that his “genes linked [him] not to the poverty of the Third World but to a country as modern as, even more modern than, America” (17). Later, Mura articulates this “descent-defined” identity in more stark contrast to another Asian culture. Traveling in the Philippines, he finds himself sharing a jeepney with a Japanese tourist and they begin to speak in Japanese, forming a “circle” between them that separates them from the Philippino driver. And even as he reflects on the racist undertones of American resentment toward rising Asian economic power, he notes that his “feelings about [his] Japanese background would be less positive if [he’d] returned to a less prosperous land of origin” (369).

Critical to Mura’s descent-driven subjectivity is its economic motivations, and in this way, Mura also exemplifies critical concerns regarding the class issues inherent in a “traveling theory” of identity formation, particularly the ways in which transnationalism, while positing an idealistic notion of world culture, actually remains complicit with the economic disparities created by globalization—disparities by which Asian immigrant women’s work embodies a “racialized feminization of labor” (Lowe 158) and travel remains an uncontested site of privilege that ignores unequal access across national boundaries (Franklin 245). One key moment in the text reveals the ways in which cosmopolitanism is defined by an economic privilege and Eurocentrist intellectualism inherent in the act of travel and mobility. Visiting the home of Gisela, a German woman with whom he has a flirtatious relationship reminiscent of his collegiate exploits, he
“admire[s] her bookcase” as she quizzes him on his reading. As he lists names—Claude Lévi-Strauss, Walter Benjamin, Edmond Jabes—he corrects his pronunciation and judges him, making him feel “suddenly . . . uncultured, untraveled” (Mura 144). As she describes her travels through London, Italy, Dusseldorf, Berlin, and India, registering surprise that Mura hasn’t “gone anywhere before,” he feels her life is “loose, shifting, without boundaries or worries about definitions.” “[R]eaching for the exotic” over the reality of his “provincial” Midwestern upbringing, he describes his grandparents from Shingu, demonstrating what Sheng-mei Ma describes as the triangulation between the Asian American “raconteurs,” the American market, and the “alien(s’) story” as a source of ethnic pride (Ma 11).

Mura’s attempts at cosmopolitanism not only surface the economic privilege and intellectual elitism inherent in the theory, but it also belies the specific ways in which national belonging and the political responsibilities of citizenship inform Mura’s negotiation between his Japanese ancestry and the Japanese cultural/political landscape. When Mura meets Matsuo, a Japanese “revolutionary” and activist, he is invited to participate in a political demonstration. Mura agrees, not at all motivated by a desire to enact change, but rather because “the prospect seemed harmless, marching up and down with a sign” (189). At the demonstration, he can “pass as Japanese, but he must not speak,” a voicelessness that makes his participation less political and more performance. And like Iyer’s “global soul,” he may act “without consequences” as he
“playact[s], donning a role [he] could doff as easily as taking off a mask” (Mura 208). But while his playacting may afford him “a new way of rejecting [his] American background” (208) and he likes the ways in which he can be “part of the group . . . doing something a Hakujin, a white person, could never do” (213), because he has no true connection to the rights and responsibilities of Japanese citizenship and “knows little about the demonstration” (209), he gets little else from the experience. Without even his ethnographer’s “note book,” he quickly gets “bored, very, very bored” (211). Mura, as if unable to escape his outsider status, ends up watching the demonstration the same way in which he had “learned” about Japan before: on television. This ethnographer’s distance is interesting given the nature of the protest itself: the physical, economic, and cultural dislocation of farmers who have lost their land in order to accommodate the development of a bastion of modern international travel, the Narita airport.

Mura’s dislocation from the farmer’s demonstration brings into sharp focus his location on the American political and historical landscape. As he reflects on the demonstration, he compares its activism and his attraction to it in terms of the relocation camps, identifying his own disdain for the legacy of silence, of inaction, that the camps have come to signify: “I admired the fact that the protestors were doing something, were not sinking back into sho ga nai [it can’t be helped] passivity” (217). Though Mura believes he is “reaching for the exotic” by shaping his own identity through the story of his grandparents, his family’s story is a
uniquely American one, informed by this nation’s specific socio-political events and history.

Mura’s focus on the relocation camps is significant, for it remains, for Japanese Americans as well as Asian Americans overall, the most vivid historical example of race situated in opposition to nation. When faced with executive order 9066 and the decision to sign the loyalty oath forsaking allegiance to Japan, Japanese Americans “did not protest” (Mura 217), did not assert their rights of citizenship. To Mura, this inaction is what distinguishes Japanese political activism from what he perceives to be Japanese American acceptance of the government and military. But as Mura reminds us, “the Issei, many of whom did not speak English and who were not citizens, had few . . . legal recourses,” and “many of the Nisei were too young and lacked the position or knowledge to mount a protest” (217). Paradoxically, at the same time that they did not assert their rights of citizenship, their silence was meant to prove their American-ness:

Most of the Nisei went quietly. Like my father or my aunt, many were eager to prove they were true-blue Americans . . . And by their quiet obedience, by their decision not to protest, by their willingness to fight in the service, by their efforts to educate themselves, by their hard work, the Nisei did, as the history books tell it, become part of America. (218)

This “quiet obedience” is the legacy that Mura inherits and the source of his disconnection from his family, from the generations of his father and grandfather. “[E]mbarrassed by the way the Nisei seemed to beg to be let into America, embarrassed because those feelings existed within [him]” (244), Mura chooses to identify with Japan as a means to forsake this American legacy of exclusion.
Mura’s anger at this American racism is profound enough that he is willing
to forgive, or at least ignore, Japan’s own extreme ethnocentrism in order to
belong. But ironically his ability to do so is enabled by his position as an
outsider. He attempts to hedge the issue, arguing that none of the atrocities
committed by Japan on the geopolitical landscape “seemed to truly engage [his]
anger the way America’s history of race relations did” (202). Further, despite his
attempts to achieve the world citizen’s “blessings of being unaffiliated,” enjoying
the benefits of perpetual foreigner, who “see[s] so many sides of every question
that he never settles on a firm conviction” (Iyer 24), Mura cannot distance himself
from the memory of his own alienation as a citizen on the American landscape.
Mura attempts to use this idea of national alienation as the justification for his
desired adaptation of Japanese identity, at this point not seeing the true nature of
the cosmopolitan’s un-affiliation—a quality that Susie eloquently articulates:

Think about why it’s so much fun here. We’re away from American
news, American problems. We have the freedom that comes from
being a gaijin, we’re not bound to Japanese rules. And at the same
time, we can pretend we’re not really Americans, that we don’t
have some responsibility for what happens in Nicaragua, El
Salvador, Lebanon, or wherever Reagan’s sending his troops this
week. If you can pretend you’re Japanese and say the Japanese
are perfect, then maybe, just maybe, you can lay down your
American burdens. (202)

Susie’s challenge to Mura is incredibly insightful, and Mura lightheartedly
concedes at the time, but in order for him to truly understand his own relationship
with his nation and identity as both an Asian and an American, he must
understand and reconcile his relationship with his past—a reconciliation that
ultimately unveils the ways in which national memory is embodied by personal history and the political power of personal voice and expression.

With spoken language as the source of alienation from Japan and intellectualism/textuality the source of alienation from the cosmopolitan world citizenry, Mura realizes that “the only way to break the barrier of language was to enter the culture through my body, through sight” (28) and explores the more physical, bodily means of expression through Butoh dancing. While Mura finds Butoh attractive for its resistance to Western influences (65), and his choice to study with Ono is motivated by his racially-charged interest in sexuality, what Butoh provides for Mura is a connection to his family, his ancestors, and his personal history that is not tied to intellectualism nor political collectivity. As he attempts to dance Butoh for the first time, he is instructed to “stop conceptualizing . . . to forget what [he is] trying to represent with the dance, what [he] is trying to symbolize or imitate” (65). And as Mura dances, he “stops thinking,” and seeing his grandparents, “presents them with [a] flower, a greeting bearing some part of [him] that has wandered through the world, unwhole, lost, bewildered, alien . . . [and he gets] a glimpse of what [his] self-consciousness misses” (65).

This connection to personal history is ultimately the means through which Mura finds a meaningful connection to language, not on intellectual or political terms, but on familial ones. In one significant passage, Mura explains to his Japanese teacher, Mrs. Hayashi, why his name, which means “town,” appears
alone when it wouldn't normally in Japanese culture. Because people could not pronounce Uyemura, his original name, his father, a reporter for International News Services at the time, shortened it. He goes on to explain the evolution of family names in the American landscape:

My mother's family retained their Japanese names, Miwako, Sachiko, Tadao, Yukimi, Yoshiko. But these were often shortened to more American-sounding forms: Miwa or Mimi, Tad, Yo . . . Members of my father's family changed their names to Ruth, Ruby, and Ken. Born Katsuji, my father tried out Roy, Bob, and several other monikers before settling on Tom. For a while it was Thomas Katsuji Uyemura. Then Tom Katsuji Mura. Today it's Tom K. Mura. His children are David, Susan, John, and Linda. His wife is Terry. (49)

For Mura, this name change signifies his family's adoption of America and a separation from Japanese community through the type of language most directly tied to identity—naming. When Mura is taught the character for Uye, the missing first part of his surname, he feels a "sudden sense of connection with the language and with my grandfather, with my ancestors and the farming village from which my name, Uyemura, derived" (Mura 49). And this new consciousness tied to language in turn enables Mura to write his own identity, to find his own voice: "Shortly after this talk with Mrs. Hayashi, I began to think about writing a novel about my grandfather" (49).

As Mura delves more deeply into his family's history and his connection with it, the transformation is revealed in a dramatic shift within his narrative's form. While in the first half the intertextuality is heavy with theory and cultural criticism, in the second half he injects more diary entries, the form through which
he can perform his most personal inquiry. It is through these personal, expressive writings that Mura begins to find his true connection with Japan by reconciling his past and its place within his family’s lineage. In a powerful entry, Mura uncovers his complex struggle between his past intellectualism and ethnographer’s distance and the confrontation with his own ancestry that the physicality of Butoh evokes:

I am awkward, a thinker, a believer in French meals, new buildings, a man from the land of golf courses, highways, air-conditioned homes. I do not believe in spirits, I do not worship the night. I acknowledge no double, no movement of the drums . . . I am a writer, an intellectual. An abstractor, a looker. One who does not let go. (71)

Mura’s diaries serve to assist him in finding his voice and serve also to allow Mura to develop an identity on personal terms, separate both from the collective identity and intellectual/academic identity. By interspersing his own expressive voice, Mura authorizes personal experience within the community paradigm, making the personal literary, social, and political.2

Textually, these diaries represent an expressive writing that provides not only the means through which to connect with family, but also the means through which Mura can challenge the dominant hierarchies of race, intellectual discourse, and language. Remembering an experience in graduate school, Mura realizes the devastating effects when personal subjectivity is marginalized within

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2 This authorization of personal experience and the negotiation of experience through expressive written forms is deeply rooted in feminist theory and notions of female rhetoric. Mura’s transition toward this perspective and these rhetorical modes is also a compelling reconciliation with his emasculation as an Asian American male, making this aspect of his narrative merit a more complete feminist reading that extends beyond the focus of this thesis.
the academy. Having received a B+ and a reprimand from a professor who believes one should not “include one’s own subjective, personal reactions in interpretation,” Mura feels “humiliated,” that his “intellect was a wasteland.” And this subjugation of personal subjectivity is interpreted in terms specific to his Japanese American identity: “My Japanese-American identity was something I shunned, both consciously and subconsciously. I felt that it relegated me to secondary status, kept me from being with Lowell, Berryman” (75). As Mura writes his own experience, he “suddenly [begins] to see . . . that they were not obstacles to overcome, they were [his] subjects” and that by listening to these “voices of [his] family, of Japan, of [his] own wayward and unassimilated past” he could “imagine” himself in a world in which his experience was “unimagined” (77).

By authorizing the personal experience, Mura also more successfully removes himself from the problematic role of ethnographer, making meaning and knowledge not through text, but by renegotiation with his own human experience. Instead of seeking to “know” Japan, Japanese culture, and Japanese people, seeking to find an essentialist identity based on genetics and race, Mura now turns his inquiry inward, seeking to know himself. While some might argue that this inward inquiry reflects a self-focus that disregards the issues defining collective identity—institutional racism, relocation, etc.—I argue that Mura’s inquiry allows him to understand more deeply how these events of History have affected his family, and his relationships with his father and grandfather specifically. Reflecting on the beatings he received by his father, and those received by his
father from his father, Mura understands that "behind these acts of fathers and sons lies the backdrop of race and relocation" (140). While he had written about the Japanese internment in his poetry before, as he writes his memoir, he "feels that [he's] lost the feel for poetry" before realizing perhaps he's "just learning how to write about [himself]" (155).

From this perspective, Japan becomes not the source for his identity but rather the site of negotiation with his past and his family's past, and this negotiation is a necessary one for Mura to overcome his shame for his family's "weakness" and his reluctance to "claim any of it as part of [his] heritage" (226). When his parents come to visit, he is able to see this distinction more clearly, as he comes face to face with the reality of their American-ness, seeing the ways in which his father "holds himself, the solid, casual confidence of his smile . . . my father–American" (316). This realization uncovers Mura's true relationship with Japan, not as a source for genetic identity, but as simply the location of his family's memories. He understands that "either [he is] American or [he is] one of the homeless, one of the searchers for what John Berger calls a world culture. But [he is] not Japanese" (370).

For Mura, history is now not a political event, nor a political cause, but a personal experience and this realization is profound, for he can no longer base an activism or an anger on an abstraction; rather, he must navigate the complexities and inconsistencies of human relationships. When he notes that "Japan allowed [him] to see [himself], America, and the world from a perspective
that was not white American," and that he no longer "feel[s] as bound now by . . .
national identity" (368), it appears to be a declaration of denationalization. But
perhaps the tension for Mura is not so much between political collectivity and
cosmopolitanism, but rather between citizenship as public self tied to national
memory and an identity tied to individual experience and personal memory.
While this privileging of the private self, enacted through expressive language,
may not fit well with the activist, collective consciousness of which Wong speaks,
it does represent a politic of intimacy that enables Mura, who has shared the self-
destructive nature of his own anger at the past, at his nation, and at his family, to
move forward with a new eye toward the legacies he creates. He reflects:

What my grandparents experienced, what kind of people gave birth
to and raised my father, all this represents an impossible
knowledge. Does culture ordinarily form a net of remembrance, a
safety guard against forgetting? Does it provide the individual with
at least some clues, some vague outlines, from which to discern his
family history? All I have are these doubts and feelings of loss,
these questions which pull me on, step after step, a dance of folly.
Over and over, knowing it is futile, I try to create my own myth of
history. (358)

Of all the relationships Mura establishes with those he meets in Japan,
perhaps his experience with Matsuo provides the most compelling insight. Mura
reflects on his relationship with Matsuo, regretting that their friendship "never
seemed to move toward . . . intimacy" (231). Matsuo represents a politic that
overlooks love, intimacy, and family, a politic that privileges History over history.
When Matsuo leaves him behind for Korea, Mura feels "betrayed" and his
reaction is physical, with emotional and disturbing visions of his father. Later, as
he imagines what became of Matsuo, he reflects on the anonymity of Matsuo's brand of political activism:

One can imagine anonymous journeys like this by men and women . . . journeys by people with a mission, something clandestine and political, people who depended on remaining anonymous, who were anonymous, who soon would no longer be anonymous . . . they were obscure fanatics, terrorists, flies on the walls of rooms where history is made. (286)

While Matsuo is left with "photographs in yellowed magazines, a few obscure books, a few articles," Mura is left with a hopeful image: his unborn daughter tying him ever closer to his "grandparents, . . . parents, and to the future" (372). The conception of his daughter, and his hopeful anticipation of her birth, is profound for Mura in that it represents his ultimate decision to privilege the intimacy of his marriage over the destructive politics of racial empowerment that had informed the relationship in the past. At the same time, it frees Mura from the emotional constraints of national memory and collective consciousness, sources of anger and betrayal, to opt instead for an identity based on "enormous love" (373) for himself, his family, his past, and his future—a stronger foundation from which to truly shape a more positive personal legacy.
CHAPTER THREE: Catfish and Mandala

Mura’s hopeful image of love is a compelling one. Through the image of his unborn bi-racial daughter, he envisions not only an identity freer from the confines of race and ethnicity, but one that privileges personal legacy as a viable alternative to an identity based on collective experience and political consciousness. In many ways, however, this ending seems tidy, too romantic, leaving questions and doubts as to whether Mura will ultimately make a larger meaning out of his reflections inward—a meaning through which his personal reflection can serve not as an alternative to collectivity, but as a necessary basis for effective political action. With these questions in mind, Andrew Pham’s travel memoir, Catfish and Mandala, provides a compelling exploration into the deep connections between our personal legacies and political responsibilities and the balance between our private selves as individuals and our public selves as world citizens.

Like Mura’s text, Pham’s narrative is a memoir of his journey to Vietnam, during which he confronts his past and the difficult memories of his family’s life in Vietnam, their immigration to the United States, and the emotional and violent turmoil deeply rooted in their family dynamic. But while Mura in many ways represents the traditional, third-generation, English-speaking Asian American perspective, Pham represents the more recent demographic evolution of Asian America. A first generation Vietnamese American, Pham immigrated to the U.S. with his family as political exiles during the Vietnam war, escaping political
imprisonment and persecution—an experience that situates him more closely with Iyer’s concept of a “global soul,” one who is uprooted and, as a consequence, exists within the boundaries of culture and geography. In this way, Pham’s motivations differ significantly from Mura. Rather than representing a renegotiation of “home” in opposition to ancestral “homeland,” his journey embodies a diasporic bridge between the cultural and physical locations of Vietnam and America.

While Pham does occupy a position within cultural and national boundaries, he shares Mura’s specifically Asian American perspective—a perspective embodied by a tension between ethnic identity and acceptance on the American landscape. Also like Mura, Pham specifically rejects what he perceives as his own family’s endeavors for national belonging, at the same time that he sees his own connection to it. Early in his narrative, after his father chastises him for quitting his engineering job for an arguably less lucrative writing career, Pham reflects on his own unwillingness to fit his father’s concept of a “good” Vietnamese American:

I can’t be his Vietnamese American. I see their groveling humility, concessions given before quarters are asked. I hate their slitty-measuring eyes. The quick gestures of humor, bobbing of heads, forever congenial, eager to please. Yet I know I am as vulnerable as they before the big-boned, fair-skinned white Americans. The cream-colored giants who make them and me look tribal, diminutive, dark, wanting. (25)

Like Mura, Pham’s narrative is a negotiation with ethnicity tied to a sense of personal and political history with American racism. Unlike Mura, who goes to
Japan at first as a reluctant tourist, having won a Fellowship he’d rather had been for Paris, Pham’s journey begins as a conscious attempt to escape his family’s violent and tumultuous past as exiles pursuing the American Dream—a pursuit that has had destructive consequences, including the suicide of his sister Chi. Confronted by his grandmother, who offers him a chance to read his “birth fortune,” Pham rejects this “relic,” this “yellowed fortune-scroll, crushed and tattered, its secret bound by an umbilical cord of red twine” (3). Instead, he quits his job and bicycles into the Mexican desert - an act of resistance to family, ethnicity, and legacy.

Yet Pham cannot easily escape his past, nor his identity as an Asian, and specifically Vietnamese, American. When he cycles into the desert, he meets Tyle, a Vietnam war veteran, and is immediately confronted with old feelings of exclusion implied in the simple question, “where are you from?” For Pham, the question is distasteful, one he has “always hated” (6), because it is one that makes him “painfully aware” that American-ness will “resonate truer” in the voice of Tyle, a “giant, an anachronistic Thor,” more American in his whiteness despite his “Rasta drag” (5). Further, when Tyle reveals that he “was in Nam” (8), Pham is further confronted with a more complicated side to the equation—the ways in which is own identity is tied to the identities of others. Talking with Tyle, he is reminded of his boyhood encounters with the “bitterness” and “bewilderment” of those vets who served in the war and his own role in triggering these emotions. When Tyle, in a powerful opening to Pham’s narrative, asks for forgiveness “for
what [he has] done to [Pham’s] people” (8), the complexity of their relationship comes into sharp focus.

Against the backdrop of war, a specifically national endeavor, Pham is reminded of the ways in which the aggressions of nations can and do remain deeply embedded in the psyche of all of those who are impacted by them. From this perspective, concepts of national belonging tied to ethnicity are problematized. Pham troubles over who he can truly call “his people,” wondering how the American Tyle can be his people when all his life he “looked at [people like Tyle] sideways, wondering if [they were] wondering if [his] brothers had killed [their] brothers in the war that made no sense” (8). But at the same time that Pham resents his own “rootlessness” on the American cultural and national landscape, a rootlessness that keeps him “hoping for but not believing in the day when [he] become[s] native,” he wonders why he should be the “beneficiary of all of [Tyle’s] suffering” (9). Living in exclusion in Mexico, it is Tyle who is the exile, the global soul who lives as non-citizen, a man who has lost his family and his nation for the sins of war.

In this way, Pham’s text from the beginning places his individual journey in a larger, global context, but his global perspective is not cosmopolitan in nature. When Tyle presumes that Pham will return to Vietnam, he asks that Pham tell his story, that Pham seek forgiveness on his behalf. Unable to ignore such a request, Pham realizes that he must not only confront his personal legacies, but the national legacies that connect him with those such as Tyle. Thus, Pham
decides to journey to Vietnam by bicycle—a pilgrimage with a meaning beyond himself, beyond the individualized act of self-exploration, carrying the weight of "something greater than [himself]" (9).

For Pham, ethnic identity dictates a necessary consciousness of nation. As a "Viet-kieu," or overseas Vietnamese, Pham's own existence in the United States is a direct result of war and against this backdrop, global consciousness is impossible to disconnect from national endeavors, creating a clear connectedness between self and nation. But more importantly for Pham, this connectedness dictates a necessary understanding of his own connection to other individuals—a consciousness of the interrelatedness of personal stories and the problematic of an identity centered exclusively on his own acceptance as a Vietnamese man in America. Throughout his text he shies away from the often black and white perspectives on race and racism, opting instead for a more difficult and troubling gray area encompassed in the moments of incomprehension between individuals. In one powerful passage, Pham reflects on a childhood confrontation with a teacher lecturing on the Vietnam war, in which, repeating "adults' drunken words," he indicts Americans as "chicken" for "not finish[ing] the war" (11). As an adult, after his meeting with Tyle, Pham realizes "with some guilt" that "perhaps [the teacher's] brother had died in the War, and if it had gone on, he might have lost another" (11). Pham sees the ways in which the politics of war mixes with the realities of personal loss, and how his shouting was less an indictment of American foreign policy and more
about personal suffering, about his own "imprisonment, about the dark wet cells, the whippings, the shootings, the biting rats, and the fists of dirty rice" (11).

With this concept of self tied to nation, and the relationship between individuals determined by national political endeavors, the specific positions of nations vis-à-vis the global economic landscape are significant, particularly in an era of globalization in which wealth determines the mobility of a nation's inhabitants. We begin to see this relationship early in Pham's travels, when he must go through Japan to get to Vietnam. Pham notes that his last "visit" to this nation was as his family "passed through" on their way to America—a stop on a refugee's journey—and as he revisits Japan as an American traveler, he can't help but reflect on this nation's position as an Asian economic power. While Mura returns to a Japan that has risen in economic prominence, and is "proud" that his roots do not end in a landscape of poverty, Pham notes:

The Vietnamese harbor a grudging hate-admiration for the Japanese. They cannot forget how the Japanese defiled their country, yet they cannot help feeling a sense of pride that an Asian nation ranks among the world's industrial power. (42)

As Pham bicycles through Japan, he sees a very different landscape than Mura, with "Japanese on their way to work, grim faces looking out windshields"—a "populace [that] ambles dispassionately toward duties" (45). And unlike Mura, who sees a Japan that empowers him from his position of "weakness" in America, Pham identifies a hierarchy not only of nations, but also of people, as he gasps at the "dark undercarriage of Tokyo, its industry, its strata of life, its
one-mindedness, its fascination with America” (46). Intrigued with this “love triangle” between poor Vietnam, industrialized Japan, and powerful America, Pham himself accepts the “vague state of being lost” (46) among the fast pace of the Japanese landscape—a feeling that is underscored by his own relative poverty, having arrived with limited funds and thus relegated to “camping out” in parking lots and parks. When he does find friendship and good will, it is, interestingly, from two homeless people, Michiko-san and Tanaka-san, who, “smiling kindly,” lead him “back to their home of plywood and appliance boxes wired together in the tall reeds” (47). While Mura and Iyer seek the cosmopolitanist’s freeing sense of “homelessness,” Pham finds himself literally among the homeless.

Pham’s experience in Japan is a jarring one that brings him face to face with the power relationship between America, Japan, and Vietnam and his own shifting location within it. This economic disparity is only underscored when Pham finally reaches Vietnam, where he finds a landscape of poverty, with Saigon “thick with alms folk” and “every market, every street corner maggoty with misshapen men and women hawking their open sores and pus-yellow faces for pennies” (106). Pham not only recognizes the economic disparity between nations, but also is deeply troubled by his own location within that paradigm. As a Vietnamese American, he has experienced the feelings of isolation of being a person of color in America, of being one of the “young-old Vietnamese, uncentered, uncertain in their identity,” those the older generation calls “mat
goch—lost roots” (63). But at the same time, as a Viet-kieu traveling in poverty-stricken Vietnam, he is keenly aware of his own position of privilege as one who, though tied to Vietnam by race and ethnicity, has reaped the benefits of his family’s “escape” to the United States.

What troubles Pham most is the randomness of this disparity and his narrative reflects this in two key passages. As he encounters a beggar girl in the Saigon markets, he is struck and emotionally moved by the tenuous line between them—a line that on which side they both sit is a result of nothing more than one family’s economic privilege over another.

I was her. She, me. She was Trieu. Could be my sister Chi. Could be my own daughter. Random. My world—her world. But for my parents’ money, I could be any one of the thousands of cyclo drivers, vacant-eyed men wilting in cafes, hollow-cheeked merchants angling for a sale. Everything could shift, and nothing would change. No difference. The shoes to be filled were the same. (107)

Here Pham, like Mura and Iyer, makes a universal connection, but it is one that is far less romantic, focusing less on the idea of a liberating globalization in which individuals, capital, and information move freely, than on an oppressive globalization, one that further stratifies the wealthy from the poor. What strikes Pham is his own seemingly random location on this stratification, his own random access to this economy and privilege, gained by his family’s exile from Vietnam. This may be the only difference between Pham and this little girl, but it is a big one.
Pham not only sees the unfair disparity in this relationship with the beggar girl, but also in very profound ways begins also to see his own role in her fate. Having given her a large sum of money, he stands “gasping at her tragedy and [his] part in it” (108). Far from a lack of responsibility that Mura and other “global souls” such as Iyer enjoy by nature of their rootlessness, Pham does the difficult work of confronting his own responsibility as a member of this economically stratified global “community.” Later, as he develops a friendship with Kim, a taxi dancer in a club, Pham is again struck by the random disparity and the illogic of his own privilege. As she pleads, “please, take me. You can save me. I can save my family. And they and all my children and their children and their grandchildren will be indebted to you” (135), Pham reflects on fate as an “obligation I don’t understand—the reasons that random beast passed over her deserving soul in favor of mine” (135).

The economic disparity between nations and those who inhabit them comes into sharper focus in the context of Pham’s role as tourist and traveler on the Vietnamese landscape, and the privilege Pham enjoys over those whom he meets in many ways manifests itself vis-à-vis the modes and motivations for travel and movement. His mode of transport, the bicycle, takes on various meanings based on the different landscapes on which he rides. In Mexico, he finds in every place people who offer him nourishment, with the explanation, “you are riding a bicycle, so you are poor. You are in the desert going nowhere, so you are crazy” (6). But in Vietnam, Pham embodies a national memory of a war
whose “winners” now live in poverty and whose “losers,” the Viet-kieu, now live in economic prosperity. In this paradigm, Pham cannot escape the perception of his wealth and position of power as an American traveler—a position of power embodied by his mobility across global terrains as illustrated by his return to Vietnam.

Themes of travel and mobility, in this context, becomes a significant consideration as we explore the potential and the pitfalls of globalization, in that they reveal how globalization creates a common desire for mobility at the same time that it restricts access to it. For so many of the individuals Pham encounters, travel and mobility are utilitarian in nature, a means to get from one location to another and a means for survival itself. Riding a bus that he equates to the “stagecoaches of the old American West,” Pham describes its drivers as the most “serious lot . . . in the world . . . [who] deal in life and death daily, their whole family riding on their performance, the bus their vehicle, the whole family’s savings and possibly their coffin on wheels” (144). For these people, transportation is a livelihood, a business of “life and death.” At the same time, Pham recalls many poignant moments that reveal the ways in which travel and mobility remain, for those who cannot access it, romantic notions tied to specifically western adventure. A bus driver articulates a romantic wanderlust, a dream of travel, in which he drives his bus “all the way to Hanoi, then right into China, then up and up and up through Russia . . . and then just go[es] West. Aim for the sun and drive at it . . . right into the end of the world” (150). This driver’s
desire is particularly poignant when we realize that, though his job is neither romantic nor adventuresome, he plays an important role in Pham’s own travels. Pham, sensing the incongruities of this relationship, feels “funny telling a traveling man about traveling,” but “oblige[s] anyway,” giving him the “rose colored lenses” suitable for “adventurers” (149).

For this driver, travel is an inaccessible freedom, one that highlights the exclusivity of cosmopolitanism and global travel. But others Pham encounters reveal how globalization enables a specifically commercial relationship with travel and tourism. Pham notes that as one who is “privy to both [Western and Vietnamese] worlds,” he is constantly approached by people eager to cash in on the tourist trade, perceived as a “gold mind of free advice” to those who want to “get in on the action” (154). For these people, from tour guides to cyclo drivers, each seeks to make a meager living on the tourist trade that globalization has enabled.

This relationship between economy, nation, citizenship, and travel on the global landscape is profound and, just as we discovered with Mura, gender plays an integral role in the paradigm. In Mura’s text, nation is gendered through his association of his wife Susie with the elusive American cultural landscape and in this way, the gendering of nation serves to highlight the emasculation of Asian American men. Nation is gendered in Pham’s text as well, but in ways that disregard the perspective of the emasculated male—an issue about which Pham seems to have little concern. Rather, the gendering of nation is articulated as a
metaphor for colonial/imperial “ownership” of nations. As Pham reflects on Ho Chi-minh, a man he describes as “well-traveled, well-learned, well-cultured” (228), he wonders if Ho’s patriotism is not a love for the “loveliest of females: Vietnam”—a “beautiful woman wooed first by the Chinese, then the French, then the Japanese, then the Americans” (229). Here, Pham’s observation reveals the troubling subtext of the emasculation issue, that the gendering of nations as female serves the specific symbolic purpose to articulate nations as possessed—a symbolism that remains unquestionably rooted in a patriarchal perspective of male-female relationships.

This subtext does not seem lost on Pham, who not only identifies this symbolic relationship between woman and nation, but goes further to connect the specifically economic nature of the gendering. For Pham, there is not only a political endeavor in the gendering of nations, but also a commercial one—an endeavor in which nations and women are not only objects to be possessed, but merchandise to be bartered, traded, and sold. In this relationship, the romanticism of global travel and cross-culturalism is deeply troubled by the industrial connection between tourism, globalization, and the exploitation of women. Pham meets many Vietnamese who seek to profit from the tourist trade, but his friend Calvin, a well-dressed tour guide well-versed in western perspective, most insightfully articulates this relationship. Revealing his shame in showing his paying customers the poverty of the Saigon streets, because “they want pictures,” Calvin notes that his role as tour guide makes him “feel like a
pimp" (329). And his comparison between the symbolic prostitution of the nation Vietnam and the economic realities of female labor and exploitation on the global landscape are not lost on Pham. As Pham leaves Calvin with a heavy heart, he meets a "gorgeous girl . . . pretty enough" for him "to fall madly in love with." But his image of romantic, "improbable possibilities" is quickly dissolved when he realizes her romance is for sale, and instead he rides away from her, "with [his] money, [his] opportunities, [his] privileges, [his] life" (331).

Having identified his own troubling and complex role within the global paradigm of wealth and privilege, and the separation he feels from his Vietnamese roots as a result, Pham resists the temptation to distance himself from the discomfort such an economic disparity provokes. Instead, he seeks a closeness to the Vietnamese, a means through which to confront the very economic privilege that troubles him. In this way, Pham's physical movement across Vietnamese landscape, particularly when compared to Mura's intellectual interactions with Japan and the Japanese, seems particularly meaningful. If in the global landscape that Iyer describes, the airplane is the symbol of modernity and mobility, then Pham's journey by bicycle takes on a more earthly form. Pham's choice mode of transport requires physical effort, endurance, and pain in order to, not conquer the boundaries of nation and landscape, but rather, move across them, allowing the "grit and grime" to "infuse every cell of [is] body" until he can "truly be Vietnamese again" (126). It is a more intimate form of travel, and one which never allows him to escape the traveling conditions that the average
Vietnamese experiences—roads “teem[ing] with cattle-drawn carts, horse-drawn wagons, load ponies, wheelbarrows, herders with cattle, cycles, bicyclists, and everything motorized . . . the horns, the curses, and the screams boil[ing] into a fantastic cacophony” (125).

By establishing this intimacy with the people of Vietnam, Pham never falls into the ethnographer’s role as observer. As a Viet-kieu, he does have a different relationship to his homeland, as opposed to Mura, for whom Japan is simply symbolic of a history with which he has no real connection. Perhaps this is why Pham distances himself from the intellectual and academic perspective that so pervades Mura’s narrative. While Mura converses about authors, anthropologists, dancers, and artists, most of Pham’s interactions, even prior to his arrival in Vietnam, center around food and drink. From the kind people in Mexico, who give him “nourishment” (5), to his friends in Portland, with whom he shares a “loud meal” (39), to his cousins in Vietnam, with whom he gorges on alcohol, “barbecued beef, steamed intestines, pan-fried frogs, . . . goat stew and goat liquor, two parts rice wine mixed with one part fresh goat’s blood” (82), Pham experiences locations and people not as intellectual observations. In Vietnam, he literally infuses his own physical being with the foods of its people, its culture.

For Pham, then, food becomes the means through which to reconnect with his Vietnamese roots, a way to assert his Vietnamese-ness, by literally consuming it into his body. For this reason, his inability to “stomach” it becomes
also symbolic. Reluctant to “drink up” a beating cobra heart from a shot glass filled with rice wine, its “red streamers of blood [swirling] into the clear liquor” (83), his cousin Hung challenges, “You said you want to be Vietnamese. You want to try everything we do. It doesn’t get more Vietnamese than this” (84). As Pham’s travelogue progresses, and he eats his way across the Vietnamese landscape, he becomes increasingly ill, until finally, he becomes “sick and unable to eat” (261), with “roiling intestines,” his gut “empt[y]ing itself” until his “insides turn inside out” and he sees his “heart emptying into the toilet bowl” (305). Frustrated by his inability to digest the food, he laments: “I’m Vietnamese after all, and these microorganisms once thrived in my gut as thoroughly as in any Vietnamese here” (324).

But as a Viet-kieu, Pham is not Vietnamese anymore, and his American privilege reveals that he is not the only one who sees the randomness in his own family’s escape, and subsequent privilege, over others. Throughout the narrative, Pham is confronted by Vietnamese, such as Hung, who observe the prosperity of the Viet-kieu and wonder at the chasm created by this disparity in economic wealth. As he fingers a picture of his own wife and daughter, who have immigrated to America, in front of their new Honda Accord in Virginia, he asks “Is this common in America?” And Pham is quick to realize Hung’s underlying question: “Has my wife passed beyond my means? Does she really need me anymore?” (80). But while Hung’s question is haunting, Pham’s friend
Calvin is indicting, as he comments on the ways in which Viet-kieu, by their assimilation on western landscapes, further marginalize Vietnamese from a white perspective:

Vietnamese aren't ashamed of our own poverty. We're not ashamed of squatting in mud huts and sleeping on rags. There is no shame in being poor. We were born into it just as Westerners are born white. The Westerns are white as we are yellow. There is already a difference between us. Our poverty is minor in the chasm that already exists. A small detail. The real damning thing is the fact that there are Viet-kieu, our own brothers, skin of our skin, blood of our blood, who look better than us, more civilized, more educated, more wealthy, more genteel. Viet-kieu look kingly next to the average Vietnamese. . . Can't you see? We look like monkeys because you make us look like monkeys just by your existence. (330)

With this indictment, we can see the ways in which Pham's journey to Vietnam, his desire to reconnect with Vietnam, to become Vietnamese again, is in many ways an attempt to assuage his own guilt and shame for abandoning Vietnam. From this perspective, his graphic and disturbing descriptions of his physical illnesses suggest something more than a simple failure to “acclimatize” to the food. The food becomes a symbol for the ways in which Pham, and all Viet-kieu, are, as Calvin suggests, “lost” to the people of their homeland.

As a “lost” Viet-kieu, Pham's quest for sustenance during his travels over the Vietnamese landscape are quests for forgiveness enacted through the intimacy of personal relationships. Unlike Mura, who seeks friendship as a means of superficial belonging, Pham's need for Vietnamese hospitality is a need for absolution—an absolution to reconcile a national memory of war, the individual shame of those such as Tyle, and the guilt of the Viet-kieu, who
became war's ironic beneficiaries. And if the superficiality of Mura's project is revealed by the limits of connections made through the language of intellect and academics, food is a powerful and deeply intimate means through which to forgive on these levels.

The power of food and intimacy vis-à-vis the intersecting themes of war, privilege, and the economics of travel and mobility are most profoundly revealed when Pham meets Uncle Tu, a one-legged man whom Pham is surprised to see riding a bicycle. When Uncle Tu invites Pham to his home, it is for Pham the most pure sense of hospitality he has experienced, the "first time someone's invited [him] home without his hands out" (262). Like so many of the individuals Pham meets, Uncle Tu also shares an "insatiable appetite for details about the rest of the world" (265), asking questions such as whether "driving a car is scary" and "how . . . cellular phones work," again demonstrating the ways in which globalization, while giving people an awareness of the world, does not provide equal access for all to experience the world. While Uncle Tu is aware of the existence of the technology, he has no experiential knowledge of it. As the two share a meal of catfish stew, it is for Pham "without a doubt one of the best meals [he's] had in Vietnam" (265).

It is during this meal with Uncle Tu that Pham receives one important aspect in the complex web of reconciliation he seeks—a reconciliation that serves to absolve the individualized shame that individuals such as Tyle internalize for their participation in global, national exploits. Commenting on the American
soldiers, Uncle Tu asks, “Who are they? They were boys, as I was. They were themselves, but also part of a greater creature—the government. As was I. I can no more blame them than a fish I eat can be blamed for what I do” (267). Uncle Tu eloquently articulates the deep connection between our selves as individuals and our selves as citizens tied to our nation’s projects. And as Uncle Tu relays to Tyle, “there is nothing to forgive. There is no hate in this land. No hate in my heart” (267), he achieves a global connection, not through individualism and notions of a self separate from nations, but through a brotherhood whose bonds are forged despite the borders and barriers of landscape and nation. It’s fitting that Uncle Tu forgives over a meal of catfish, for the catfish of the title itself is symbolic of a cycle, a spirituality inherent in the cycle of life and death, consumption and cleansing. While the catfish feeds on the wastes of humans, it is also the national fish that feeds the nation, with “Vietnam’s rivers and lakes teem[ing] with this hardy creature” (264).

Uncle Tu seems to not only forgive Tyle and those like him, but also provide relief to Pham, whom he nurtures back to health with an intimacy that “embarrasses” Pham, who reflects that while his father and he had “never shaken hands,” Uncle Tu, a “stranger-once-enemy,” draws on his skills to “heal me with his hands, skin on skin” (266).

Uncle Tu’s forgiveness is powerful, but serves to reconcile only one aspect of Pham’s journey. The weight of Tyle’s message, Pham’s desires to reconcile with the people of Vietnam, and his desire to find the Vietnamese in his
own identity are all ultimately secondary to a deeply spiritual venture Pham must take into his own memories—memories of his family’s secrets and abuses, and memories of his sister, Chi, who commits suicide after the family immigrates to the United States. As Pham seeks reconciliation for what he perceives to be his responsibility for the sins of nation and privilege, he also seeks a much more difficult reconciliation for what he perceives to be his own role in his sister’s death. Pham’s “cycle,” then, is one that not only moves him across the Vietnamese landscape; it is also the circular relationship between his past and his future. When “Crazy” Ronnie suggests as he embarks on his trip, “You’ve been working very hard . . . since you were put on earth, so on this cycle, you are done with work. You’re out exploring the world” (36), she may refer to the emotional work in a troubled life, and the “exploring” is as inward as it is out.

Within his memoir, Pham revisits power memories of his father’s abuse and violence, his family’s assimilation into America, and their ultimate rejection of both Vietnam and his sister Chi. In a searing recollection, Pham recounts a particularly violent episode, when, after Pham betrays his sister, his father beats Chi with canes “like striking vipers . . . blurr[ing] through the air, swishing, biting into Chi, one after another” (56). It is a key point at which Chi begins to separate herself from the family, after which she “never wholly came back into [their] lives again” (57). For Pham, who remembers “cowering in the hallway terrified, for [he] had brought these blows on her” (56), the memory seems a powerful self-indictment for his responsibility in Chi’s fate. Later, we see the depth of this
family's violent legacy, when Pham reveals the moment when he discovered his own violent tendencies, when he caned his brother Hien "with a spark of Father's fury. And Hien, barely ten, comes back at [him] with a knife" (170). Pham confesses:

I am violent, Mom.
A curse on my father's line.
The rage was passed on to another generation. A monster in me, for I am violent.

As Pham shares, it is the direct result of this violence that is ultimately responsible for Chi's physical removal from their home when social services arrests his father for child abuse.

Chi is not only the victim of this literal violence, she is also the victim of a more subtle, cultural one. In recalling the circumstances leading up to the family's loss of Chi, Pham describes his family's intense desire to assimilate into America, to achieve the immigrant's dream. As the Phams "plotted and . . . schemed and . . . dug [their] escape tunnel" from the poverty of America's immigrant neighborhoods, they were blind to the possibility that their endeavor would have a "casualty," that Chi was not going to assimilate as easily as the rest and that this would contribute to her ultimate death. In a heart-wrenching passage, he describes Chi's return from juvenile hall after their father is arrested for child abuse. It is the moment when she truly departs from their family, the moment she disappears. For Pham, Chi's departure and his family's inability to deal with it is both driven by and symbolized by his family's struggle to assimilate. When Chi doesn't return, Pham is "glad . . . because the court
dropped the charges and Dad didn't go to jail. We would survive. There was enough to eat and, if everything went well, we would be moving away from the dump soon” (215).

The family's assimilation into America marks its abandonment of not only Chi but of Vietnam as well. And this immigrant crossing from Vietnamese identity to an American one is enacted through language. It is during the nights that Pham awaits for Chi's return and slowly wonders if she had “gone far away and couldn't return” (214) that he:

started dreaming in English. Abruptly, I was walking in two camps, each distinct and vastly different from the other. I didn’t feel it then, but one side was beginning to wither. In my sleep, English words gushed out of my mouth and poured into my ears naturally as though I were born with it. (214)

As the Phams gain in upward mobility, slowly achieving the “American Dream,” Chi “slip[s] away from [them] the way [their] birth-language slipped from [their] tongue, in bits, in nuances” (215). And as their American-born little sister, Kay, with her “sweet, flawless English” (215) begins to replace Chi, who “no longer existed” (215), the Phams deepen their “silence,” burying “Chi into [them]selves, lock[ing] her into the basements of [their] minds.” In a powerful confluence, Pham's family becomes “embarrassed by [their] immigrant accent” and Chi becomes the “family's big shame, as if we’d somehow failed–failed her as we’d failed ourselves” (215).

By weaving these memories of abuse, assimilation, and the loss of his sister with his travels in Vietnam, Pham draws a parallel between his feelings of
shame for betraying Chi and his guilt for his family's abandonment of Vietnam, unable to dissociate the two. In one passage, when Pham is confronted with the randomness of his own privilege over a beggar girl, his reaction is visceral. Leaping onto his bike and moving through traffic like a "madman," he weeps "uncontrollably, as [he] did when [he] heard [his] sister Chi had committed suicide," knowing that he "wept for [his] sister Chi. [He] wept for [himself]. [He] wept for the disparity between [his] world and the world of these people" (110). With a shame that belies the cosmopolitanist's freedom from responsibility, Pham weeps for his "sorry soul" (110), equating his failure to Chi with a failure to focus beyond his own self vis-à-vis the disadvantaged overall: "I wasn't there when my sister needed me. I did not turn my life into a crusade for runaways. Did not volunteer to help the homeless or to counsel troubled people" (110). By making this connection, Pham makes global connections that are deeply personal and deeply intimate, and in doing so, locates a profound sense of personal responsibility, belying critic Sau-ling Wong's fears that denationalized, descent-driven identity will result in a privileging of the self over collective consciousness and political activism.

It is perhaps for this reason that Pham downplays his own role as writer, opting instead for the physicality and the intimacy of food and cycling. While Mura continually refers to his own writing process throughout his narrative, Pham's writing process is conspicuously absent from his text. Indeed, outwardly critical of his career as a writer, he highlights not the transformative and personal
power of the written word, but rather the superficial, commercial one.

Interestingly, his metaphor for writing is a traveling one:


Pham’s perspective on the impersonality and superficiality of words becomes profound when we realize that Pham’s father was also a writer, the director of the propagandists, who “wrote literature, broadcast Nationalist ideology, pro-American sentiments, and anti-Viet Cong messages”—propagandists whom “the VC hated . . . more than they hated the American GIs . . . more than they hated the Nationalist Army” (17). Pham’s father did not own his own words; it was as spokesman for his nation that he was exiled from his own country.

Despite Pham’s explicit de-emphasis on the power of his written words, he structures his narrative in ways that underscore the cyclical nature of both his spiritual and physical journeys. Throughout his narrative, Pham intricately weaves the stories of his family in with his own. Interestingly, he does not begin at the immigrant’s tale, but rather, with his family’s roots in Vietnam. In many of these “memories,” he tells the story outside of his own experience and journey, recalling the stories his father tells to him—his “rarest pearls of wisdom.” It’s significant that while Mura chooses to integrate his memories of his father inextricably into his own narrative, Pham makes clear distinctions between the
stories/experiences of his family and his own. Further, he distances himself even from his own memories by presenting them in the third person, allowing us to see not only the tenuousness of his individual perspective, but to also imagine the ways in which his experience might have impacted those whom he loves.

At the same time that Pham acknowledges and privileges the individuality of perception and experience, attempting to honor the experiences of his family outside of their meaning to himself, he, at the same time, seems to see the inextricable relationship between these individual experiences—the ways in which the actions of one impact the actions of many, the ways in which legacies of violence, of silence, and of shame are passed from one person to the next. Pham does not shy away from these overlaps. Instead, he embraces them, and embraces the margins. Again, his narrative form reveals this, despite his de-privileging of the writing process itself in his text. Each chapter is titled with a compound noun, often two seemingly incongruous concepts, from “Exile-Pilgrim” to “Jungle-Station” to “Harlot-Heroine.” The meaning of the hyphen is not lost on those Asian Americans who consciously removed them from their Asian American identities in order to assert the “American” as the identity, the person, the noun, with “Asian” as the descriptor. That Pham plays with language in ways that extend beyond these signs of nation and ancestry suggests he’s exploring much deeper, multi-faceted aspects to his identity. Indeed, as the chapters progress, we see titles such as “Father-Son” and “Chi-Me,” suggesting the extent
to which the memories and stories of his father and of Chi are inseparable from his own identity.

At the same time, with these hyphens, Pham seems to reject the tensions between a Vietnamese identity and an American one, opting instead for a seeming cosmopolitan disassociation. Having gone to Vietnam to remember what he'd "long forgotten" (101), he instead finds that "everything has changed. [His] roots have turned to dust. Nothing here to bind [him]" (161). Confronted with this "foreign place" (101), this distance between his own memory and Vietnam's current realities, Pham opts to "flow along, not caring that [he] ought to seek out more Vietnamese, meet as many of them as [he] can, to learn all our differences and similarities" (284). Instead, he "thrives on the camaraderie and the adventurous spirit of other Western tourists, comfortable in his role as translator, a cultural go-between" (284).

Like Mura, Pham finds a certain freedom in releasing the tension between America and Vietnam. Pham locates himself in the borders, comfortable with the margins and with ambiguity. In the final passage of his narrative, upon meeting an old woman enjoying the peace of the open sea, he chooses not to speak, not to "remind her of [their] shared history," seeking instead to enjoy his "anonymity," inviting her to "interpret [his] half-truths, . . . for I am a mover of betweens" (339). In this moment, Pham asserts his ultimate revelation: "I am quick and deft, for there is no greater fear than the fear of being caught wanting to belong. I am a
chameleon, and the best chameleon has no center, no truer sense of self than what he is in the instant" (339).

While this statement may seem a rejection of collectivity, of citizenship, of public self tied to nation, Pham seems to suggest that it is this very ambiguity that defines America, and it is this very ambiguity that most eloquently asserts his belonging on the American landscape. In the end, Pham not only reconciles with Chi, with his Father, and with Vietnam. He ultimately reconciles with America. He finds that he misses the “white, the black, the red, the brown faces of America . . . the varied shapes, their tumultuous diversity, their idealistic search for racial equality.” Through a spiritual and physical adventure both inward and outward, Pham’s “search for roots . . . becomes [his] search for home—a place I know best even though there are those who would have me believe otherwise” (337). This “home” is America.

Catfish and Mandala, then, is a writing of personal experience and personal stories, but not individualized ones. While Mura’s revelation is a freeing disconnection from national, political, and familial legacies, privileging instead a focus on the self, Pham’s text posits a close interconnectedness between ourselves, our families, our communities, and our nations. Having located himself in a such a circle of relationships, Pham achieves not a global soul, but a global consciousness, a realization of the tenuous borders marking the point at which one’s stories end and another’s begin.
CHAPTER FOUR: *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*

Both Mura and Pham raise compelling questions about the nature of Asian American identity in an era of globalization that challenges traditional boundaries of geography, culture, and shared history. For these authors, the act of physical movement, of travel, outside of the American national and cultural landscape provides the means through which each takes a personal journey, confronting the legacies of personal and collective memory in both global and national paradigms. In each of these narratives, the self remains at the forefront of this negotiation and the political, cultural, and human connections Mura and Pham seek center on an ancestral connection that ties directly to their own family legacies and experiences. While critic Cynthia Franklin finds this self-focus troubling, an indulgent privileging of the self over the collective through the specific form of the memoir, I have attempted to show the ways in which this self-focus may be less indicative of a desire to remove the individual from the responsibilities of citizenship and more a specific negotiation of a personal responsibility that demands an understanding of one’s relationship to one’s self, one’s family, one’s community, nation, and finally, world. Indeed, as we have seen, Pham in particular clearly equates his lack of personal responsibility with a lack of political action, and unlike Mura, who stops just short of assuming this political responsibility at a denationalized level, Pham confronts the nature of his own responsibility to Vietnam, seeing the connections between his homeland and his adopted home.
Unlike Franklin or Sau-ling Wong, both of whom see a denationalized association with one’s ancestry as counter-productive to the collectivity of Asian American experience, I find the continued focus on Asia and Asian America as the center of identity politics troubling in a globalized context. Mura and Pham both reveal, indirectly and directly, the economic disparity between nations and individuals, as well as the particular privilege of one’s chosen mobility. But, perhaps due to the personalized narrative strategies the authors employ, both stop short of questioning the larger constructs at work as markets, politics, and cultural systems are denationalized in the process of globalization. While Mura and Pham might imagine their own legacies extended beyond the national borders of America, neither questions the global legacies we collectively leave as participants in this new global paradigm—legacies that ultimately take us well beyond the two-dimensional relationship between American home and Asian homeland.

In this context, Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel Through the Arc of the Rainforest provides a compelling fictional imagining of the connections and disconnections created by the various constructs of globalization: mass communication, mass mobility, and free market capitalism. In doing so, Yamashita also represents a truly expanding definition of Asian American literature in a global context. The novel, described by Yamashita in her author’s note as “perhaps a kind of novela, a Brazilian television soap opera, of the sort which occupies the imagination and national psyche of the Brazilian people,”
follows a seemingly disconnected and eclectic mix of characters. The novel includes a Japanese national with a small ball permanently whirling six inches from his forehead and a three-armed American businessman with an obsession for paper clips and the perfect product, each of whom for his own reasons travels to Brazil, where other characters are living out their own storylines, including a peasant farmer with a magic healing feather; a tumultuous and passionate couple who turn homing pigeons into an international phenomenon; and Chico Paco, a young man for whom a single promise turns into a higher calling. The storylines of Yamashita's text are seemingly disparate, but as all the characters slowly converge, each drawn by the mysterious, miraculous, and profitable powers of the Matacão, a plateau of plastic hidden within the Brazilian rainforest, the text reveals the larger implications of a globalized world in which individuals are connected and disconnected through the unrestricted movement of capital, information, and people.

The text begins by introducing Kazumasa, a Japanese national who, while playing on the beach as a child during a sudden lightening storm, is knocked unconscious by a piece of "flying debris" that becomes permanently "attached," hovering just inches from his forehead. Later, while riding a train as a ticket-taker, Kazumasa discovers that this "tiny sphere whirling on its axis" has a distinct ability to detect breakdowns in the tracks—a discovery that proves beneficial to the Japanese national railway, which hires Kazumasa to "make a complete inspection of the entire national [train] system" (7). Kazumasa
eventually immigrates to Brazil, and thus represents an immigrant experience removed from the American national context. Nonetheless, he recalls familiar tropes of the Asian American, and specifically Chinese American, immigrant narrative. Critic Rachel Lee discusses how Kazumasa’s relationship to the railroad mirrors the oppressive work Chinese immigrants performed to build America’s first coast to coast national rail system—work that has become historically symbolic of not only the Chinese immigrant’s contribution to the American economic landscape but also the anti-Asian sentiment such a contribution provoked with America’s white working class (Lee 14).

This symbolic connection to traditional tropes in Asian American literature is an important one, but while the character of Kazumasa arguably grounds Yamashita’s text within an Asian American literary tradition, by imagining an immigration experience that remains outside the American national paradigm, Yamashita raises more complex questions of global immigration in a setting that extends beyond the national memory and collective consciousness of Asian American identity politics. Kazumasa subverts the traditional immigrant narrative in important ways. Unlike traditional immigrant narratives, in which individuals are typically “pushed” by particular conditions in their home countries and “pulled” by promises of wealth or freedom by the adopted country (America), Kazumasa represents a decidedly different motivation. His choice to move to Brazil represents an unlikely immigrant movement from wealthy first-world country (Japan) to poor third-world nation (Brazil). Kazumasa arguably represents a new
immigrant narrative directly tied to the economics of globalization. Working on the railroads, he is literally a "mobile" worker, who is displaced first by the privatization of a nationally regulated industry and then further displaced by technological advancements of the private corporation, which quickly develops technology to detect railway deterioration at far less cost and greater efficiency than that provided by Kazumasa.

Having been thus displaced, Kazumasa in many ways represents a true cosmopolitan, global perspective in which the individual is increasingly independent of family and homeland—a perspective that is further underscored by the "tiny impudent planet" that upon its arrival almost immediately "destroys the bonds of parent and child, literally setting them a world apart" (5). This "tiny sphere whirling on its axis," which comes to be known simply as "the ball," provides an omniscient narrative voice for the text, providing Yamashita with the means through which to broach globalization's dimensions through multiple, complex perspectives, revealing relationships of connected lives and connected stories—an endeavor that both Mura and Pham attempt, yet both remain constrained by the limits of human experience and memory. The ball knows by "simple clairvoyance" that events "as insignificant as those in a tiny north-eastern coastal town wedged tightly between multicolored dunes, and events as prestigious as those of the great economic capital of the world, New York, would each cast forth an invisible line . . . leading us to a place they would all call the Matacão" (15). Like Pham, who begins to wonder at what point one's stories end
and another's begin, the ball reveals the connections between "all the innocent people we . . . eventually meet [in the book]," all of whom "had a past and stories to tell" (8).

Kazumasa in this way embodies not only a global consciousness, he also represents how this consciousness is enabled by his ability to move freely and easily across the global landscape. He arrives in Brazil and quickly finds work with the Sao Paulo railway system, moves into an apartment, and keeps a maid, Lourdes—a new luxury he is able to experience with his comparative wealth in this third world country. And while Kazumasa at first falls into a role of distant observer, "peer[ing] down from [his] window on the fourteenth floor to observe [his neighbor] Batista's life" (12), experiencing the culture around him much as he would by watching a television in Japan, he does begin to "feel a certain intimacy" with the country and with its people, most of whom, like Lourdes, "seemed to want, at all costs, for him to understand" (36) and to participate in the life around him. As his maid Lourdes prompts, "Come on, Seu Kazumasa! Every day you look down there and watch those people. I watch the soap operas, but you watch those people. I can't get inside a soap opera, but you can go down there. Let's go down!" (37). Kazumasa not only does "go down" and connect with his neighbors, he experiences a sudden stroke of good luck as a result, winning every sort of raffle, lottery, and sweepstakes imaginable—a stroke of luck described as "an immigrant's dream" (42).
Kazumasa is an unassuming character, a “simple and solitary Japanese immigrant with a shy smile and a growing desire to experience more of life” (59), but while he represents a global mobility and endeavor that is pure in its motivations, his character is contrasted in Yamashita’s text by those for whom such a mobility remains inaccessible. When Kazumasa visits Lourdes’ home, he discovers the relative poverty in which she lives compared to him. He meets Lourdes’ son, Rubens, lame, literally unable to move or travel, “his withered legs useless beneath the ragged coverlet” (43). This relationship between poverty and immobility is mirrored when we meet Rubens’ parallel character, Gilberto, an “invalid” who “did not even hope to wander any further” from his rural home. Significantly, both Gilberto and Rubens are connected by their immobility to third world women’s labor, represented by Lourdes’ job as a domestic worker and Gilberto’s grandmother, Dona Maria Creuza, a seamstress whom he helps makes lace ribbon that, by the time it reaches its “final destination—the trim on a woman’s blouse or negligee or the delicate border of a fine linen tablecloth—it had been bought for a hundred times the money [she] had received for it” (26).

This connection between wealth, labor, and mobility becomes more evident through the character of JB Tweep, a three-armed businessman with an obsession for corporate efficiency. Tweep compares with Kazumasa in that they both represent a first world access to third world cultural and physical landscapes and they are both representative of a new type of corporate worker. But the two are different in an important way: as much as Kazumasa embodies a new mobile
worker who is fundamentally disconnected from any specific organizational entity, Tweep, though not particularly loyal to any one company, remains unequivocally tied to a specifically corporate identity. As he admits, "if anyone were to ask him what he was doing in life or what his personal goals were, he would simply answer, 'to find a job'" (31).

Some might argue that Tweep's personal goals are more reflective of the constantly moving and unstable labor conditions of the global marketplace, particularly for mid-level white collar workers. But Tweep's character is not simply one who must constantly seek employment, a victim at the mercy of corporate downsizing and reorganization. He is deeply respectful of the efficiencies that drive such maneuverings. He admires not just a connection between individual and company, he seems to admire a relationship in which the individual is subsumed by the company, located "behind the scenes . . . the anonymous party who held 51 percent of the stock, influenced crucial decisions and sometimes, unknown to others, secretly controlled everything" (125).

Indeed, his third arm, like his penchant for paper clips, is symbolic of a business efficiency that literally becomes a physical part of him, a part he "accept[s] . . . as another might accept ESP, addition of 128K to their random access, or the invention of the wheel" (30).

This equation between his third arm of corporate efficiency and that strong hold of modern transportation, the wheel, seems especially apt because what Tweep ultimately comes to represent when he arrives in Brazil is not the solitary
mobile worker that Kazumasa embodies, but rather the unrestrained movement of capital and corporations across global borders. Tweep's pursuit of the perfect product leads him to the Matacão and when he discovers it, he is anxious that the company, GGG, make its presence felt "immediately." Rather than use the labor resources that are available locally, contributing to the local economy in such a way that is truly beneficial to all, he instead, seeking to "duplicate GGG's New York offices on the Matacão," makes a decision to "move an entire building, all twenty-three floors" along with the entire Human Resources Department, "complete with red-haired Texas-accented clones, re-cloned and flown in" (76). Though Tweep and his relocated first world workers are at first "exasperated . . . that things did not seem to work in this country," that there was "no organization," and "alarmed" at the lack of efficiency, the "sudden listlessness in his third arm" (75), the move ultimately represents the true nature of economic globalization: unlimited access to resources for business and limited economic access for locals.

This economic development has profound impact on the individuals who inhabit the Matacão, and the character that most illustrates this impact is Mané Pena, whose discovery of the magic healing properties of the feather is what drives, ironically, GGG's arrival onto the Matacão. Upon GGG's arrival, Mané has already been displaced by economic development, having been forced by "fires, chain saws, and government bulldozers" into a life of farming from his prior existence of "fishing, tapping rubber, and collecting Brazil nuts" (16)—a living that
was in better balance with the natural environment. He is ultimately not able to farm the Matacão, whose “slick shiny surface” proves infertile, its “tubes . . . tied long ago” (17), and instead, the land is billed a “wonder of the world,” making him displaced not only by economic development, but specifically tourism, as visitors “stomp[ . . . ] over the Matacão,” pursuing the “chic” of getting a tan on its surface (17). Just as Pham realizes, this tourism, though creating an economic sustenance for the local inhabitants, ultimately underscores a chasm between those who travel and those who serve them. After all, Mané’s wife does the “hand-laundering for hotel guests” (18).

Just as economic and cultural development manifests itself in the notion of literacy in both Mura (directly) and Pham (indirectly), so too does it play a role in the development of both the Matacão and the narrative in Yamashita’s text. Indeed, it seems to be the primary way in which those such as Mané Pena can have access to the benefits of such a development. But while literacy in Mura and Pham is defined in purely cultural and academic terms, literacy in Yamashita’s text is closely tied to commercial venture. When Tweep, having been sent on assignment by the GGG International Research and Funding Division, attempts to “collect data on the 9.99 selection of the feather” (75), Mané becomes his expert, positioned to teach even Michelle Mabelle, the ornithologist who “took careful notes on everything [he] had to say” (74). As the feather gains

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3 It’s interesting to note that here again, the earth, like Mura’s America and Pham’s Vietnam, is gendered female, recalling themes of ownership/possession, as well as surfacing additional themes of fertility and procreation.
in popularity, with even the tourists “drawn to the use of the feather” (79), Mané becomes the “feather guru, [who] was so frequently accosted by feather enthusiasts and salespersons about the nature of the feather. . . that he was finally summoned to give classes and lectures at the local college” (79). And while lectures were “not difficult” (79) to Mané, it is the written word that is privileged in this paradigm, as Mané’s lectures are transcribed by his new secretary Carlos, who busily writes down “everything that Mané Pena ever said” (121). The privilege is profound, as it displaces even the expert, the illiterate Mané, who “could not read the transcriptions” (121).

Mané Pena’s expertise is not only transcribed, it is mass communicated, and his rise (and, consequently, GGG’s rise) in prominence is fueled specifically by the global movement of information enabled by technology and mass media—a movement that serves in many ways as a legitimate means through which many of the characters connect with each other. Indeed, Yamashita begins her book from the outset by comparing the stories within it to the connecting properties of television, noting that a “single television in a church or open plaza will gather the people nightly to define and standardize by example the national dress, music, humor, political state, economic malaise, the national dream, despite the fact that Brazil is immense and variegated” (1). When the healing powers of peasant farmer Mané Pena’s feather are “discovered,” he explains the feather’s properties for national television, and though he speaks in a regional “dialect” the reporter strains over, “as if it were another language” (22), he effectively
communicates with, and draws closer to him, a nation of people, including Kazumasa, Lourdes, and Chico Paco, who “watche[s] the same TV report with extreme interest” (24) and to whom the “Matacão seemed to be calling from the great forest” (25).

Mass media becomes a means through which individuals gain both physical and conceptual access to distant locations and in this way serves as a means to a type of travel. Shortly after viewing the television report on Mané Pena, Chico Paco is motivated to walk to the Matacão to give thanks to Saint George after his best friend Gilberto is suddenly able to walk. Having prayed to Saint George for such a miracle, Dona Maria Creuza asks Chico Paco to fulfill her promise that she would walk to the Matacão if her prayers were answered. As Chico Paco begins his pilgrimage (a journey that recalls the spiritual nature of Pham’s “pilgrimage”), he is followed by a radio station crew, which repeats the “recorded interview of events once every hour”—a broadcast that reaches even the “far away . . . seaside town” where his mother, “who [has] no other way of knowing” is able to follow her son’s progress (47). And when Chico finally arrives on the Matacão and meets Mané Pena, he exalts that his own prayers have been answered—that he has fulfilled a desire that began from the “day [he] saw [Mané] on the television” (48).

Contrary to concerns that this globalization of information and communication creates a rootlessness that undermines the collective efforts of individuals toward common ends, this technology in Yamashita text, at least at
first, demonstrates a clear power to connect individuals for just such purposes. The broadcasting of Chico Paco’s pilgrimage draws people together and when the government attempts to remove his shrine to Saint George from the Matacão, not only are those present to witness the event riveted, so too were those not present, as “TV cameras watched, and far away, so did Gilberto and Grandmother Maria Creuza, who were in turn watched by other TV cameras” (50). The effect is dramatic. As Chico continues his pilgrimages on behalf of a nation, “people who never left the shade of their front porches . . . were bound to come out to see the walking angle, the keeper of promises” (91). Though the medium is technological, the result is decidedly grounded in an experience separate from the “fabricated world of their nightly soap operas” (91).

In this way, Yamashita’s text explores the possibilities of globalization and the freedom that can be found through the mobility of people, information, and business. But in Through the Arc of the Rainforest, perhaps no other aspect represents these possibilities as creatively and profoundly as the pigeons raised and trained by Tania and Batista Djapan. The pigeons, which Batista begins to train after saving one (ironically) “just before a bicycle would have pressed its delicate head into the concrete” (13), in many ways represent the ultimate mobility: flight. And the possibilities of this flight come to represent a freedom that is not lost on those who lack it, such as Rubens, who himself becomes interested in pigeons. Anxious to “try his own birds in flight,” he rolls his wheelchair “farther and farther away” (65). Significantly, the notion of freedom
and of movement is tied to the distance one can travel from home. Equally significant, this distance must always be tested against one’s ability to find one’s way back. After all, they are homing pigeons the Batistas and Rubens raise, and when Rubens does get lost in attempting his own “flight” from home (“flying,” as he does, right out of his apartment window), it is his pigeon that “saves” him by returning home with a message.

That the pigeons not only return home, but also return home bearing messages call to mind a movement of information similar to that which is enabled through the developing technologies of global communication. It is this communication that succeeds in bringing together the community, for whom Batista’s messages, which began as “riddles or jokes,” become “more wonderful and exciting than a voice on a telephone” (15). Just as Mané Pena’s speeches grow in legitimacy as they are transcribed and mass communicated, so too do Batista’s messages. As speculation grows as to the messages’ origins, with people “ferret[ing] out sources” as “varied as the Bible, Shakespeare, Buddhist sutras and the Koran” and some going so far as to conclude that “maybe. . . the prize-winning pigeon was literate” (40), Batista gains, through the pigeons, not only a source of freedom, but also a power over language itself. And this freedom and power is gained specifically vis-à-vis the constraining constructs of business and labor. Batista, up until this point, has worked in a “document processing service,” a job for which he “caught buses and subways and scurried all over the city with a vinyl briefcase filled with documents needing signatures on
as many as ten pages of their forms” (11). Through the birds, Batista escapes the “buses and subways” for a freer form of mobility and, as he becomes “aware of the necessity to produce messages of greater profundity” (38), he also gains a language more meaningful than that of commerce, which for him, carries no meaning at all.

While the pigeons serve to liberate Batista from the constraints of corporate labor and language, it is the business potential of the pigeons that, in turn, liberates his wife, Tania. As she discovers ways to profit from their pigeon popularity, she finds that she likes to “haggle over prices to make deals and even watch the inflation index” (92). While we might readily dismiss global capitalism for its negative impact on stratifying labor, and specifically women’s labor, the pigeon business, for Tania, is liberating specifically relative to women’s domestic work—“washing clothing, cooking and sewing”—compared to which it is “so much better” (92). Significantly, Tania’s new freedom is not only reminiscent of communications technology, but also of a physical mobility enabled by such a technology. When she establishes Djapan Pigeon Communications and takes it “international” (137), she does so less for the commercial gain and more the access to global locales it gives her. She weaves the network “farther and farther over the globe” until, “as she had always wished and dreamed of,” she is able to “travel abroad for the company to New York, London, Paris, and Las Vegas” (138).
Such a development in Yamashita’s text suggests that there are, indeed, benefits to the mobilizing constructs of globalization. But the novel is far from an unequivocal endorsement of unconstrained technological, intellectual, and economic development. As each character makes use of and benefits from such developments in some way, so too do they undergo irreversible transformations that ultimately destroy the very relationships and connections between individuals that globalization claims to enable. Just as the homing pigeons symbolically warn, this destruction occurs specifically as characters become “lost,” unable to locate themselves or each other to find their way home. For Tania and Batista, the success of their business and Tania’s subsequent mobility, drive them apart to the point that Batista, “staring at her features” in a newspaper picture, cannot “find the woman he loved within the black and white newsprint” (134). As Mané “develops” intellectually, he “rarely [sees] his family anymore,” until eventually, they are lost to him, having “long since move back to the small town where [his wife] was born” (150). Even Kazumasa, in his own desires to do good by a vague concept of “progress,” is lost when he agrees to help Tweep find new deposits of Matacão plastic. Believing it is a positive scientific venture, he goes “forth for the greater good of society, abandoning his family and friend, thinking that he would be able to explain everything to them in due time” (149).

This loss of intimacy and personal connections manifests itself in the reductive nature of mass communications technology and in this way, the same
technology that once closed distances now extends them as individuals lose their very identity and sense of self in the process. As Mané comments:

Funniest thing. I talk for two, three hours, see. Then when it’s finished, they do something, make it come out ‘bout one-half hour. Speed everything up. That’s how come you can watch a story, guy gets born and dies in one hour. (117)

For Mané, while television has connected his experience to others in important ways, it has also reduced his life to a sound byte, separating him from the experience, the stories, of life itself and ultimately disconnecting him to the point of loneliness and isolation. Just as Pham wonders at the wonderfully tenuous border separating where “one story ends and another begins,” Mané finds:

To have one’s life changed forever, three times, amounted . . . to being like one of those actors on TV who slipped from soap opera to soap opera and channel to channel, being reincarnated into some new character each time. One story had nothing to do with the other except that the actor was the same. (18)

That Mané compares his disconnection to the “high” technologies of television discourse is compelling, for it also mirrors the paradox of expanding communications technology: just as it enables connections across physical distances, indeed, is necessary to connect disconnected people, it cannot replace the intimacy that is fundamentally lost. Though Tania has a lucrative marketing approach to “sell pigeons as monogamous, familial, dependable, and loving creatures, the perfect messenger to send one’s love” (137), the irony is not lost on Batista, who remains convinced that “being able to communicate for free with Tania over thousands of miles [over their Djapan Pigeon Communications network] seemed a lousy trade-off to having her right there in bed with him”
And so, perhaps not surprisingly, in Yamashita’s text, communications technology often fails at the moments when one character attempts to find another. Tweep tries to “make Mané wear a pager or walk around with a mobile phone,” only to have “these things invariably [get] lost or broken” (77). When Kazumasa contacts Tia Carolina in hopes of finding Lourdes, “suddenly, of course, the line [goes] dead” (146).

This loss of human intimacy is profound in *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, but Yamashita explores an even more troubling notion—that as individuals lose their sense of home, their sense of connection to those around them, they turn to the very constructs of globalization for the intimacy they crave. Characters establish relationships with technology, as when Chico Paco makes his pilgrimage. Followed by the radio station, he becomes “grateful for their friendship on that long journey that otherwise would have been quite solitary,” despite the fact that they had “given him nothing for his central role” in their broadcast (119). Similarly, when Mané loses his family to his new life as corporate and academic “guru,” he finds comfort in his television, which “he never turned off anymore” (157). And for Mané, this technology is not only a comfort; it has replaced his very identity, his language, his sense of self. As he watches his own translated lectures on television, in “languages he could not understand,” he watches “his own mouth moving with these strange noises coming out. . . . he stare[s] past the feather at himself—the same toothless grin,
the same grey stubble of unshaved beard, the strange language flowing from his lips” (158).

This type of intimacy manifests itself not only in technological relationships but in business and commercial ones as well. When Kazumasa wins the lottery and becomes well-known for his silver ball and businesses begin to produce and sell “artificial spinning satellites,” buyers find in the product “an inexpressible comfort. . . a relationship . . . unmatched by human or animal counterparts” (59). And when Tweep discovers that Kazumasa, through his cousin Hiro’s secret investments, is now the unwitting majority stockholder for GGG Enterprises, he suggests that as such, it is “incumbent upon us, as well as you, to develop a relationship” (89)—a relationship that is arguably less between Tweep and Kazumasa than between Kazumasa and the corporation.

For Yamashita, this loss of intimacy, though, seems less a direct result of the constructs of globalization themselves than of what individuals choose to do with these constructs—choices that seem to be deeply tied to one’s motivation and purpose. Significantly, this notion of purpose in many ways surfaces the personal sacrifices individuals make as we pursue endeavors that, to us, represent a “higher calling,” whether political, academic, corporate, or spiritual. Chico Paco’s “duty to God and to his fellow human beings” (119) is meaningful both to him and his “disciples,” but when this sense of purpose drives him to establish Radio Chico in order to reach a larger constituency, he becomes responsible less to “human beings” as to anonymous masses. From his control
booth, as he reads the letters that are sent to him, he no longer moves intimately among the people, as he did when his "bus quickly accumulated new passengers, their cargo, their animals—both living and dead, and their hopeless stories of the road" (80).

Within this context and understanding the origins of Chico Paco's trajectory from simple boy to spiritual leader, it is interesting to consider Gilberto, who comes to represent in the text how motivation, purpose, and development specifically impact third world landscapes. If Gilberto as an invalid represents the immobility and unequal access to globalization's advantages, his new mobility might represent the pitfalls of progress that is too eagerly sought and too quickly acquired. When Gilberto comes to visit Chico Paco on the Matacão, he "adapt[s] easily to this new life, probably because, having been an invalid for so many years, taking his first steps coincide with his discovery of the world" (165).

Gilberto's desires, perhaps not surprisingly, are articulated within the constructs of transportation and speed. As Yamashita writes, "after Gilberto could walk, he wanted to run. And then he wanted to run faster and faster and faster" (166). Significantly, Gilberto acquires an insatiable appetite for all modes of movement and travel: "roller skates, an iceboat, a motorcycle, a dune buggy and a skateboard" (166).

Ultimately, Gilberto's unchecked rapid mobility becomes a danger to himself and others, and his desire for speed culminates in a profound example of corporate fantasy replacing reality, of media culture replacing real culture, of the
world reduced and reproduced as commercial products to be bought and sold: Chicolandia. With its “animated animals,” “giant palms [and] dropping orchids,” and its “magnificent scenes” of “Babylonian towers... the Taj Mahal, the docks of Amsterdam, Times Square in New York City, the Miami International Airport, [and] the French Riviera,” among others, Chicolandia provides Gilberto new access, as this “former invalid, who had never known any place other than his birthplace on the multicolored dunes, and now the Matacao, could soon be suddenly anywhere both in time and space” (168). But this “access” is ultimately to nothing more than plastic structures, a commercial venture that turns “mad ideas into forests of paper, high-priority meetings, pressurized schedules, jobs, egos, [and] ulcers” (170).

Just as Mura and Pham explore the notion of memory and legacy, so too does Yamashita. But in Through the Arc of the Rain Forest, Yamashita explores the ways in which our individual motivations and actions create not just personal legacies, but global ones. As Mura and Pham represent a new mobility enabled by the globalization of information, culture, and capitalism—mobility that critics such as Sau-ling Wong warn undermines the collective politics of Asian America—Yamashita’s text is a cautionary tale of a different sort. As her characters pursue endeavors of unrestrained “development” along the planes of mass media, mass commercialism, and “higher” academic culture, their impact is a legacy of environmental destruction. Indeed, the source that brings them together, the Matacao, is itself such a legacy, composed of “non-biodegradable
products in landfill pushed to the ‘virgin areas of the Earth’” (202). And as Tweep and GGG attempt to mine its plastic, we learn that “the chemical runoff from [their] secret technique had been collected and analyzed and found to cause genetic mutation . . . after five generations” (160)—a legacy that perhaps is not so unlike Mura’s vision of the genetic possibilities of procreation, though arguably less hopeful.

The environmental destruction levied within the narrative of Yamashita’s text is significant and is underscored by the human destruction that accompanies it—a human destruction that is perhaps best illustrated by the most tragic of characters, Mané Pena. Mané, who begins the narrative as the most balanced and spiritually restful character, is ultimately the most profoundly impacted by the development that occurs around and within him. In the beginning, he expounds on the “simplicity of the pigeon feather” as a means to “tranquility of the mind” and a privileging of family and human intimacy, noting that “pigeons marry for life . . . stuck to each other forever after” (116). His simplicity extends to his philosophy on travel and movement, believing that if “God had meant people to go faster, he woulda built us with wheels and wings” (120). But as the feather business “gets more complicated” (120), Mané’s life changes dramatically and the changes center specifically on concepts of “progress” vis-à-vis labor and more material desire. As he leaves “the labor of his former days for a different kind of toil,” having to “be places at a specific time. . . .get on airplanes to get there. . . . talking about the same things over and over” (121), he finds that the
“once proper balance of relaxation and excitement in the simple feathers of the parrot or pigeon” become ill-suited to meet his needs, which begin to require “more sophisticated feathers of rarer birds” (121). When a bacteria deadly to humans is found to be carried in feathers, and the government is compelled to kill all the birds of Brazil, the full extent of environmental destruction is realized, and Mané’s expertise is not enough to save them. Ultimately, he succumbs to his own tragic death from the very birds from which he gained spiritual, economic, and intellectual growth.

Ultimately, this environmental legacy that Yamashita envisions extends well beyond the politics of nation and of ethnicity, making her text particularly meaningful in the context of denationalization of Asian American literature and identity politics. As she writes,

This disease, like other diseases, was indiscriminate in its choices; it afflicted rich and poor, young and old, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, clean and dirty, wise and stupid, optimist and pessimist, innocent and cynic, powerful and peon, beatified and atheist, philanthropist and criminal, rational and mad, peaceful and warlike, complex and simple, activist and indifferent, ingénue and pervert, heterosexual and homosexual, and everyone else in between. (182)

For Yamashita, then, and perhaps for us Asian Americanist readers, her tale is a warning and a challenge—that our real concerns about denationalization and globalization might have less to do with a loss of ethnic identity, or national identity, but with a loss of something greater than even ourselves. Mura and Pham may be on the right track, privileging a politic of love and intimacy as a necessary first step toward a politic of collectivity. But ultimately this politic of
love must itself be collective, not on a national or even ethnically diasporic scale, but on a global one. As Kazumasa’s silver ball, born at a time when everyone was “terribly busy, whirling about, panging and heaving, dizzy with the tumult of their ancestral spirits” (3), muses, “now the memory is complete, and I bid you farewell. Whose memory you are asking? Whose indeed” (212). In the end, our stories really are connected, and legacy is neither individualized nor localized, but global in a most profound way.
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