

Representing Discourse

REPRESENTING DISCOURSE: FILM AND PHOTOGRAPHY
IN
SELECTED ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Although many critics have written extensively on the representation of Asian North Americans in popular film, little has been written about the textual representation of film and photography in Asian North American works. This thesis examines the nature of this representation, focussing on the ways that camera technologies are used in selected works — Chuang Hua's *Crossings* (1968), Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), and Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other* (1989) and *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) — to discuss such issues as historiography and identity politics. The wide body of published commentary on the history and sociopolitical significance of camera technologies, while useful, is not always directly applicable in an Asian North American context, for many writers appear to discount the heterogeneous ways that images signify. This is an oversight that suggests such theorizations, to an extent, are still insufficiently historicized and, with a few notable exceptions, have yet to acknowledge adequately the importance of race, gender, and class. This thesis reads the selected works through these theories, as well as the theories through the works, to illustrate how both can inform each other. By examining the figurative evocation of images and their literal incorporation in the texts and film, this thesis also interrogates the relationship between texts and images. The seemingly inevitable pairing of texts with images and vice-versa suggests a complementary and supplementary relationship. Yet texts and images are also more complexly related; co-existing yet frequently incommensurable, texts and images, as presented here, foreground the visualization of a discourse that frequently hides its very constructedness as a strategy of naturalizing and legitimating its own authority. In Asian North American works, the visualization of discourse, likened especially in the works of Kogawa and Trinh to a creative and fictive process, is a counter-hegemonic strategy that historicizes and re-visions what is commonly presented as incontestably “true” and natural.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Acknowledgments	v
List of Illustrations	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter One: “It’s Not How it Was”: Photography and the Construction of “History” in Joy Kogawa’s <i>Obasan</i>	14
Chapter Two: “The Center Shifts”: Film, Photography and <i>Emigré</i> Identities in Chuang Hua’s <i>Crossings</i>	36
Chapter Three: “I am not i”: Writing/Picturing Subjectivities and the Camera Eye in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s <i>Woman, Native, Other</i> and <i>Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam</i>	64
Conclusion	93
Bibliography	95

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS:

Figure 1: Cover Photograph, <i>Obasan</i>	32
Figure 2: “ <i>May My Story Be Beautiful...</i> ”	72
Figure 3: “ <i>Words, Fragments, and Lines...</i> ”	76
Figure 4: “ <i>With time It Is between Me and Myself...</i> ”	88

Introduction: Printing the Image, Imaging Print

Much early work in Asian North American studies tends to take an “images of” approach, criticizing stereotypes of Asian North Americans, particularly in commercial films. Notoriously type-cast, for example, as the asexual Charlie Chan, homosexual Fu Manchu, and hypersexualized Suzie Wong, Asian males and females have figured disturbingly in the popular imagination. The sheer popularity of these stereotypes and their multiple refinements and incarnations points to anxieties about representation, specifically about the ways that the Western Self ought to be imaged in relation to the Eastern Other, or more accurately, about the ways that the Western Self tries to construct its images over and against an orientalized subject that is “othered” in this process of negation. From Frank Chin’s turgid repudiation of the emasculation of Asian American males, to Elaine Kim’s careful, thorough contextualization of Asian American studies, to Eugene Franklin Wong’s more specialized discussion of filmic representations of Asian Americans, there has certainly been no lack of important and perceptive commentary in this area, no lack, that is, of bringing into print analyses of filmic images.

But although image and print have been more closely connected than an exclusive focus on the significance of images would suggest, there has been surprisingly little debate concerning this inter-relationship. Despite the prominent insertion, both literal and figural, of film and photography into Asian North American texts themselves, critics have yet to

analyze in sufficient detail the implications of this inclusion. Commentary has been limited either to brief allusions to the importance of photographs, for example, as one among many forms of historical documentation (Lowe), or restricted to a consideration of pictorial representations in a single novel, notably the use of photos in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* as one source of knowledge among others (Neubeauer), and, more recently, as a means of interrogating the construction of truth in post-modernist fashion (Zackodnik). An extensive examination of the relationship between text and image in Asian North American writing would shift the current critical debate about identity politics, and about one of the most important attendant issues, representation, towards a critique of the *production, negotiation* and *reception* of ethnic identity/ies and, as crucially, towards a critique of the ways that different media represent identity/ies.

There is no lack of historical commentary on photography and film. A good general introduction to the development of camera technologies is Mary Warner Marien's *Photography and its Critics: A Cultural History, 1839-1900*. A more theoretically engaged approach is John Tagg's *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, a study which provides a useful and interesting discussion of the sociopolitical impact of these technologies. Challenging the notion that photographs which are presented as "document" or "evidence" are wholly innocent and disinterested, Tagg's work is a particularly insightful critique of the use and, more frequently, abuse of imaging technologies, technologies which, he argues, have proved increasingly instrumental in disciplining and policing the populations they depict.

Since their inception in 1839, photographic images have been viewed as capturing in objective detail a truth that is “out-there,” or what Barthes later in this century describes as the onto-temporality of the “having-been-there,” the “stupefying evidence of *this is how it was*, giving up, by a precious miracle, a reality from which we are shattered” (1977; 44). This faith in the mechanized recording of a visual “fact,” according to some purists, disqualifies, by definition, photography from the realm of art. Yet the continuing popular faith in the objectivity and transparency of a visually-recorded reality has increasingly been undermined, indeed savagely interrogated, in a manner that can be seen as coincident with the post-modern/-structuralist suspicion accompanying the deconstruction of historiography and contestation of the possibility of a non-discursive “Truth.” John Tagg’s work can be included within this approach, as can, in some respects, Susan Sontag’s influential collection of essays, *On Photography*. Of particular relevance to my analysis in the following chapters is Tagg’s dismissal of the indisputability of the documentary authority of photographs. “[E]very photograph,” Tagg argues, “is the result of specific and, in every sense, significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic and raises the question of the determining level of the material apparatus and of the social practices within which photography takes place” (2). In the context of Asian North American literary studies, the ways that photographic images are forged and refined as “documents” must remain important issues. These issues are particularly relevant in a field which must, it seems, always confront questions of historiography explicitly in ways that, arguably, less sociopolitically-charged areas of literary studies are not required to do.

Yet little attention has been focussed on the ways that race is pictured or (mis)represented in photographs. One of the few critics who have considered this issue is Laura Wexler, who in fact introduces her discussion of this topic by remarking on the critical silence surrounding it. There is no hesitation when it comes to writing on ekphrasis, the written representation of visual representations, Wexler observes, except when race, class and gender enter the picture. According to Wexler,

anekphrasia [insensitivity to the relationship between image and text] is not innocuous. The comparative neglect of critical attention to the raced, classed, and gendered productions of the photographic image is a form of cultural resistance. It represses the antidemocratic potential of photography. The dynamic meanings of cultural forms produced and marketed since the mid-nineteenth century cannot be fully adduced with concurrent attention to the way that those cultural forms have used photography to naturalize and enforce their message. One might even go so far as to say that anakphrasia itself is an institutionalized form of racism and sexism, insofar as photography has always been deeply involved in constituting the discourse of the same. (163)¹

Wexler's "Seeing Sentiment: Photography, Race, and the Innocent Eye" analyzes the photographic representations of African Americans during the nineteenth century in terms of the practices that exclude blacks and consolidate an idealized vision of the family as bourgeois and white.

1. It should be emphasized, however, that the neglect is comparative and by no means total. See, for example, Chapters Five, Six and Seven of Kobena Mercer's *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), which address the issues of race, sexuality and photography. There is also a considerable body of criticism on race and film. bell hooks comes immediately to mind, having written extensively on filmic representations of race in a number of her essays included in such collections as *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), and *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

Marianne Hirsch's work on photographic representations is also one of the few studies sensitive to the ways that race is involved in ideological constructions of "family" as portrayed in photographs. Hirsch's *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* extends what is no doubt one of the most popular ways of talking about photographic technology: its function as a putatively democratizing and domestic/ating "family rite," to borrow Pierre Bourdieu's phrase. Although the photographic depiction of families is a favourite topic among commentators of camera technology, attention has usually focussed on the blurring of private/public boundaries, on its bourgeois affiliations, or on the ways that such cohesiveness and homogeneity are illusory. Critics such as Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag have written widely about the importance of photographic and, to a lesser extent, filmic technologies in producing and reinforcing liberal-humanist, bourgeois discourses about the family; however, they ironically do not take into adequate consideration the sheer heterogeneity of family experiences, instead accepting at face value the very homogeneity striven for in the ideological construction of family. Hirsch's work notably challenges this vision of homogeneity, a vision (in)famously endorsed and promoted by Edward Steiglitz, who curated MOMA's "Family of Man" photographic exhibition, a popular exhibition that reached an even larger (more democratic?) audience when it was subsequently published under the same name in 1959. Extending Barthes's critique of the mythology or the dehistoricization of the images collected in this exhibition,² Hirsch's analysis comments

4. See "The Great Family of Man" in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

further on how these images participate in constructing an ostensibly humanist embrace of a universal “family,” only to betray their failure to flatten difference, to equalize gross socioeconomic incommensurabilities.

This issue, too, is particularly significant in the context of Asian North American literary studies, although it should be noted that the linkage which the other critics observe exists between liberal-humanism, bourgeois privilege and photographic images, does not, again, sufficiently account for the heterogeneity of family experiences, nor the ways that some families and their self-depictions differ from such normative and normativizing discourses. Although some Asian North American family groups, such as the Japanese Canadian family depicted in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, attempt to reintegrate through pictorializations, the pressures that lead to their disintegration in the first place — pressures exerted, for example, by evacuation, internment, dispersal, immigration, exile, and diaspora — cannot be said to register the same *effects*, that is, motivations and repercussions, as these other discourses, even as these pressures appear to result in the documentation of a familiar *content*, family albums and home movies. This is not to suggest, of course, that only Asian North American families have such pressures exerted upon them, only that these pressures have rarely if ever been a focus of analyses of family photographs.

There is no dearth, then, of commentary on camera technologies. There is no hesitation when it comes to talking about images, although there is some silence when it comes to analyzing the relationship between race and image, as well as of text and image. For instance, although family photos are discussed in terms of the blurring of public and private

spheres, what needs to be considered in greater detail is the significance of such a blurring, particularly in terms of race, and with an awareness that text and image always complicate each other at the same time that they are implicated with each other. We might ask: how is the concept of “document” variously, differently, applied in *public* (or official) as opposed to *private* (unofficial) contexts? In other words, can “private” uses of pictures counter, even correct, “public” abuses, so that in this process of re-visioning, the spheres become blurred together as a narrative of dissent, an alternative narrative? Further, do such politicized deployments of images constitute a straightforwardly subversive speech, another type of, to borrow King-Kok Cheung’s phrase, “articulate silence”? Or is this strategy fraught with its own dangers, notably of the kind that visual anthropologists such as Asch (1992) and Kuehnast (1992) warn about when they suggest that film and photography can be, and often are, subjectifying ethnographic tools? As importantly, can the narration of what W.J.T. Mitchell calls the “imagetext” escape entirely the totalizing author-ity implied by popular conceptions of “documentary,” or do efforts to transcend the limitations of such discourses inevitably reinscribe unspoken assumptions about hierarchical knowledge/power relationships?

In attempting to examine these issues, I divide my analysis into three chapters, the first two of which focus on more ostensibly straightforward and intuitive divisions between text and image. Specifically, in the first two chapters, I address the figurative evocation of film and photography, or *ekphrasis*. In the first chapter, I discuss Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), a novel about the evacuation, internment, and dispersal of Japanese Canadians during and

after the Second World War, in which the use of photographs constitutes part of a sustained historiographic critique. My analysis in this section will involve an interrogation of Gary Y. Okihiro's implied assumption in a piece entitled "Family Album History" that photography is a form of narrative especially conducive to the narration of Asian American history (here, obviously also applicable to the Japanese Canadian context), an assumption that seems to find theoretical support in Sontag's view of photography as *memento mori*, "an elegiac art, a twilight art," valued especially by people who desire to reclaim history. Juxtaposed against other, excerpted archival evidence in *Obasan* are described — although not actual — photographs. The absence of such types of documents foregrounds one of the fundamental issues of the novel, the relationship between text and image — an issue that can be overlooked given the lack of image and notable presence of text. Kogawa uses descriptions of photographs to supplement and complement her written narrative at the same time that she draws attention to the dangers of uninformed and careless (mis)readings of both media.

In the second chapter, I examine Chuang Hua's *Crossings* (1968), a novel whose narrative and theme of individual and cultural fragmentation unfolds in terms of the trope of film — a technique through which the protagonist, Fourth Jane, also attempts to order her experiences as an ethnic subject. The use of film in this text also nicely complements Kogawa's *Obasan*: in *Crossings*, the written narrative evokes, in modernist fashion, a home movie, with the family as the central and organizing structure. In *Obasan*, Kogawa painstakingly compiles a family album, a task that can be read as a nostalgic attempt to reclaim a lost, and mourned for, familial unity. In *Crossings*, however, the trope of film, as

opposed to photography, is deliberately employed in order to suggest, in complex ways, the fluidity (rather than the stasis associated with photography) of the transnational migrations, the crossings that the protagonist undertakes in order to reconstitute her family, which has fragmented under the pressures of such physical and cultural dislocations. As part of my analysis, I attempt to reconcile the irony implicit in the fact that the ordering medium, film, performs many of the disordering pressures that compel and necessitate such an ordering in the first place. My reading of *Crossings* will also be informed by Lisa Lowe's influential insights into the "heterogeneity, multiplicity, and hybridity" of Asian North American identity as well as the cautionary notes sounded by critics such as Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong (1995) and Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1997), who observe that Lowe's view of identity construction is also fundamentally affected by class. If the "family," as depicted in family albums, exemplifies — is indeed the product of — bourgeois ideology which, to draw on Walter Benjamin's observations, mechanically reproduces *en masse* visions of itself so efficiently precisely because photographic technology is so easily affordable, how does the "family," as perceived by the *filmic* eye — whose scope at first glance is much more panoramic and possibly less affordable — shift in focus?

In the third chapter, I consider the more literalized incorporation of images into text as well as the inclusion of text in a film, in Trinh T. Minh-ha's work. This incorporation or inclusion might more broadly be approached through the trope of translation, an issue which Trinh addresses in both her films and in her writings. This chapter will concentrate specifically on the inclusion of photographic stills from Trinh's three films in her widely

influential theoretical text, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* with a particular emphasis on the use of images taken from her film *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam* (SVGN), which was released in 1989, the same year that *Woman, Native, Other* was published. Whereas in the first two chapters I concentrate on analyzing textual renderings of images, this chapter also looks at pictorial renderings of text, in order to interrogate more fully the relationship between image and text. This relationship is further complicated by the differences and similarities between types of images, specifically between film — often referred to as *moving* pictures — and photographic *stills*. Trinh's use of photographic stills suggests that stills are not simply an element of film, as André Bazin suggests in "The Ontology of the Photograph," that is, the relationship is not a difference "in degree," as Barthes characterizes it (1977; 45), nor can it be described as "a radical opposition," as Barthes proposes. Rather, such images are more complexly a mediated transfer, a translation. In this chapter, I argue that Trinh's incorporation of photographic stills from her own film productions functions as a complement to, and exemplum of, her written emphasis on the importance of storytelling for marginalized Third World women. For Trinh, film weaves a narrative that ultimately is inextricable from oral or written narratives. To this extent, film is not an alternative to more conventional narratological forms, but rather an addition to them. This is not to suggest, however, that Trinh's project merely extends conventional visions or understandings of imagetexts; her commitment to deconstructing ethnographical filmmaking, particularly to exposing anthropological perspectives as limited and even blind, shows that, although Trinh cannot be said to provide an alternative narrative,

she does provide an alternative to hegemonic discourses through the practice (and *Woman, Native, Other* also demonstrates how such a practice unfolds) of sensitive revisionings. However, in rescripting the ways that film frames “woman, native, other,” Trinh arguably does not escape the discourse she seeks to subvert — an irony that she herself recognizes and acknowledges. Yet Trinh’s awareness of what she describes, in another context, as the triple bind of womanhood, otherness and authorship, puts her in a prime position to comment on the difficulties inherent in defining or grounding subjectivity. Her manipulation of text over/with/against images in SVGN, when considered in the context of her manipulations of images of SVGN in *Woman, Native, Other*, suggests the ultimate irreconcilability and untranslatability of text vis-à-vis image and vice-versa. Such indeterminacy explodes any confidence in what she, in *The Moon Waxes Red*, describes as the “totalizing quest of meaning” and “all-owning spectatorship,” or what we might call the author-ity or tyranny of a subjugating/subjectifying (rather than plainly subjective) notion of authorship.

In my concluding remarks, I consider the ways that viewing selected Asian North American texts from the perspective of film and photography facilitates a more comprehensive commentary on thematic continuities and discontinuities. Although limited to only three texts and one film, my examination of the incorporation of film, photography and text demonstrates, ultimately, the heterogeneities within Asian North American representations. Yet my choice of these particular texts is not meant to suggest an exemplary or representative Asian North American writing and filmmaking; rather, my choices reflect personal interests, and no doubt the shape of my analysis would have shifted according to the

selection. However, I believe, these texts and film, in some measure, work well together within a thesis, insofar as their preoccupations with images reflect on and against each other, illustrating not so much the universality of approaches to images and texts but rather the differences, the heterogeneities, among them. Such heterogeneities are not yet adequately acknowledged in current criticisms of film and photography, nor, I think, are they sufficiently addressed in Asian North American literary studies. This thesis thus aims to reframe the debate in Asian North American literary studies concerning the production and state of individual and cultural ethnic identity — whether nationalist,³ assimilationist,⁴ exilic, or diasporic⁵ — by taking into consideration, as Asian North American writers and

3. In reviews of the Asian American critical tradition, such as the one that King-Kok Cheung provides in her introduction to *An Inter-Ethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, the writings of pioneers such as Frank Chin, Jefferey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, editors of the groundbreaking *Aiiieeeee: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), are characterized as nationalistic. For the *Aiiieeeee* group, American nativity is an essential determinant of what the editors call “Asian American sensibility” as a neither/nor state of being.

4. Early Asian American writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston focussed on claiming America for Asian Americans, a goal that has since been unfairly attacked by critics such as Frank Chin (1990) and Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1993) for its alleged assimilationist perspective. Chin and Lim suggest that the widespread popularity of texts, notably Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, is attributable to the ways that they pander to the tastes of a mainstream, Caucasian readership.

5. In “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences,” (included as a chapter in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*), Lisa Lowe argues that nationalistic and assimilationist models of Asian American identity are restrictive and fail to reflect adequately the recent history of Asian American immigration. Nor do these models sufficiently account for the diversity of identity negotiations. Lowe proposes that critics also consider heterogeneity, hybridity and multiplicity as important terms in debates about identity politics.

filmmakers do, other ways of seeing, reading, and writing.

Chapter One
“It’s Not How it Was”:
Photography and the Construction of “History” in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*

Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* has been described as a work of fiction about the evacuation, internment and dispersal of Japanese Canadians during and after the Second World War. Moreover, as a fiction that acknowledges, in a brief prefatory note, the incorporation of “historical events” and “real persons,” it not surprisingly invites a sustained and highly charged debate about the relationship between history and fiction.¹ Not only does Kogawa incorporate documentary evidence into *Obasan*, but the novel, a work of fiction, has itself been adopted by many, especially by redressal advocates, as a document. Notably, Ed Broadbent, at the time leader of the New Democratic Party, read excerpts from the novel in the House of Commons after the Redress agreement was announced on September 22, 1988. On the one hand, humanist interpretations claim that Kogawa recuperates history through the art of fiction. B.A. St Andrews, for example, praises Kogawa’s efforts to “intertwin[e] historical fact and often rhapsodic fiction” in “reclaiming a Canadian heritage” (30). Marilyn

1. Such debates generally do not revolve around more “traditional” accounts of these experiences, that is, accounts that interpret such documents as newspaper reports, journal entries, oral testimonials, and Orders-in-Council in ways that are not self-consciously creative or artistic as is the case with *Obasan*. Excellent fictionalized histories include Ken Adachi’s *The Enemy that Never Was* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976) and Ann Gomer Sunohara’s *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War* (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1981).

Russell Rose similarly extols Kogawa's "remarkable honest[y] about the need to preserve a kind of humanistic faith in historical writing despite the ambivalences which surround the act" (216). More recently, Rachele Kanefsky argues that Kogawa ultimately eschews perspectivism, suggesting that the "postmodern denial of historical veracity is silencing, debilitating" (216). Yet such readings do not account for the sheer complexity of Kogawa's treatment of fiction and history in a text that problematizes, indeed upsets, the very assumptions of a stable, monological truth on which the dominant, official history legitimates itself — assumptions which have not only proved comfortable and comforting for a complacent, frequently racist majority, but also dangerous and oppressive for ethnic minorities such as Japanese Canadians.

On the other hand, critics such as Gayle Fujita (1985), Donald C. Goellnicht (1989), Manina Jones (1990), King-Kok Cheung (1993), and Scott McFarlane (1995) rebut these humanist claims by positioning *Obasan*, a novel which self-consciously and self-reflexively blurs the distinction between fiction and history, within post-structuralist and post-modernist theories, and, particularly, within the genre of what Linda Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction." According to Hutcheon,

[h]istoriographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. (93)

More important in terms of interpreting *Obasan*, however, is Hutcheon's claim that "historiographic metafiction . . . keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical

context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge” (100).

Understandably, this is a position which discomforts humanists like Kanefsky, who admits to

a sense of the horror of history. Contemporary critics who assert the relativity of all literary expression and, by extension, all lived experience fail to examine the serious and very *real* implications of such an antiassertionist perspective. If experience cannot be formulated with any authority, and no worldview or theory can legitimately speak as truth, then we cut ourselves off from the concrete, rational knowledge that we require in order to resist repeating the mistakes of the past. Thus, while the postmodern conception of history as subjective construct may be engaging in theory, in practice its consequences can be devastating. (12)

Although Kanefsky’s article attempts to refute Goellnicht’s argument² specifically, it could be safely assumed she would also take issue with the implications of McFarlane’s more extreme assertion that:

the intense accounting, recounting, and documentation suggests that the internment cannot be said to exist outside of language. That is to say, what

2. Goellnicht writes that:

No history presents absolute truth, for all history is textualized, and while it may form our concept of past “reality,” inherent in language lies the possibility -- the necessity even -- of manipulation through selection, judgment, choice of rhetorical tropes, and so on, so that “reality” becomes distorted, “truth” biased. (290)

Kanefsky’s passionate objections, although rhetorically compelling, in some respects, are a misreading of Goellnicht’s argument. Indeed, Kanefsky asserts the irrefutability of material experience, claiming that the post-modernist and post-structuralist emphasis on the indeterminacy of signs denies significance to the horrors and injustices of history. Yet Kanefsky does not acknowledge the fact that a careful application of the historiographic approach interrogates, not the *truth* of experience itself, but rather the *truthfulness* of varying and contesting *representations* of experience. Kanefsky’s article, in particular, ignores Goellnicht’s cautious qualification that “[s]uch self-consciousness does not deny the existence of past events, but recognizes that the only way we know these events is through texts, themselves a form of fiction-making” (290).

“really happened” happens as an effect of language. This is why the redress movement was so concerned with control of the media and the language used to reconceive the events of the war. Furthermore, if the internment is an effect of language then it should be understood as a process to be continually negotiated. This would suggest that the uprooting, internment and dispersal of Japanese Canadians were the results of representational struggles that are ongoing. In fact, the political struggle for redress is currently ongoing. (402-03; emphasis added)

In the current debate between humanists and post-modernists/-structuralists, historical “truth” and the means and mode of its articulations are thus continually challenged. Although I cannot presume to resolve the debate in this chapter, I hope to clarify some of the issues by focussing on the ways that photography interrogates truth and its representations. *Obasan* is fundamentally a text that repeatedly returns to the unstable site of this contested historical knowledge, in order to ask: knowledge of whom, by whom, and for whom? Kogawa’s use of photographs, moreover, is one among many ways in which these questions are continually revisited. Indeed, this revisitation is dramatized in the novel by *Obasan*’s frequent return to the family photo-album in response, however inadequate or provisional, to Naomi’s questions about the past. Photographs in the text function to reveal what Hutcheon describes as the porous relationship between fiction and history; that is, photos not only expose the constructedness of truth, they also enable the construction of alternative truths and narratives and thus the constitution of a minority history as counter-history.

In *Obasan* descriptions of photographs are, appropriately enough, framed within a sustained critique of the claim that a single, coherent truth exists — a claim that has been popularly accepted about photographs themselves. As Susan Sontag observes, photographs are perceived as a more authentic record than other accounts. “The *camera* record,” Sontag

writes, “justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened...any photograph — seems to have a more innocent, and therefore accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects” (5-6). Roland Barthes affirms this perception of photographs in his famous claim that the photographic message is denotative rather than connotative, that it lacks a code. In response to the questions he poses for himself — “What is the content of the photographic message? What does the photograph transmit?” — Barthes offers the following explanation:

By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality . . . Certainly the image is not the reality but at least its perfect *analogon* and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph. (1982; 196)

Barthes’s understanding of the relationship between the photographic image and the object it represents appears to be influenced by C.S. Peirce’s analysis of sign systems, an analysis that has since informed film theory as well. In his discussion of signifiers and significations, Peirce distinguishes between three types of relation that exist between a sign and the object it represents: iconic, indexical, and symbolic. In the first, the iconic relation, the sign resembles what it signifies. An indexical relation is based on causality (the object shapes the sign), whereas in a symbol the relation between the sign and the object is arbitrary (as, for example, in Saussure’s definition of language). A photographic image has at once an iconic and indexical relationship to its referent, since it not only *resembles* its object, but is also *produced* by that object, specifically by the impact of light-rays reflected from the object onto light-sensitive film. From a technical perspective, then, the material connection between the photographic image and its physical referent would

suggest that photography is a powerful -- and neutral -- representer of reality.

In the early days of photography, this indexical relationship between sign and referent, as much as its iconic capabilities, was accorded a magical quality. Seemingly the stuff of fantasy in the nineteenth century, photography's perceived ability to capture, to fix, the likeness of a beloved relative, for instance, was also seen as the ability to preserve in time the essence of that person.³ Well into the twentieth century, this faith in the objectivity of the photographic image is affirmed by prominent writers such as the film critic André Bazin, who emphasizes the pun (lost in English translation) on *objectif* and lens. In his influential essay, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin remarks that

The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually, re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage [over other media such as painting] in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. (241)

The use of photographs in official discourse, as *Obasan* exposes, appeals precisely to this claim to accuracy and credibility. It is no accident that photographs function significantly in verifying the authenticity of identity cards, such as the one issued to Naomi's uncle. Yet the apparent faith in the truth-value of photographic images is considerably undermined by the fact that these images frequently require textual supplements. Berenice Abbot's

3. Photography, however, is arguably neutral only to the extent that the camera captures on film what is viewed through the lens. This is a condition obviously complicated by the issue of human agency, by the operator, as Barthes would call him/her, who selects what should be imaged.

declaration that “the *picture* has almost replaced the *word* as a means of communication” (179) may well be premature. Naomi observes that Uncle’s ID card contains the following terse description: “Isamu Nakane #00556. Beside the picture is a signature which looks like ‘McGibbons’ - Inspector, RCMP” (24). The picture alone cannot function sufficiently to contain identity, but neither, Kogawa suggests, can the texts that supplement the image wholly perform this function. Naomi wryly wonders whether her Caucasian date’s rude and invasive questions about her ethnic identity would be fully answered if she were to flash her identity card. “The only thing I carry in my wallet,” she recalls,

is my driver’s licence. I should have something with my picture on it and a statement below that tells me who I am. Megumi Naomi Nakane. Born June 18, 1936, Vancouver British Columbia. Marital status: Old maid. Health: Fine, I suppose. Occupation: School teacher. I’m bored to death with teaching and ready to retire. What else would anyone want to know? Personality: Tense. Is that past or present tense? It’s perpetual tense. (7)

However, within the very passage in which Naomi toys with the possibility of truthful and complete representation, she implies its impossibility. With her play on the word “tense” — a pun whose connotative multiplicity suggests a signifying excess that eludes attempts at totalization — Naomi asserts that an identity card cannot perform its purported function; it cannot completely describe, let alone affix, identity.

This signifying excess is, on the one hand, suggestively indeterminate, but, as critics such as Goellnicht and Cheung have pointed out, it is also often manipulated duplicitously. Old Man Gower lures the young Naomi to his house claiming that her knee is injured. And Aunt Emily exclaims about the treachery of official discourse: ““You know those prisons they sent us to?”” she asks the mature Naomi, “The government called them ‘Interior Housing

Projects'! With language like that you can disguise any crime'" (34).

When photographs are combined with such language, the result can be potent propaganda. Kogawa's deconstruction of official readings of photographs challenges the neutrality and apparent indisputable facticity of "documents." As John Tagg, in his Foucauldian analysis of the deployment and manipulation of photographic images, asserts,

[w]hat is real is not just the material item but also the discursive systems ... That a photograph can come to stand as *evidence*, for example, rests not on a natural or existential fact, but on a social, semiotic process, though this is not to suggest that evidential value is embedded in the print, in an abstract apparatus, or in a particular signifying strategy ... what Barthes [in *Camera Lucida*] calls "evidential force" is a complex historical outcome and is exercised by photographs only within certain institutional practices and within particular historical relations, the investigation of which will take us far from an aesthetic or phenomenological context. (4-5)

In her diary, Aunt Emily makes the following observation:

There was a picture of a young Nisei boy with a metal lunch box and it said he was a spy with a radio transmitter. When the reporting was protested the error was admitted in a tiny line in the classified section at the back where you couldn't see it unless you looked very hard. (85)

Naomi later studies a photograph of Japanese Canadian beet-workers, with the caption "Smiling and Happy," and, responding against the aggression of the connotative message (revisioning the photo), she bitterly revises the dominant account of history by juxtaposing her memories of poverty and hardship in direct opposition to the official "facts about evacuees in Alberta." "'Grinning and happy,' and all smiles standing around a pile of beets?" Naomi questions, then responds: "That is one telling. It's not how it was" (197).

This message, functioning as an alternative caption to the photo, or in effect as an alternative narrative, could describe the very structure of *Obasan*, a novel that contests the

one telling through multiple tellings. Images paired with texts (such as the press photos Naomi scrutinizes) can be read as a double narrative that destabilizes the official, monologic truth claims. Photographs can thus function as a powerful critique of the official account of history at the same time that they provide a revision of that history. Yet the text's relationship to the image is complementary *and* supplementary -- although not always in benign ways. For the text is not necessarily a description, but rather a discursive interpretation and manipulation, of the image.

Barthes describes this relationship as paradoxical: the text confers a connotative code to a denotative message (the image). This formulation, which idealistically privileges images with an ideological innocence does not, however, adequately account for the complex functions of photographs in *Obasan*.⁴ Kogawa's use of photographs is more consistent with Sontag's critique of the popular faith in the photographic image as a transparent and referential transcription of reality. Sontag asserts that

[a]lthough there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are. Those occasions when the taking of photographs is relatively indiscriminating, promiscuous, or self-effacing do not lessen the didacticism of the whole enterprise. This very passivity — and ubiquity — of the photographic record is photography's "message," its aggression. (6-7)

For Sontag, the photographic image no more captures or describes a monologic or "pure"

4. On the other hand, the moralist efforts to redeem the putative integrity of the image through the text also fails to find support in Kogawa's use of photographs. Walter Benjamin's belief that the right caption could "rescue it [the image] from the ravages of modishness and confer upon it a revolutionary use value" (qtd. in Sontag, 107) does not acknowledge the duplicity of language that Kogawa is eager to expose.

reality than words do. Writing on photography, the film critic Siegfried Kracauer notes that the medium is also transformative:

Actually there is no mirror at all. Photographs do not just copy nature but metamorphose it by transferring three-dimensional phenomena to the plane, severing their ties with the surroundings, and substituting black, grey, and white for the given color schemes. Yet if anything defies the idea of a mirror, it is not so much these inevitable transformations -- which may be discounted because in spite of them photographs still preserve the character of compulsory reproductions -- as the way in which we take cognizance of visible reality. (259)

Similarly, for Kogawa, photographic images are as suggestively indeterminate as the texts that accompany them. They are themselves mute yet articulate narratives that, in turn, invite affirming but also contesting textual narratives. In other words, photographic images themselves (even, and perhaps especially, those used for documentary or evidential purposes) create and tell stories at the same time as they invite stories to be told about them. It is perhaps in implicit acknowledgment of this seemingly inevitable yoking of text to image (a text that seeks to explain the elusive narrative promise of the photographic image), that Obasan places the photo of Naomi as a young child clinging to her mother's leg "on the sideboard, propping it against a tin can filled with old pens" (54). A woman of few words herself, Obasan unconsciously invites Naomi to supply the text, to flesh out the stories that the photographic image is bursting to tell.

This particular photographic image significantly lacks any identification on the back that would fix, however arbitrarily, a context outside the one that Naomi supplies from her own memory. Memory, moreover, is linked symbolically to photography, with the function of the former echoing the creative, (re)constituting processes of the latter. Naomi observes,

“If I search the caverns of my mind I come to a *collage of images* — sombre paintings, a fireplace and a mantel clock with a heavy key like a small metal bird that fits in my palm” (50; emphasis added).⁵ These images, then, register in Naomi’s memory as an assemblage, an amalgam of often disparate parts. The text which exposes, in postmodern fashion, truth as discursively constructed, here betrays a modernist nostalgia for the coherence of an irretrievable, prelapsarian past. Studying this photograph of her childhood self and her long-lost mother, Naomi muses on the radical difference between her present and the past she mourns, the past that the photo conjures:

The woman in the picture is frail and shy and the child is equally shy, unable to lift her head. Only fragments relate me to them now, to this young woman, my mother, and me, her infant daughter. Fragments of fragments. Segments of segments. (53)

The incoherence of individual and collective identities are, as Naomi realizes, the desired result of official policy:

We are hammers and chisels in the hands of would-be sculptors, battering the spirit of the sleeping mountain. We are the chips and sand, the fragments of fragments, that fly like arrows from the heart of the rock. We are the silences that speak from stone. We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera and every means of communication, a trainload of eyes covered with mud and spittle. (111)

Naomi’s attempt to order her memories is figured in her efforts to reassemble the family photographs, Aya Obasan’s legacy. Her project also requires her to make sense of Emily’s papers, which the older woman hands to Naomi so quickly that they appear, significantly, “as

5. See Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of the differences between collage and montage.

if they were snapshots” (35). For Naomi, the resemblance of the papers to snapshots hinges upon the way they are handled and the superficiality of her observation of them. That Aunt Emily hands these papers so quickly that Naomi cannot look at them critically (the way that they should be examined) before she must attend to other documents suggests documents alone are not sufficient in mounting this critique, just as snapshots hurriedly glanced at remain meaningless. As Kogawa states to Magdalene Redekop,

I’m finding that so many “facts” are an encumbrance to the fiction -- but they still insist on being present. Documents and facts are intended to direct our prejudiced hearts but rarely provide direction by themselves. I have boxes and boxes of documents but what I need is vision and vision comes from relationship. Facts bereft of love direct us nowhere. (115)

Many critics tend to privilege either Aunt Emily’s words/writing or Obasan’s silence,⁶ and even those who emphasize the complementary relationship between them have not focussed on Obasan’s contribution as an alternative text in the form of photographs.⁷ To be effective, however, the documents, the public snapshots, must be transformed into family photos, that is, understood and contextualized within the scope of private experience. The legacies of both aunts — both literal photographs and figurative snapshots, snapshots which demand

6. Mason Harris, in “Broken Generations in ‘Obasan’: Inner Conflict and the Destruction of Community” (*Canadian Literature* 12.7 [1990], 41-57), privileges Aunt Emily’s legacy over that of Obasan, arguing that the latter’s offer of family photographs fails to provide any satisfying answer to Naomi’s questions. B.A. St. Andrews similarly faults Obasan’s “tyrannical” silence and interprets the return to family photographs as escapist in nature.

7. See Gayle Fujita’s “‘To Attend the Sound of Stone’: The Sensibility of Silence in *Obasan*.” (*MELUS* 12.3 [1985]: 33-42) and, particularly, King-Kok Cheung’s *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993) for comment on the function of Obasan’s silence as an alternative narrative.

scrupulous re-vision in the way that official history requires critical revision — are fundamental to Naomi's efforts to construct a comprehensible collage out of her memories. And it is this very collage which constitutes minority history, and thus critiques the official, dominant account of that history.

From this perspective, Kogawa's approach to the construction of Canadian history from a "minority" or "marginalized" position strongly resembles Gary Y. Okihiro's notion of a "family album history." In *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, Okihiro contends that the trope of photography and, especially the family album, is particularly appropriate for narrating Asian American history, a contention that also resonates for Japanese Canadian history. As a personal account that bears witness to the everyday, the family album, according to Okihiro, not only connects the individual intimately with the community, it attends to experiences that official accounts deliberately elide:

A family album history is crammed with visual stories and encoded messages that reflect and structure and transmit culture and community. And like the oral tradition of "talk story," family albums help to define a personal identity and locate its place within the social order and to connect that person to others, from one generation to the next, like the exchanging of snapshots among family and friends. (94)

As a collection or assemblage of pictures -- understood in a loose sense, as both private family photos and public documents -- the family album, moreover, is an apt dramatization of the collage technique which could describe the structure of the entire text, which, as we have seen, knits together fiction and non-fiction.

Kogawa's incorporation of the family album, in effect, functions to contest the erasure of Japanese Canadian experience from the official history of Canada, and, just as importantly,

to mourn the erasure of a once cohesive Japanese Canadian family and community (for which the family figures as a microcosm), an erasure that official policy deliberately and actively pursued. Aunt Emily tells Naomi that Japanese Americans were more fortunate than Japanese Canadians, because “their property wasn’t liquidated as ours was. And look how quickly the communities reestablished themselves in Los Angeles. We’ve never recovered from the dispersal policy. But of course that was the government’s whole idea -- to make sure we’d never be visible again” (33-4). Naomi later testifies to the facts as she recalls them, as distinct from the facts that official policy attempts to construct. “The fact,” Naomi asserts, “is that families already fractured and separated were permanently destroyed. The choice to go east of the Rockies or to Japan was presented without time for consultation with separated parents and children. Failure to choose was labelled non-cooperation. Throughout the country, the pressure was on” (183). One of the worst consequences of the policy, then, was the devastation of Japanese Canadian families and communities in general. A post-internment Japanese Canadian community was never as strong again. As Naomi laments at the beginning of the text, “Some families grow on and on through the centuries, hardy and visible and procreative. Others disappear from the earth without a whimper” (21). Naomi herself continues the legacy of infertility begun, it would seem, with her surrogate parents, Aya Obasan and Uncle, who were only able to produce two children who died at birth. Chafing uncomfortably under her students’ questions about her marital status, Naomi ponders, “Why indeed are there two of us [she and Aunt Emily] unmarried in our small family? Must be something in the blood. A crone-prone syndrome” (8). The text, indeed, is haunted by the

absence of Naomi's father and, particularly, by the absence of her mother, who seems to have disappeared mysteriously in Japan.

Given this yearning for the reconstitution of the Japanese Canadian family, it is not surprising that the very first photograph described in the novel is a family photo taken in 1933, a prelapsarian time. "They [the Katos and the Nakanes] look rather humourless," observes Naomi, "but satisfied with the attention of the camera and its message for the day that all is well. That for ever and ever all is well" (20). Nostalgically, Naomi recalls that

My parents, like two needles, knit the families carefully into one blanket. Every event was a warm-water wash, drawing us all closer till the fibre of our lives became an impenetrable mesh . . . We were the original "togetherness" people. (20)

Naomi's handling of family photos, however, is more than simply a replication of what Marianne Hirsch calls "the human family romance," or an unproblematic affirmation of Pierre Bourdieu's well-known notion of photography as a "family rite"; that is, Naomi does not succumb to sentimentality. Rather, she qualifies the photographic message, "that for ever and ever all is well," with her awareness that "it isn't, of course. Even my eleven-year-olds know that you can't 'capture life's precious moments,' as they say in the camera ads" (20). Kogawa's use of family photos, in other words, is not a straightforward endorsement of the myth of the cohesive bourgeois family, whose consolidation, as Hirsch, Bourdieu and Sontag have argued, is effected through family photos at the historical moment when the bourgeois family becomes disunified. What concerns Kogawa instead is something that none of these theorists adequately addresses: the disunification by violence of the ethnic family and of ethnic communities. Naomi's sense of cohesiveness, the loss of which she mourns in the text, is

devastated by the evacuation, internment, and dispersal which cruelly separated families and effectively destroyed the hope for a reconstituted Japanese American community after the Second World War.

To this extent, Kogawa's figurative evocation of the family album to narrate Japanese Canadian history is consistent with Sontag's view of photography as *memento mori*, specifically her claim that photography is an "elegiac art, a twilight art" (15), especially treasured by people who have been robbed of their past. The framing of photographs in a family album, or within a fictionalized history that symbolically emulates an album, accordingly attempts to recover and memorialize that lost past, even if it must acknowledge, as Naomi does here, the ultimate irretrievability of cohesiveness. Family photos in *Obasan* not only are themselves elegiac, they also provide some solace to mourners. Immediately after Naomi first recognizes the irrevocable fact of her father's death, she studies the photograph of his burial (211); and Obasan clings to her recently deceased husband's ID card, as though his image substitutes, however inadequately, for his physical presence.

Photographs in this text, indeed, frequently function as compelling, yet also problematic, substitutes for the absent subjects of these images. Looking at the photo of the original "togetherness" people, for example, Naomi is particularly attentive to the way eyes are shown, as though to foreground the interpretative process, the complexity, that is, of "reading" photos. Although Aunt Emily here is portrayed "squinting so that the whites show under the iris, giving her an expression of concentration and determination," Naomi observes that "Mother is a fragile presence" (19). According to Obasan, Mother's eyes "were sketched

in by the photographer because she was always blinking when pictures were being taken” (19).

If eyes function as a trope for the reading — the hermeneutic — process, why do we have here their absence, and, as importantly, their forced presence? The photographer’s artistic manipulation of the image may exemplify the kind of aggression that Sontag discusses. This aggression, and more importantly, the image which is its result, attest profoundly to the ethics of both reading and constructing photographic narratives, or reading and writing minority histories. A direct engagement is not always the most ethical one. There is, indeed, more than one method of narration. Naomi wonders, for example,

Who is it who teaches me that in the language of eyes a stare is an invasion and a reproach? Grandma Kato? Obasan? Uncle? Mother? Each one, raised in Japan, speaks the same language; but Aunt Emily and Father, born and raised in Canada, are visually bilingual. I too learn the second language. (47)

In this context, the physical *absence* of photos — in a text that so self-consciously and scrupulously reproduces other, written, forms of documentation — is all the more conspicuous. On the one hand, language, as we have seen, necessarily, it seems almost inevitably, supplements photos in the frequently disappointed effort to comprehend identity fully. That photos in *Obasan* are, on the other hand, solely evoked through language, suggests that the issue of representation is further underscored; the effect of not having these described images to view is to draw attention to the images’ constructedness in the language that Kogawa employs, as well as in the discourses that were mobilized around them in the first place. Because Kogawa has not commented on why she chose to reproduce written documents and not archival photographs, I cannot speculate on her intentions but rather on

the effect of this decision. In *Obasan*, images unsupplemented by text could invite cursory glances rather than the kind of serious scrutiny Kogawa argues for, that is, a carefully engaged and, moreover, critical contemplation of the connotative message. Accordingly, the absence of literal photos, and the presence of their figurative representations, further underscores the ethical imperative of reading carefully, with the consciousness that images and texts are the result of discourses.⁸

This is a message that Penguin, Kogawa's publisher, ironically seems to have missed. In the 1983 paperback reprint of *Obasan*, the front cover provides the photograph, presumably of the young Naomi, which Kogawa so conspicuously withholds throughout her narrative (Figure 1).⁹ In this picture, a young girl with a doll stares out of a filmy window of a train compartment. As McFarlane argues, this photograph, decontextualized from the rest of the narrative, and paired with the testimonial, "A moving novel of a time and a suffering we have tried to forget," orientalizes, however inadvertently, Japanese Canadians by presenting them as stereotypically childlike and inscrutable. It would seem that Penguin also endorses the humanist perspective by including a testimony that suggests that in reading this novel, "we" will remember the past. But, as McFarlane is correct in asking, who are "we"? Who is Penguin speaking about, or, perhaps more accurately, who

8. If photos *were* physically present, the message, that there is an ethical imperative in reading texts and images carefully, might well be the same. I am suggesting, however, that the effect of withholding images, instead of merely constructing them in language, is to make visible what many images hide: the discourses that underwrite their very constructedness.

9. I include Penguin's photograph in order to illustrate my point. In doing so I am, however, aware that I could be accused of reproducing Penguin's discourse.

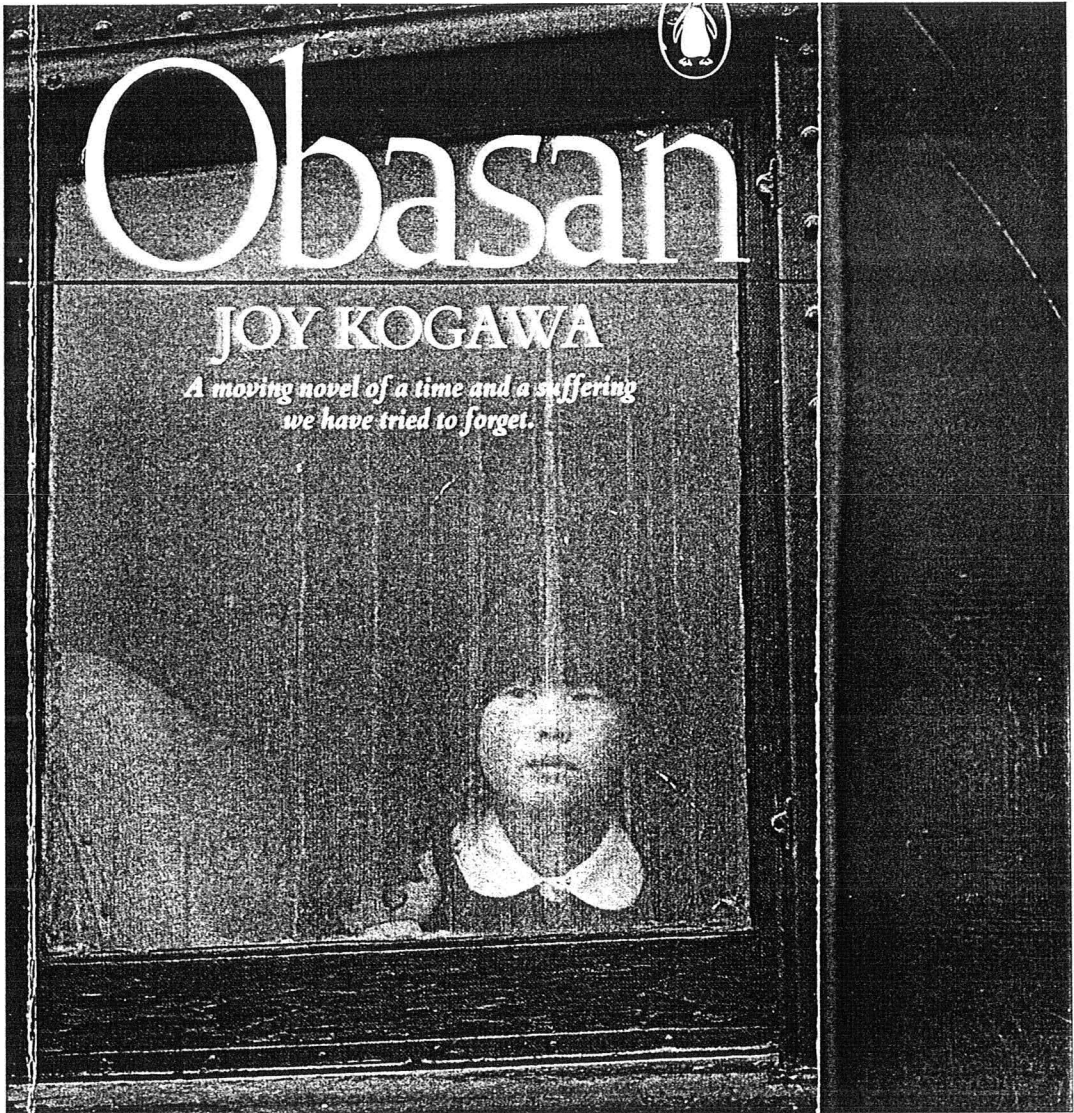


Figure 1

is Penguin speaking for? If that imprecise “we” is intended to suggest “Canadians” in general, a conflation of majority perspectives (including, presumably, those active in suppressing other perspectives) with the experiences of *Japanese Canadians*, then it would appear that consciences are ultimately absolved in the act of reading and, apparently, recuperating this fictionalized history. After all, “we” become united in guilt and forgiveness. Yet, clearly, there is a danger in subsuming Japanese Canadian experiences so smoothly and easily into an ostensibly homogenous identity; for this is a move toward another kind of elision, similar in effect to the disenfranchisement of Japanese Canadians depicted in the text.

Penguin likely intended the visual evocation of the child on a train to illustrate the scene from the text in which Naomi and what remains of her family are transported to Slocan (Chapter 15). On the other hand, the photograph, in depicting a train journey, also suggests that the text should be interpreted as a *Bildungsroman*, a developmental novel in which historical memory (as opposed to forgetting) is the *telos* that marks individual and collective maturity. Indeed, this is the way that Kanefsky reads the text. In her interpretative struggle with the relationship between history and fiction, Kanefsky posits that Naomi’s maturation involves a confrontation with historical perspectivism and indeterminacy -- both of which negatively result in the loss of agency -- which is ultimately (and this is where Kanefsky would suggest the historical subject becomes fully adult) eschewed in favour of a humanist embrace of the essential, material truth. Although Kogawa’s text contains elements commonly associated with the *Bildungsroman* genre, the kind of characterization that Kanefsky provides is perhaps too neat and simplistic to describe *Obasan* adequately. For *Obasan*, as I have tried

to show in this chapter, can also be seen as structured, albeit loosely, as a metaphorical family album, an album which Naomi painfully and painstakingly attempts to make coherent throughout the narrative. This album, however, is not progressive. Moreover, the family album tries to incorporate experiences in order to comprehend, rather than overcome, them, as a traditional *Bildungsroman* hero(ine) would attempt to do.

To view Kogawa's text strictly as a *Bildungsroman*, in the way that Penguin's photograph arguably invites us to do, and in the way that Kanefsky in fact does, risks reinscribing the very discourses that Kogawa is so intent on exposing. The *Bildungsroman*, in other words, is often the way that monumental accounts of history are constructed. As Lisa Lowe argues, the "link between historical narratives of the U.S. nation and novelistic narratives of the individual is mediated by adherence to a realist aesthetic, a fetishized concept of development, and the narration of a single, unified subject" (107). Situating *Obasan* exclusively within the *Bildungsroman* tradition and within a humanist frame of reference fails, then, to account for the ways that Kogawa attempts to write outside, to deconstruct, a traditionalist understanding of "history."

Although structuring *Obasan* as a metaphorical family album risks privatizing history, Kogawa's decision is ultimately strategic: the family album could be said, indeed, to compensate for the way that "public" discourses have attempted to destroy the "private" sphere of family. During and for several years after the Second World War, the Canadian government, in constructing an outright lie about public security in which interests private citizens were to be sacrificed, did not give Japanese Canadians a choice. The narrative of

evacuation, internment and dispersal, then, has since the beginning blurred the distinction between public and private spheres, only, in the end, to subsume the private into the public. To present a privatized, individualized account of this period is not to overlook the aggregate experiences of Japanese Canadians, nor, on the other hand, is it an attempt to be representative, to incorporate all of these experiences. Rather, Kogawa's aim is to recuperate not history in a monolithic sense or even a humanist sense, but rather the private sense of suffering and survival. Even as the notion of a family album history privatizes the public, and publicizes the private, what we are left with is a strong sense of the one area which the officials, who operated strictly in the public realm, brutally ignored: the private. Kogawa argues, rather, for a sympathetic and empathetic sensitivity in reading and writing dominant versus minority histories in re-visioning the multiple histories. Ultimately, *Obasan* demonstrates the need for an acknowledgment of, and respect for, the complexity and multifariousness of human experiences, neither of which can be adequately served in the conventional insistence of a single "truth" that all too often turns out to be an exclusionary "fiction." Kogawa's commitment to exposing the discourses which have remained hidden for too long may, in part, explain her decision to restrict the scope of her historiographic metafiction to textual representations of the visual images that have for too long also hidden under the facade of truth, evidence, and document.

Chapter Two:
**“The Center Shifts”: Film, Photography and *Emigré* Identities
in Chuang Hua’s *Crossings***

Whereas *Obasan* has received quite a lot of mainstream and critical attention, Chuang Hua’s *Crossings*, first published in 1968, has received very little. Amy Ling’s efforts to promote the novel have met with only mixed success at best, despite the current critical interest in examining the very kind of negotiations of identity — as exilic and diasporic — in which the protagonist, Fourth Jane, engages. Although *Crossings* is now published by Northeastern University Press, thus far it has not received the kind of extensive study that other Chinese American texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), for example, have managed to secure. And this despite the fact that Chuang Hua, as Ling points out in the forward to the 1986 edition of *Crossings*, can be seen as Kingston’s literary “precursor” (1). Ling is the first and easily the most ardent champion of the text’s merits, extolling its virtues as a “Chinamerican gem” (1982; 36), and hailing it in her Forward as “a major landmark in Asian American literature” (4). Moreover, in reflecting the influence of Western literary movements, Ling argues the book can be considered “Asian America’s first modernist novel” (2). For Ling, this literary modernism is evident in the novel’s form, a form which she describes as “experimental,” in which

the fragmented narrative is a collage of dreams, nightmares, autobiography, and fantasy. Its prose is often elegantly spare, its punctuation and syntax

often unconventional. Quotation marks may be omitted; fragments and run-on sentences abound, and characters are often referred to only by pronoun. Spatial and temporal settings are unspecified, and chronological leaps may occur even within a single paragraph. Still, internal clues and final revelations ultimately enable the reader to see the picture whole. (2)

Yet although Ling does not comment on Fourth Jane's cultural allegiances beyond suggesting that the text strives toward a modernist coherence grounded in familial love — a striving akin to Naomi Nakane's nostalgic yearning in *Obasan* — Ling, arguably, emphasizes an exclusively Western frame of reference in stressing the text's literary modernism, and thus neglecting to pay attention to the ways that the text is also informed by Eastern sensibilities.

If Ling's remarks on the novel can be considered an occidental approach (and this may well be an oversimplification), Lesley Chin Douglass's analysis re-orientates the terms of the discussion, emphasizing instead an Eastern frame of reference for which Fourth Jane yearns and upon which *Crossings* is also structured. Douglass asks, "Must it [the text] be structured so that a certain artistic coherence or unity, as well as a 'universally' shared (Western?) mythical consciousness prevails over paradox or disunity?" (54). According to Douglass, *Crossings*, "in a strongly silent and poignant way, is full of China" (54), palpably influenced by the philosophical teachings of the *Tao Te Ching* (which is mentioned twice in the text). Although Douglass concedes the validity of describing *Crossings* as "modernist," and is cautious of the way she juxtaposes Western (modernist) and Eastern (Taoist) sensibilities, she ultimately claims that the text is more fully informed by an eschewal of the former for the latter:

If we look for Chinese influences in the literary form and philosophical

underpinnings of *Crossings* . . . Fourth Jane's seemingly desultory lifestyle, her curiously objective stance, the fragmented narrative and juxtaposition of images — all associated with Euro-American modernism — assume a new significance. We see, then, not a Chinese-American, hopelessly dislocated and alienated from both her Chinese and her American selves, a person seeking solace in an art which seems similarly dislocated, alienated and isolated; rather, we see an individual attempting to rediscover a Chinese identity and a way of *embracing* life, through a Taoist tradition which has been lost to her. (55)

This brief review of the brief critical commentary on *Crossings* suggests, in an admittedly summary fashion, the polar ways in which Fourth Jane's relations with East and West has been viewed. In this chapter, I aim to locate the text somewhere between these two poles; indeed, the tropes of film and photography, suggestive of dislocation and groundedness, situate the text within a vexed relation somewhere *between* the worlds of East and West.

One of the most central scenes of the novel crystallizes, for example, the nature of Fourth Jane's identity crisis — a crisis that cannot be resolved meaningfully, nor so easily, through a nostalgic reclamation of an ostensibly authentic Chinese tradition, nor by an adoption of a recognizably Western, formalist aesthetic. In this episode, Fourth Jane's French lover presumptuously informs her she belongs in China, a country which, he says, “would welcome you with open arms” simply because “you're Chinese.” To his Eurocentric and orientalist mind (a point to which I will return later), Fourth Jane, as a woman of colour, is an outsider in his country and even in America. “You have to go back,” he tells her, “You have no future in America. You are an exile in America as you are an exile here.” Yet, as Fourth Jane recognizes, although she is born in China, it is “simple-minded” (121) to assume that the issue can be settled so easily. Her subsequent remarks to her lover function to

explode his childish argument about where she does or does not belong, for as she asserts,

I couldn't live without America. It's a part of me by now. For years I used to think I was dying in America because I did not have China. Quite unexpectedly one day it ended when I realized I had it [China] in me and not being able to be there physically no longer mattered. Those wasted years when I denied America because I had lost China. In my mind I expelled myself from both. (121)

Even though she admits she “[s]elfishly ... wanted both my worlds” (122), Fourth Jane instead must contend with the fact that she remains “between worlds”; that is, Fourth Jane’s identity remains neither fixed nor in stasis, but rather in a constant state of flux, negotiation, and contestation. To this extent, *Crossings* deserves examination in the light of the direction recently taken in Asian North American studies towards theorizing identity formation, a direction that expands the initial “strategic essentialist” (to borrow Gayatri Spivak’s oft-quoted phrase) claiming of America for Asian Americans to include notions of what Lisa Lowe describes as “heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity” — notions that must also be considered alongside other factors such as class and gender which have not yet received the attention they are due. Not only can these new theorizations of Asian American identity as diasporic and exilic, as opposed to exclusively assimilationist or nationalist self-conceptualizations, benefit interpretations of a text that was written and first published before the term “Asian America” was recognized, but *Crossings* can in turn contribute to, indeed expand, complicate, and even trouble, the parameters of these current theoretical debates.

Ling’s comments on the novel’s form can be fruitfully developed in the light of these contemporary discussions of identity politics. Particularly useful are her observation, quoted

earlier, that the fragmented narrative is comprised of “a collage of dreams, nightmares, autobiography, and fantasy” (Forward 2), and her remark on the prominence in *Crossings* of the juxtaposition of disparate, conflicting scenes, a technique that, as Ling points out, “we are accustomed to in cinema but encounter less frequently on the printed page” (1982; 33). This latter technique is, indeed, borrowed from cinematography and is properly known as montage. Chuang Hua’s use of this technique, when fully considered, as I aim to do in this chapter, in terms of other, frequent references to film suggests that film centers — as well as de-centers — the narrative, and, moreover, structures the text formally and thematically. In *Crossings*, the trope of film would seem to dramatize aptly the very migrations evoked by the title of the novel, and which are constantly undertaken by Fourth Jane and her family. On the one hand, the medium seems to be appropriate for depicting what Lisa Lowe, in her brief remarks on Peter Wang’s *Great Wall*, terms “filmic ‘migrations’” (91), or the shuttling back and forth between two (or more, as in the case of Fourth Jane and her family) geographic and cultural sites. But the text, on the other hand, shows that such crossings and re-crossings are not as “easy” as Lowe, in her focus on Wang’s film (which depicts a family on a tourist visit to the “homeland”) makes them out to be. As a trope, then, film in *Crossings* lends itself well to complicating issues that attend the formation of one aspect of Chinese American identity as an unstable, continually shifting series of negotiations.

When Amy Ling uses the term “collage” to describe Chuang Hua’s hybrid literary style, she is invoking a useful, and, to the extent that the term suggests the multiplicity of techniques, an apt metaphor. Strictly speaking, however, *Crossings* exemplifies montage

more than collage. Although frequently conflated in literary studies, there are important differences between the two, and, in film studies at least, the techniques have remained discrete. In his analysis of modernist poetry, Andrew M. Clearfield differentiates between literary montage and collage, noting that the former involves “a free-flowing subjective temporality,” whereas the latter is marked by a “geometric and static spatiality” (9). For Clearfield, literary montage and collage are most obviously distinguishable in terms of the opposition between motion and stillness, or what he describes as montage’s “*succession* of visually disconnected images, which, cut together, tell a coherent story or furnish some sort of ironic commentary upon that story” (8; my emphasis), as distinct from the “spatialization of all forms, which denies all succession . . . and replaces it with mere juxtaposition” or the “totally static universe” (8) associated with collage. It would seem appropriate, then, that montage would, as Clearfield observes, be “native to the cinema” (10).

In film theory, Russian formalists emphasize the importance of montage techniques. Sergei Eisenstein is particularly famous for his insistence on the primacy of montage, asserting, for example, that “[c]inematography is, first and foremost, montage” (28).¹ For Eisenstein, the basic elements of film are shot and montage. But whereas collage, at least as Clearfield defines it, is a juxtaposition of extrinsic features, montage, according to Eisenstein,

1. By no means is Eisenstein’s evaluation of montage unchallenged. A couple of decades later, André Bazin famously argued that although montage is important, other techniques should also be considered. For a useful survey of the most influential critical work in film theory, see J. Dudley Andrew’s *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (London; Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, 1976).

is a *superimposition* of intrinsic elements (such as images). In his essay “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form,” Eisenstein argues that “montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots — even shots opposite to one another” (49). In *Crossings*, a notable example occurs in the scene in which Fourth Jane and the Frenchman discuss the status of their relationship. As Ling points out, the understated tension is foregrounded by the violent clamour of the Chinese opera — a clamour that is figuratively evoked but which cannot literally be heard in the Paris apartment where the discussion occurs. It is this superimposition, Eisenstein explains, that results in the sense of motion:

The incongruence in contour of the first picture — already impressed on the mind — with the subsequently perceived second picture engenders, in conflict, the feeling of motion. Degree of congruence determines intensity of impression, and determines that tension which becomes the real element of authentic rhythm. (50)

Essential to Eisenstein’s conception of the various types of montage is not only the way incongruity can achieve the impression of movement, but also the way that such incongruity is resolved or synthesized by viewers, who impose a sense of order through metaphor. To this extent, montage, as Eisenstein and as Clearfield theorize it, embodies a recognizably modernist sensibility in its progression from incoherence and disconnection to coherence and connection.

Amy Ling’s remarks on the modernist yearning towards order in *Crossings* can thus be extended further. For *Crossings* depicts a tension between stasis and mobility, photography and film, collage and montage. It is no accident that Fourth Jane’s first encounter with the French journalist who will become her lover centers on mobility,

particularly Fourth Jane's understated sense of urgency to move from one point to another, in this episode, from the bus-stop to her dentist's office in time for her appointment. This emphasis on movement is paired almost immediately, although rather subtly, with film, for the Frenchman who at once stalls her journey (by inadvertently making her miss her bus) only to facilitate it (by hailing a taxi) writes about films and, as we later learn, is involved on some level with making them too. Similarly, although the Frenchman's association with film arguably draws Fourth Jane to him, film is what frequently keeps them apart. Their first meeting is delayed by his job, or so Fourth Jane reasons. When he fails to contact her, she wonders "if he was still making his film by the sea" (20). And although they plan on their first date, significantly, to see a film, they eventually decide not to do so at all.

Even during their first meeting, the Frenchman becomes tied to the complex ways that film is paired with physical (im)mobility as well as psychological or psychical torpor in the text. Despite remaining nameless throughout the narrative, — in much the same way that Fifth James's Caucasian wife is not accorded a proper name — the Frenchman associates himself with mobility. "You won't remember me under my name," he tells Fourth Jane, "I'll put it [in your phonebook] under T for taxi" (12). Symbolically, the encounter at the bus-stop and the subsequent taxi-ride foreground some of the conflicts which occur in the text, particularly the tension between stasis and mobility. Fourth Jane's confusion at the bus-stop, her indecision and hesitancy throughout the scene, suggest that she is not a slickly cosmopolitan or sophisticated traveller, as Ling suggests. For, already we see some of the problems that attend a transient or restless existence. Watched by the Frenchman, Fourth

Jane consults her guidebook, contemplates taking a taxi, reconsiders, and finally accepts his offer to help her. Yet the Frenchman, whose connection with film would suggest that he knows a little more than she about the artistic representation of mobility, is responsible for her further sense of disorientation. Not only does he misread the guidebook, but the journey by taxi that they subsequently share is marked by detour, reversal, and indirection.

Based on Fourth Jane's early encounter with someone associated with film, it would seem that this trope functions to de-center her. After all, to get to the Boulevard (near the Square), which is close to where she wants to go, she must pass the Circle, the Frenchman's destination, and the area where she eventually rents her apartment; that is, she hovers around one of the many circles that recur in the text, going around but not quite able to ensconce herself comfortably in its center. The geometric shapes evoked here perhaps are reminiscent of collage, so frequently are circles juxtaposed with and against squares. In a frequently quoted passage, Fourth Jane stands surrounded by the symbols of her nomadic life, "in the center of the square carpet of faded reds greens and blues and whites in which she discerned oases and deserts, scorpions and camels, wanderings and homecomings woven inextricably there" (187). She situates herself, in other words, amidst the motif of travel; the square carpet frames her in a contained sort of chaos. It would appear that the kind of mundane, directed travel which is the context of her first meeting with the Frenchman, is, in a curious way, also directionless, muddled by the confusions and setbacks involved in the journey. That the journey ends with physical injury — Fourth Jane bruises her knee, although her stocking does not tear, a sign that she feels pain beneath an ostensibly invulnerable, impenetrable

facade — suggests that it is also marked by an understated violence which prefigures the emotional injury she endures in her affair with the Frenchman.

The Frenchman and the film with which he is associated, or rather with the type of film (as distinguishable from the other types of film represented in the narrative, the home movie and the Western melodrama), function paradoxically, at once starting and stopping journeys, helping and hindering Fourth Jane. Yet Fourth Jane's attraction to him and his work, his writing and his filmmaking, seems puzzling indeed. Why does she have an affair with a Caucasian man after leaving a relationship with a man who was willing to marry her and whose child she had just aborted, particularly since she had gone to Paris in order, as she tells the Frenchman, "to remove myself from ties at the moment" (121)? Why does she attempt to escape from the confusion in familial responsibilities — established at her birth when her parents gave her a combination of masculine and feminine names, Chuang Hua — that culminates when Dyadya finally accepts Fifth James's Caucasian wife, only to be involved with a Caucasian herself? The Frenchman's namelessness throughout the text, along with that of Fifth James's wife, suggests that although these "barbarians" are indisputably involved with her and her family, Fourth Jane insists on alienating them from her, or rather herself from them. Moreover, the apparent inconsistency or irony suggests that Fourth Jane's relationship with the Frenchman functions to parallel the relationships she had found too muddling to accept, especially her relationship with her domineering father. The events in Paris, then, can be seen as a loose repetition of events in America. Fourth Jane's experiences with the Frenchman constitute not necessarily an escape *from*, but rather, in a sense, an escape *to*, the

conditions that prompted her self-exile in the first place.

The appeal of the Frenchman and the type of experimental, avant-garde film with which he is associated can be further understood by examining the way that Fourth Jane responds to other types of film in her life. In the often confused, and confusing, narrative, one of the most prominent representations of film is the home movie that is shown at Grandmother's eighty-fifth birthday party. Throughout the novel, film not only is associated with the constant journeys that Fourth Jane and her family undertake, from China to England to America, but also with familial unity. Home movies exemplify this construction of a coherent and stable familial identity, in much the same way, as I have shown in my discussion of *Obasan* in Chapter One, that the family photo album does. As Richard Chalfen argues, home movies belong to the "home mode of visual communication"(127), which prioritizes the social characteristics of the communication process over the technical features emphasized in professionally-made feature films. In *Crossings*, this "home mode" consolidates the image of familial solidarity and stability. Notably, this home movie, screened at a birthday party (the pretext, in a sense, for a family reunion) visually represents this solidarity through montage techniques. Family members are not only brought physically together for the celebration, and through Grandmother's blood — a claim that she proudly makes in her pronouncement, "Out of my womb came these generations" (31) — but also symbolically, through the fluid movement of images on the movie screen, images which melt or graft into each other:

An offering to heaven First Nancy's face appeared on the lower left portion of the screen, an apparition *superimposed* on Grandfather's shoulder, unmoving against Grandfather's flickering silent animation, a forlorn face,

round large eyes stared into nothing. Then her head began to turn with agonizing slowness, showing in profile hair cut straight at the ends, parted and combed to one side, clamped together by a large floppy bow tied at the back of the head. The velvet collar of her heavy chesterfield coat lay awkwardly on her narrow shoulders. First Nancy vanished and with her vanished Grandfather interrupted in the middle of a soundless anecdote recounted with the emphatic shakes and nods of the head. (27; emphasis added)

As described in the narrative, the camera's vision is outside the scope of human manipulation, even as it attempts to encompass human experience. Indeed, the camera is shown operating autonomously, as though human hands do not direct its range or focus its attention. Yet the camera's efforts to achieve a democratic vision of familial unity in its representation of the house as a well-protected, well-guarded stronghold, "its clean fortress lines punctuated by black windows" (27), are undermined by its perhaps unwitting illustration of class disparity. In other words, the vision of family connectedness is achieved through a subtle depiction of disconnectedness: whereas members of Fourth Jane's affluent family are privileged with the leisure to view and celebrate, their servants are merely viewed, and labour during the celebrations. For example, Grandfather's triumphant figure, sitting "astride a horse of weatherbeaten stone ... interrupt[ing] his mad dash on horseback, elbows jerking and body heaving, to raise a hand in salute to the camera," is shown incongruously with the "bare-chested coolies, gaunt shoulders weighed down by poles carrying sedan chairs," some of whom "paused to look into the camera before continuing on their slow-swinging way, bodies sagging under the load" (29). The camera levels — to the extent that both privileged and under-privileged classes are represented almost as though they are equal on the same screen — yet ultimately demarcates, class differences.

The ideology of the family is inextricably tied, then, to the issue of access to pictorializing technologies; the picture of familial unity that Fourth Jane's extended family enjoys not only *incorporates* a vision of their economic status, but it also is *achieved* by this ability to purchase the means for the production of this vision in the first place. As noted briefly in Chapter One, Pierre Bourdieu suggests that photography is a bourgeois rite which constructs a bourgeois notion of "family." This is the way that the relationship between the family and camera technology is generally discussed. John Tagg, for example, argues that the democratization of the image — and one of the most photographed images is, not surprisingly, of the family — is made possible through commodity production, that is, through advances in photographic technologies that have made not only the possession of images (photographic portraiture), but, increasingly, the possession of the means of producing these images, inexpensive. The representation of the home movie in *Crossings* underscores, however, not the accessibility of camera technology,— which has been one of the most widely commented on or "recognized" characteristics of such technology — but rather its inaccessibility, in order to show the extent of the privilege that Fourth Jane's family enjoys. Class operates in *Crossings* on multiple levels; Fourth Jane's family can afford the many migrations that result in feelings of dispersal and disconnection as well as the means of recording a movie about home which provides the compensatory and consoling vision of settlement and connection. Moreover, this home movie depicts an exclusive, enclosed solidarity, devoid of a wider, communal sensibility. Notably, Fourth Jane's family remains immobilized within its own protective walls, or mobilizing between countries, not in the

cultural or geographic space of Chinatown, as in other, working-class Chinese American novels such as Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) or Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980).

Fourth Jane's sense of dislocation and alienation is fundamentally connected to issues of class privilege. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong notes (156-59), commenting on the implications of the notion of denationalization on Asian American studies and subjectivities, what should not be neglected from materialist analysis is the concept of a "world citizen" (as problematic as the term remains), or, in the case of *Crossings*, of an affluent *émigré* who possesses the means to travel the world. Fourth Jane's confusion, her feelings of fragmentation, then, is not the easy or fluid adoption of multiplicities, heterogeneities, and hybridities that Lisa Lowe appears to embrace and celebrate, but perhaps, rather, the result of an exilic identity, or self-exile in both senses of the term, that is, a physical exile from "home," whether from China or America, as well as a psychological sense of dislocation or separation.

When she leaves her home in America to escape from the confusion resulting from Dyadya's and Ngmah's conflict concerning the status of Fifth James's wife in the family, Fourth Jane clings nostalgically to the comforting sense of familiarity that the home movie evokes. In this sense, she attempts, however unsuccessfully, to reproduce in France what she feels she has lost in America through Fifth James's marriage to a Caucasian, an act that Fourth Jane feels de-centers her family's enclosed world. For Fourth Jane, the house which the camera had depicted as invulnerable, and the garden wall, which she had believed was

impregnable,² is only weakly fortified after all. The “barbarian” who had “stood outside the barred gates of the wall,” manages, so Fourth Jane reasons, “[a]fter fruitless years of patient search, with gnawing heart ... [to find] a weakness along the immense wall encircling the garden, found, followed, married Fifth James and entered the garden at dusk” (50). This is an incursion on what Fourth Jane believes to be her exclusive territory, — the allusions to Satan entering Eden are clear — the walled, protected prelapsarian home of a purely Chinese family. The presence of the “barbarian” signifies for Fourth Jane the Fall, the collapse of the symbolic great wall of China, as well as an expulsion from this paradisaal family garden. As she tells Dyadya, “I feel a terrible danger crossing. The oneness of you and Ngmah you have built so tightly you can’t undo overnight just to accommodate them” (196-97).

Despite Fourth Jane’s emphasis on family, her own imaginary — a mixture, as I have shown here, of Eastern and Western symbolic references — undermines the notion of a “purely” Chinese family. It may be that the instability of this notion accounts for much of Fourth Jane’s emotional distress. The sense that the disorder and resultant confusion is “splitting the head in two” (196) prompts Fourth Jane to try to escape from the ties that no longer provide her comfort. It is no accident that, in Paris, Fourth Jane decides to rent an apartment in the Circle, as a kind of symbolic gesture towards rebuilding, albeit in relative

2. It is perhaps ironically fitting that Fifth James’s wife manages to break through the ostensibly impenetrable, impregnable barriers that Dyadya and Ngmah had erected against her through her pregnancy. Here, gender manages to overcome the obstacles that race presents — the “barbarian” makes herself worthy of recognition and of a place within the center of the family by producing the first son of the first son.

solitude and with only the Frenchman's undependable, sporadic presence, the circle of the family home.³ Fourth Jane, moreover, ensconces herself within her apartment, objecting to the inconveniences of continental commerce which requires that she go from shop to shop to purchase what she needs for the often elaborate meals that she prepares for her lover, whereas she had been able to order her supplies by telephone in America. Fourth Jane could be said to be enclosing herself in a square within the Circle, within the walls of her apartment, attempting to find, in another country, the walls of her family home.

Her apparent partiality for minimalist decor — hardly any furnishings and an insistence upon white — can also be seen, in a sense, as an effort to reproduce the conditions of familial stability and security that had provided her with so much comfort in the past. Fourth Jane's otherwise strange determination to find, as she tells the Frenchman, “an apartment with white walls and not too much furniture” (11) and her preference for “bare” (12) rooms can be attributed not only to her desire to start anew, but also to fill the physical void of her spartan existence with the familial memories which continue to sustain her.

Indeed, the whiteness of her minimalist apartment is reminiscent of the whiteness of the corridor wall outside Ngmah's bedroom. The description of the wall in the latter space as “eggshell” white, although a common enough colour, significantly suggests the potential for growth contained in blankness, or, less positively, that Fourth Jane will indulge in an infantile retreat. Fourth Jane carries this whiteness with her to Paris; in fact, she is whitened

3. It is unclear whether the walled garden which symbolizes so much to Fourth Jane is a circle or a square.

or emptied, her fingers and bracelet “smeared” (100) with the paint when she retrieves her bracelet from an exposed water pipe that juts out of the wall of the landing. Linked with the most irrevocable condition of immobility and the ultimate crossing, as well as the mourning of that crossing, white is associated ominously with death. After studying an old photo of China, for example, Fourth Jane dreams that she has died. In her narrative she remarks,

The lights were on when she woke up. She saw white walls, ceiling, floor, some furniture about but did not know where she was. Certainly this must be death she thought. How strange yet natural to wake up dead with white walls, ceiling, floor and pieces of furniture scattered about. She had managed to enter *death wrapped in white sheets, a crossing not so difficult as one might imagine*. She marveled at the lack of fuss. (124; my emphasis)

In her Paris apartment, Fourth Jane spends most of her time sleeping, seemingly suffering from a depression that results in physical and psychological anguish to the extent that “[o]n certain days moving from one room to another in her apartment was the only displacement she felt capable of undertaking” (116) — this despite, or perhaps because of, her nomadic life, a life in which “she had packed and unpacked so often, always leaving from and returning to the same point, she knew the gestures by heart, could repeat them in sleep” (75).

Yet “eggshell” white also corresponds symbolically with a barely nascent or emergent consciousness, and further connects Fourth Jane’s experiences in Paris with the home movie shown at Grandmother’s birthday party. That Grandmother is near death at this point when everyone celebrates her life suggests that life and death, as well as the colour that represents both, are complexly coupled, in fact, hardly separable. Indeed, particularly emphasized in the description of the home movie is chiaroscuro, the play of shadow and light. From the “white

cloudless sky” (29) and “gray lawn” (28) to which the “diminishing house gave way” (29), to the “black block windows” (27) of the fortified house, all of which end with a final whiteness that announces the film’s end, the home movie constantly plays with the images that materialize from blankness, the possibilities that emerge from white space. Accordingly, Fourth Jane’s retreat into “eggshell” white, her return to a kind of sterile womb, is also a survival strategy: she creates the conditions for which a symbolic film can be played and replayed in her mind, a film of a cherished family connection which she uses to help her reconstitute her fractured sense of self. In this light, the Frenchman’s presence in her life is more understandable, though his influence hardly more positive. For Fourth Jane can identify with his attachment to film, so obsessed is she with the medium’s potential to provide a meaningful frame of reference.

Although the French journalist writes a regular column about films, and expresses an interest in American cinema, there is only one description in the narrative of one of his projects: significantly, it appears to be a rather mundane, realist film about a seemingly typical family. In this filmmaking venture, family life is aestheticized, shown to be a rite that is performed without the performers’ awareness of their own function as such. Despite his artistic pretensions, the Frenchman’s experimentations with emplotment and direction expose the role-playing elements that structure the ostensibly natural function of family life. He explains to Fourth Jane that his film is

about two persons, a man and a woman, both of average middle class background. It is summer. The wife leaves town with their son to spend the summer in a house rented on the beach. The husband joins them only on

weekends. I employed amateurs, people who never acted before. I gave them no dialogue but simply said Tonight is Saturday night. The husband has just arrived by train from the city. He is a physician as he is in real life. From the moment the husband enters the house by the sea on a Saturday night, husband and wife make their own dialogue. Then the son comes in. All this goes on for half an hour. *They play their own lives.* (22; my emphasis)

The Frenchman's film publicizes the private life of family and especially when compared with Fourth Jane's memories of her family's private home movie, — a comparison Fourth Jane surely makes, and one that we are invited to make also — it operates on a metadiscursive level to expose the performativity of family life. If the family members *play* their own lives, play at being a family, they also simultaneously consolidate the notion of what being a family is. To this extent, the performance functions as social reinforcement, even though for the Frenchman, it may only be a decision made to fulfil some undisclosed aesthetic vision. Although the Frenchman's film has a very different audience (public) than Fourth Jane's home movie (which is intended for private viewing), it similarly engages what remains for her the primary question: what is family? Like the feature film, the home movie not only images family life as it is lived, but it also presents a particularized paradigm for how that life should be lived. It is not surprising, then, that Fourth Jane, whose role in her family has been destabilized by multiple gender- and racially-based factors, should be drawn to the Frenchman, whose attachment to film provides her, on a superficial level at least, with a comprehensible and re-ordering context.

In her confusion, Fourth Jane also chooses simple, unambiguous narratives to help re-center her. The blank walls thus eliminate the possibility of undesired distractions, and film

provides her with a reassuring, familiar vision. Similarly, the stories she prefers to read are ones that she already knows. This is why, she explains to the Frenchman, she enjoys examining financial statistics: "I must have bored you but I like reading these figures. The meaning behind them can engage mind and imagination as much as words can without words' ambiguity. The content of each story is profit or loss, and the story can be enthralling depending on whether you are committed or not" (38). Yet the Frenchman's effect on her life, even here, is to reinforce ambiguity. For, although Fourth Jane clearly expresses a preference for simple narratives, her emotional commitment to him is manifested in her obsession with his decidedly complex narratives constructed around, and by, the films which he critiques. His columns, however, also detail the story of his relationship with Fourth Jane. As challenging as it is for Fourth Jane to read, to translate that is, multiple layers of meaning embedded in the Frenchman's column, the task becomes almost an obsession:

It had become her habit to reread his articles before turning out the light, paying particular attention to passages she had underlined. Descriptions of gestures or ideas or words which appeared familiar although they functioned in quite different contexts, words, gestures, ideas which had taken place during the brief space and time they had been together. These words, phrases and paragraphs she isolated from their public meaning and context since by setting them apart she was able to dote more easily on their private sense, memory arousing such as his reference to an undressable mistress. For her it meant something other than the use he made of it to describe the film under discussion and she nursed and cherished words, phrases, paragraphs during long periods of his silence and his absence. (115)

As with his film, then, the Frenchman's columns blur the boundaries between private and public discourses, and Fourth Jane willingly performs her role, that of deciphering the private meanings he has apparently encoded within a public medium. Fourth Jane's involvement

within *his* narrative ostensibly about only film, can be seen as further emphasizing the inextricability of her connection with the medium.

Nonetheless, Fourth Jane's affinity to this narrative and to film remains clear, even though the relationship between them, between, that is, text and image, is less apparent. In *Crossings*, films can only be "seen" in translation, through the fixity of print. Accordingly, the fluidity suggested by the frequent references in the text to cinema cannot quite transcend the restrictions of the print-medium which, after all, is only capable of *representing*, not *reproducing* its effects. Even though Chuang Hua may be striving for the impression of movement, the material impress of black letters on a white page reminds us that what we have is, in the end, only a translation, a stationary product that can only attempt to trace the sense of fluidity.⁴ To view the relationship between text and image thus is to avoid the kind of easy analogy, discussed earlier, that Lisa Lowe makes between film and flight suggested in her notion of "filmic migrations." Chuang Hua's vexed efforts to represent in text moving images should remind us that Fourth Jane's efforts, in turn, to comprehend her fragmented identity is not a simple task. Fourth Jane's subject positions are not fluidly assumed, just as textual representations of visual representations cannot be perfect translations.⁵

Yet Fourth Jane's decipherment of the Frenchman's cryptic codes is not really that

4. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between text and image as translation, see Chapter Three.

5. Indeed, the popular definition of film as *moving* pictures may be overly simplistic, for films can only simulate fluidity. See Chapter Three for a more extensive discussion of the degree of motion pictures can convey.

challenging at all, when we consider that much of what he writes he steals from her; in a sense, she is reading what she herself has encoded. When the Frenchman tells Fourth Jane to read his articles, as a substitute for him during his frequent absences — “There’ll be messages for you only you can decipher because it will be between us” (121), he says — he neglects to admit a fact that emerges only when their relationship is about to end. Her involvement in the Frenchman’s narrative implies a form of patriarchal control, which links the Frenchman, yet again, to Fourth Jane’s father: both consider themselves “modern” and “progressive,” but are manipulative as it suits their positions.

Indeed, much of what the Frenchman writes *to* her is, after all, taken from what she has said to him. “I steal from you, do you know that?” he confesses. “Without you I would stop writing. I steal your thoughts, your language, sounds, movements, all, all” (134). This dependence on Fourth Jane for inspiration may be a sentimental gesture, ostensibly positioning her in the clichéd role of romantic muse (he claims that her absence causes him to be “analphabetic” [152]), but it is belied by the Frenchman’s attitude towards her in other respects. For although Fourth Jane admits to herself that this appropriation is reciprocal, the narrative suggests that the Frenchman’s practice is a blatant form of colonization. Not only does he mine Fourth Jane, in a condescending manner, for material for his column — at one point he tells her that he visits her “to learn and be amused” (123) — when he is unable to write altogether, he is nonetheless given credit for the column, which is actually ghost-written, so he explains, by a “little black man” (153). The Frenchman’s diminution of the real author and, particularly, his emphasis on “black,” suggest that race as much as gender is emphasized

in relation to colonization.

If Fourth Jane seeks some confirmation of her self within his narrative, she can only see a distorted self, a self that he filters and reflects to her. Ironically, Fourth Jane's unvoiced hope that he will piece her together has the opposite result: she is as torn apart and disconnected as ever after meeting him. After they consummate their affair, Fourth Jane stares objectively into the mirror, and sees that "[u]nder the harsh beam of light hanging above the cabinet" her image is "cut off at the waist, mirrored against the shadowed confines of dull porcelain walls. Her face appeared *intolerably alien and unclaimed as the space and light around her*" (40; emphasis added). Moreover, Fourth Jane's retreat into an infantile state, although it is a survival strategy, also relegates her to an inferior position vis-à-vis the Frenchman. He is content to infantilize her while she allows him to eroticize her as a China doll (67-9).

Nonetheless, it is in moments of depression that Fourth Jane responds by regressing into a childlike state. This response is not necessarily a form of escapism, although it certainly can have deleterious effects, as we have seen in her relationship with the Frenchman. Rather, by returning to what Lacan calls the mirror-stage of development, and by focussing on the metaphorical cinematic screen as a self-reflective surface,⁶ Fourth Jane can find some comfort in an image which projects a sense of stability and coherence. The final representation of film

6. In *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al (Bloomington: Indiana UP), Christian Metz discusses the implications of what he calls "the other mirror, the cinema screen" (4) on modes of self-identification.

in the text, the Western melodrama, highlights film's perceived ability to produce a sense of self even as it appears only to consolidate an already achieved notion of selfhood. Appropriately enough, this film depicts a childhood trauma, and is rehearsed in Fourth Jane's mind as a consolation of sorts for the loneliness she experiences when the Frenchman fails, once again, to contact her. Indeed, Fourth Jane recalls that, when she was younger, "[s]he sat through it [the film] three times, twice alone and the third time with Michael [one of her brothers, the sixth-born] on a day they had dinner together. The first two times she found herself weeping just before the lights came on" (103). The film, which depicts a child who is stolen away from home and is finally rescued, features issues that predominate in Fourth Jane's life, specifically those of belonging, wandering, crossing, and, most importantly, of desiring to be claimed. As such, it functions as a touchstone with which to make sense of her current state of rootlessness, her sense of being unclaimed, in addition to being a vehicle of fantasy. If in life nothing is perfect, Fourth Jane can be comforted by the possibility of a happy ending that the film presents.

Indeed, when the child is reclaimed at last by someone who could be her father,⁷ the rescuer declares, on seeing her again, "Cross. You don't belong there. You belong with us" (104). Even though Fourth Jane is unable to watch the film for a fourth time, it continues to have a positive impact on her young life. Michael, who had accompanied her, treats her affectionately and carefully, attentive to the small crossings they must make on their way

7. Whether he *is* her father is unclear in the text. Her father could be the man who rescues her or the one killed by the "Indians."

home:

He took her home which he would have done anyway. But because it was late and dark and cold, the streets slippery with ice and huge embankments of frozen snow not yet removed at unfrequent crossings along their way, and because she had just left the hospital that week he took special care to help her across the snowy streets, listened attentively to her breathless incoherent chatter and at the doorway of the house where she lived alone said sweetly and gently good night to her. (106)

The representation of this Western melodrama can be seen in opposition to the representation of photography in the text. Here, Fourth Jane's stress on the repetition of the activity — she watches the film three times and replays it in her memories — suggests that the film has a looping function for her. Even though the filmic narrative has a definitive ending, the film itself, for Fourth Jane, is not static in Clearfield's sense. Film is not a spatialization of form, but rather a potentially endless repetition of sequences, a narrative that unreels, unfolds and rewinds. No wonder, then, that Fourth Jane returns to film as a frame of reference, emptying out the distractions in her life, so as to order her memories with scenes that are meaningful to her.

Photography, on the other hand, remains still. It may, in a sense, be a component of film — a series of photographic *stills* comprise a moving picture, as some critics argue⁸ — but Fourth Jane cannot find comfort in its stationary mode of representation. Significantly, the one description of a family photograph in the text is of Fifth James and his wife, an image included in their marriage certificate. Moreover, the certificate, in keeping with the theme of

8. See Chapter Three for a more detailed discussion of the differences between film and photographic stills.

travel, is likened to a souvenir. As the narrator observes, it was “the size of a postcard.” However, Fourth Jane’s sense of self and her connection with her family is opposed to the symbolics of the photograph. Whereas Fourth Jane feels she is slowly nudged out of familial centrality, the picture of Fifth James and his wife — who appear “unkempt and fierce as if they were related, on either side of the crease” (53) — consolidates their role, in turn, at the centre of the family. Appropriately enough, the photo is positioned in the very centre of the certificate. This picture, then, appears to ensure Fourth Jane’s alienation, even as, or more precisely, because it foretells the incorporation of Fifth James’s wife into the family circle.

Another photograph in the text also emphasizes Fourth Jane’s sense of exile and alienation. In this picture, which is taken from a Chinese magazine, Fourth Jane recognizes and mourns a past that, unlike the past that film evokes, cannot be made present. She tells the Frenchman that on the first page of the magazine

was a poorly reproduced photograph of a farmer’s house built up of mud and rushes and roofed in tile standing in the middle of a neatly tilled field. A tree clung by the wall of the house, a line of mountains beyond the fields. With a shock she recognized the landscape, could smell the tilled soil, felt the embrace of the house, climbed the mountains. Unguarded, a seizure of loss struck her. For an instance she could not breathe. (124)

It would appear that this photograph communicates to Fourth Jane a past that is recognizable yet unclaimable. Indeed, after looking at this photo Fourth Jane dreams about her death “wrapped in white sheets, a crossing not so difficult as one would imagine” (124), and insists, in her conversation with the Frenchman, that it is “[t]oo late [to live in China]. Farm house, field, solitary tree, the distant mountains have fused, have become one with the American

landscape. I can't separate any more. If I were to live in China today I would have to conceal one half of myself. In America I need not hide what I am" (125).

In this context, the photograph reinforces nostalgia for a lost identity, a process that Shirley Geok-lin Lim, expanding on the work of Edward Said, would describe as involving a sense of filiation, or an identification with a "natal order" (the homeland). Filiation, for Lim, is distinct from affiliation, which is the condition that a socialized self experiences, or "the self-situating process of *making* belonging" (296). Lim's useful distinctions among Asian American identities as immigrant (not filiative but rather assimilative), exilic (filiative but not affiliative), and diasporic ("the disarticulation of identity from natal and national resources" that "includes the exilic imagination but is not restricted to it" [297]) tend, however, to blur confusedly together.

Fourth Jane's sense of filiation and affiliation similarly defy her statuses as immigrant, exile, and member of the Chinese diaspora. Her identity also cannot be so easily classified as Lim's theory suggests. Rather, the relationship between filiation and affiliation in *Crossings*, particularly as evoked by film, blend in complex ways, suggesting that Fourth Jane's sense of self, too, is constantly negotiated. For, although the photograph concretizes the homeland, it cannot actualize it for Fourth Jane. This is why her attachment to film is stronger: film, at least, can metaphorically evoke a greater sense of movement and of transplantation than photography, even though photographs are arguably more physically transportable. Film conjurs filiation only in the sense of familial belonging, not in Lim's sense of "homeland." After all, a "homeland" cannot be as easily transported as its photographic representations.

Identity in *Crossings* is not necessarily rooted in a sense of cultural rootlessness, but rather in the shifting dynamics of the family. To this extent, Lim's notion of filiation to describe the variances, the heterogeneities of identity, is literalized in *Crossings*. For Chuang Hua, then, the notion of "home" is tied not so much to a geographic space — it cannot be, given the number of crossings and re-crossings — but rather to an emotional state. Important to Fourth Jane is the home that she can carry with her, not a *homeland* but a home-feeling, a *home-coming*. In this sense, home is not where one ultimately ends up, nor even where one comes from. It is, rather, built from processes of instantiation.

In the text, trees also symbolically reinforce this idea. To survive, trees must be rooted in a geographical space, a site where nurturance is possible, but they can also be transplanted, in much the same way that Fourth Jane's family can be, and are, transplanted, thriving in a number of different cultural sites. The lichee tree, for example, can be introduced to American soil, and its fruit sold and consumed by Dyadya, who recalls all the while the lichee trees in China. Like film and the trees, food travels and keeps well. As a communal activity (in *Crossings*, meals are presented as an opportunity for family members to reunite), food, again much like film, helps to consolidate home and family, wherever they may be (dis)located. Fourth Jane, significantly, does not weep during her third viewing of the Western melodrama, because her brother Michael accompanies her that time, whereas she had gone and cried alone the first two times. Similarly, she prefers to eat her extravagant meals in the company of those whom she loves, and it is a measure of her loneliness that when she is alone in Paris that she eats only a hard-boiled egg instead of the elaborate dinner she had

prepared for the Frenchman who fails to show up. As Dyadya tells Fourth Jane, “What is essential is not the surrounding but the food” (18). Fourth Jane’s eagerness to cook for the Frenchman stems, in part, from this view of food as a social offering, an offering that, ironically, he does not fully understand and which he takes for granted.⁹

Ultimately, Fourth Jane’s efforts to grapple with her identity revolve around the notion of family. Her return to America is an admission of the Frenchman’s insufficiency; he cannot comfort her in her loneliness and, more troubling, he abandons the notion of familial loyalty altogether. Indeed, he trivializes his marriage, and, speaking of his feelings about his newborn child, he remarks that “it was a bother but women want to have children” (154). This forms a curious symmetry with Fourth Jane’s experience, for she herself rejects the possibility of her own family when she decides to exile herself from Dyadya and Ngmah, abandon her lover and abort their child. Yet Fourth Jane’s decision to return to America suggests that she requires the comfort of family after all. The novel ends in a looping back, like the Western melodrama to which Fourth Jane is drawn again and again, this time to the Grandfather, practicing his calisthenics, his exhalations dissolving puffs of vapor in the morning air. As Dyadya tells her

9. The representation of food can, and should, also be interpreted in intertextual terms. See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s discussion in *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) of how food in the relationship between Fourth Jane and the Frenchman functions in orientalizing ways. Fourth Jane’s increasingly elaborate meals, Wong argues, can be seen as constituting “food pornography,” to borrow Frank Chin’s phrase. Fourth Jane tries to play the role of cultural hostess, only to reinscribe ethnic stereotypes.

I love you. Go out and plant your trees, and water your flowers with powerful agile hands that made wounds and healed the wounded, planted trees and smashed the china, shaded exposed seedlings from the sun's rays, protected roots from predatory animals. There are two gates in the north wall, three in the south, two in the east and two in the west. Winds blow from all sides. The gates are open. The center shifts. (204)

Fourth Jane's sense of self, then, can only be consolidated in a familiar otherness, the community of the flesh which is rooted in whatever soil love flourishes in. The sense of filiation which informs Chuang Hua's discussion of identity formation in *Crossings* may, in this sense, amount to essentialism. The obsessive pairing of film and photography with kinship in order to construct a meaningful selfhood emphasizes, after all, the biological, the organic, over the cultural, unlike in *Obasan* where kinship is understood more broadly, and where the family represents a wider community. In *Crossings*, however, the status of Fourth Jane's family as upper-class probably separates them from the broader Chinese-American community. As a cultural practice and as a social rite, camera technologies here ultimately indulge in a nostalgia for the natural, the prelapsarian garden in which families connect harmoniously together. The textual representation of images of self, then, incorporates a vision of familial connectedness.

Chapter Three

“I am not i”: Writing/Picturing Subjectivities and the Camera Eye in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Woman, Native, Other* and *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam*

I am always working at the borderlines of several shifting categories, stretching out to the limits of things, learning about my own limits and how to modify them.
— *Trinh T. Minh-ha*, *Framer Framed*

It hardly seems possible to write about Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* without discussing her consciousness of language, her self-conscious use and abuse of language, as well as her efforts to exceed the confines of language. Commenting on her textual playfulness in an interview with Judith Mayne, Trinh herself stresses the importance of hybridity in describing her own work (1992; 137-50). In this interview, Trinh addresses the mixed, often antagonistic reception¹ of her work, observing

1. Herman Rappaport adopts a dismissive, condescending tone in “Deconstruction’s Other: Trinh T. Minh-ha and Jacques Derrida,” an essay which examines Trinh’s theory vis-à-vis the high theory of classical deconstruction practised by critics such as Derrida. Comparing Trinh’s approach with that of Derrida, Rappaport remarks that the former is not as artful nor as careful in her argumentation as the latter. Yet Rappaport clearly does not know what to make of Trinh’s experiments, and so can only describe them as ineffective strategies. Next to Derrida, Trinh’s efforts — so Rappaport implies — seem amateurish. His unspoken belief that Trinh’s theory is no theory at all is easily discernable from such passages as the following:

Readers of Trinh Minh-ha and Jacques Derrida might agree that they make an odd couple. / After all, Trinh’s work is not shy about appropriating metaphysical modes of thinking in what might seem to be a relatively uncritical and enthusiastic manner. Her melodramatic effusions, wholesale identifications with exotic culture [surely a misreading of Trinh’s project], and rough-cut appropriations of French theory are hardly the stuff out of which deconstruction is made. / However much she situates herself between cultures, Trinh’s eclecticism or bricolage looks at first glance as if it is based on the

that

[f]or academics, “scholarly” is a normative territory that they own all for themselves, hence theory is no theory if it is not dispensed in a way recognizable to and validated by them. // The mixing of different modes of writing; the mutual challenge of theoretical and poetical, discursive and “non-discursive” languages; the strategic use of stereotypical thinking; all these attempts at introducing a break into the fixed norms of the Master’s confident prevailing discourses are easily misread, dismissed, or obscured in the name of “good writing,” of “theory,” or of “scholarly work.” I was continually sent back and forth from one publisher to another — commercial, academic, and small presses — each one equally convinced in its kind suggestions that the book would fit better in the other marketing context. (1992; 138)

For Trinh, theory is a blending of genres, a blurring of boundaries, to borrow Donald C. Goellnicht’s phrase (1997).

Trinh’s experimentation is not limited simply to demonstrating that theory can be poetical or poetry theoretical, — although she does maintain in another interview that this is a legitimate way of looking at the issue (1992; 151-60) — for her vision exceeds even the boundaries of “pure” text, of writing as a self-sufficient medium. As Henrietta L. Moore astutely observes, “one of the most striking things about her [Trinh’s] writing is its cinematic quality” (121). However, unlike the writing style and technique of someone like Chuang Hua, who in *Crossings* strives for the *effect* of cinema (although not to the extent of literally producing or reproducing it), Trinh goes a step further, re-framing between/among language

assumption that mixing up Julia Kristeva with Audre Lorde, or Leslie Marmon Silko with Claude Levi-Strauss, is somehow going to liberate us from the prisonhouse of eurocentric thinking. Behind Trinh’s cut-up techniques appears to be the assumption that she is a multicultural subject who can write her way into a brave new epistemology that stands apart from and exceeds what Lorde has called “the master’s house.” (99)

photographic stills from her own films.² That is, Trinh's experiments in language lead her also, perhaps even necessarily (given her background as a filmmaker), *outside* an exclusively linguistic play, to bring images to her text and text to her filmed images. In *Woman, Native, Other* Trinh's writing goes well beyond evoking a "cinematic quality"; it inextricably incorporates aspects of cinema itself in order to trouble divisions between image and text, divisions which are ultimately exposed as arbitrary.² Trinh's films, particularly *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam* (SVGN) released in 1989, the same year that *Woman, Native, Other* was published, uses text to comment upon images, problematizing assumptions about both media and the relationship between them in the same way that *Woman, Native, Other* imports images in order to show the limitations of text, as well as the interdependency and incommensurabilities between text and image. Trinh's approach to theory, then, is not only poetic, but also visual, and might be described as an exemplification of what W.J.T. Mitchell calls picture theory.²

Whereas the first two chapters of this thesis examined *ekphrasis*, the figurative evocation of images, or the representation in writing of visual representation, this chapter will consider not only Trinh's introduction of photographic stills from her films — a strategy that she favours enough to continue in her next book *When the Moon Waxes Red* (1991) — but

2. In several interviews collected in *Framer Framed* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), Trinh maintains that *Woman, Native, Other* was completed in 1983, well before SVGN was released. Trinh's decision to include in *Woman, Native, Other* stills from this film along with the two others she had worked on while writing this book (*Reassemblage* [1982] and *Naked Spaces — Living is Round* [1985]) further suggests that theory for her is visualized and fundamentally visual.

also the significance of text in her film *SVGN*. Of course, this kind of study shifts the focus of this thesis, by moving from writing to film, but given Trinh's preoccupation with blending genres, blurring boundaries, her works — writing *and* film — demand an analysis attentive to the close relationship between the two media.

To examine *Woman, Native, Other* with an awareness of Trinh's active interest in film is not to misread the text, notwithstanding her contention that

[i]t is difficult to talk about a single agenda in my filmmaking. Each work engenders its own agenda. I can try, however, to trace some of the preoccupations that run through the different works produced. For example, I wrote *Woman, Native, Other* approximately at the same time as when I made my earlier films, and yet I was committed to not mentioning film in this book because I was dealing with writing rather than filmmaking. But in both filmic and written works, the attempt is to reflect on the tools and the relations of production that define us, whether as a filmmaker or as a writer. By doing so, what I hope for is to provide myself and others with tools not only to beat the master at his own game, but also to transform the terms of our consciousness. (1992; 157-58)

Although Trinh claims that her concerns in *Woman, Native, Other* are distinct from her work as a filmmaker, she also asserts in this conversation with Pratibha Parmar that there are affinities between film and writing. Despite Trinh's disinclination to acknowledge the ways that film explicitly informs her writing, even a cursory glance through the book suffices to illustrate the extent to which images figure in her theoretical approach, as a means of shifting what is meant and understood by the author-ity of "theory" and of interrogating the engendering and decoding of imagetexts, texts as images, and images as texts.³ Incorporated

3. The issue of whether text is wholly separable and distinct from images and vice-versa is one that Trinh addresses and which I aim to complicate in greater detail shortly.

between, within, and among the text “proper” of *Woman, Native, Other* in the form of photographic stills, SVGN incorporates, in turn, written texts to make visible the frequently invisible discourses that present documentary as pure, authentic and incontestible fact — a project that has obvious affinities with Kogawa’s concerns in *Obasan*.

Trinh’s practice of including photographic stills from her films in her text is not a unique or even unusual strategy, when we consider the historical prevalence and continuing popularity of what W.J.T. Mitchell calls the “pictorial turn.”⁴ Roland Barthes, in his musings on the semiotic significance of advertising photographs, — musings which surely resonate even for photographs which are not directly or obviously situated in commodifying practices — remarks on the undiminished ubiquity of text in an apparently visual culture. Contrary to Berenice Abbot’s pronouncement that “the *picture* has almost replaced the *word* as a means of communication” (179), Barthes, in “Rhetoric of the Image,” asserts that

[t]oday at the level of mass communication, it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon. Which shows that it is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of the image — we are still, more than ever, a civilization of writing, writing and speech continuing to be the full terms of the informational structure. In fact, it is simply the presence of the linguistic message that counts, for neither its position nor its length seems to be pertinent (a long text may only comprise a single global signified, and it is

4. See especially Chapter One of *Picture Theory* for a thorough discussion of the ways that writers have obsessively included images in their texts as well as in their writings about images themselves. I am, of course, implicated in the subject of my own analysis, having first of all decided to write my thesis on this topic and to include in my writing the images about which I write. Mitchell notes that for centuries, pictures have accompanied written texts, although it has only been recently that critics have examined this accompaniment in other than comparative terms.

this signified which is put in relation with the image). (38)

Woman, Native, Other, however, exemplifies the *reciprocity* of text and image. For a text which, according to its own author, is intended to deal exclusively with the subject of writing, we are almost inundated with visual reminders of a subject Trinh says she was keen on avoiding, film. Trinh in fact delays the text “proper” until after her exergue, “*The Story began long ago...*” and a set of three photographic stills from *India-China (I-C)*; released in 1992 with the title *Shoot for the Contents*).⁷ The prominence of images in a text committed to *writing*, — according to the subtitle, the relationship between writing, postcoloniality and feminism — suggests that images are an important factor in this relationship, a factor that, moreover, troubles the commonly held view of “writing” as only, or simply, the inscription of words on paper.

Yet writing is clearly the announced focus of *Woman, Native, Other*, and, in her first chapter, “Commitment to the Mirror-Writing Box,” Trinh attempts to address and unravel what she calls the triple bind which defines the subject positions of women of colour in their efforts to write/be writers. Trinh writes exhaustively about writing in order to explode such unspoken assumptions about writing/as the one I just briefly mentioned. Positioning her thoughts on writing within, and sometimes outside, Western feminists’ writings about writing, Trinh stresses the fundamental heterogeneity of writing experiences. She begins with a lyrical exergue celebrating the non-totalizable, never-ending, communal, oral, and paradoxically, even at times silent, nature of writing:

The story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless/

for it is built on differences. Its (in)finitude subverts every notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one. The differences it brings about are differences not only in structure, in the play of structures and of surfaces, but also in timbre and in silence. We — you and me, she and he, we and they — we differ in the content of the words, in the construction and weaving of sentences but most of all, I feel, in the choice and mixing of utterances, the ethos, the tones, the paces, the cuts, the pauses. The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. Its quietness. (2)

Recognizably “traditional,” this is not, according to the Western philosophical tradition, what “theory” should look like nor how it ought to unfold, as over thirty publishers, who rejected *Woman, Native, Other*, remind Trinh. This emphasis on the oral foundations of writing, and on writing’s continuing orality attacks the binary opposition between verbal and written speech constructed by the Western philosophical tradition. To view writing as oral too, then, is to transcend the boundaries which this tradition, beginning with Plato, insists on maintaining.

Trinh similarly attempts to transcend the boundaries of a solely text-based conception of writing through her employment of images. For example, Trinh arguably refers in figurative terms to her filmmaking in the long passage from the exergue which I have just quoted. Trinh’s description of the sundry ways in which Third World Women and other “others” delight in the gift of story plays with metaphors suggestive of filmic techniques: “We — you and me, she and he, we and they — we differ in the content of the words, in the construction and weaving of sentences but most of all, I feel, in the choice and mixing of utterances, the ethos, the tones, the paces, the cuts, the pauses” (2). Further, the first set of

photographic stills that follows the exergue and which precedes the text “proper” in *Woman, Native, Other* depicts a South Asian woman engaging in thread-work (Figure 2). Weaving thread, as Goellnicht observes (1997), is a visual metaphor for story-telling, a metaphor which, notably, also occurs in *Obasan*. To this extent, these first images are obviously apt complements to the textual content. According to Goellnicht, they are selected and included as a materialization or concretization of what can seem an abstract theory about writing. Moreover, the images seem inextricably bound to the text which they inform, so tightly does the “caption,” an excerpt from the text “proper,” describe the ostensibly silent narrative of the images.

The relationship of the caption to the photographic stills is analogous to a balloon’s relationship to a comic strip (which, of course, is not to suggest that Trinh’s work is like a comic strip): both imply a type of transcribed, oral testimony that emerges from the mouths of the imaged subjects. It is only fitting, then, that this particular caption begins as a quoted speech, an impression that is further underscored by the use of cursive script: “*‘May my story be beautiful and unwind like a long thread...’ she recites as she begins her story. A story that stays inexhaustible within its own limits*” (4). Near the end of the text “proper,” we find this thread/theme further unraveled and extended: “The story is beautiful, because or therefore it unwinds like a thread. A long thread, for there is no end in sight” (149). Seen thus, the images appear, paradoxically, to be bound by the text, even as they broaden the latter’s scope. This is what Barthes refers to when he proposes that one of the functions of the text is *to anchor* the meaning of images. In helping to establish a context for the image, the text



"May my story be beautiful and unwind like a long thread . . .," she recites as she begins her story. A story that stays inexhaustible within its own limits (Stills from I-C)

Figure 2

becomes a “matter of a denoted description of the image (a description which is incomplete) or, in Hjelmslev’s terminology, of an *operation* (as opposed to connotation). The denominative function corresponds exactly to an *anchorage* of all possible (denoted) meanings of the object by recourse to a nomenclature” (274). To describe the function of texts with respect to images in terms of “anchorage,” however, is to suggest, metaphorically, that the former lends weight or credence to the latter. In other words, the trope arguably privileges text over image.

On the other hand, Trinh’s employment of these images is more playful and sophisticated than a summary glance at the caption or even a more attentive examination of the text “proper” would suggest: the images of threading/sewing, in turn, sew/thread the images to the text simultaneously as the text appears to comment on the image. For Trinh, neither text nor image is privileged. If the images are illustrative of the text, the text — itself, we must remember, a *material* impress of type on paper — must be illustrative of the image. On a metadiscursive level, the threading images ground not just theory *as* a type of writing, and the theorizing *about* writing, in terms of story-telling, but they also commit themselves to the text “proper.” That is, the images thread *themselves* to the text, and illustrate, literally and figuratively, that “writing” must be recognized as visual too. Seen in this light, the “triple bind” which vexes the Third World woman writer is one she ultimately escapes precisely by knotting a bind of a different kind: her own.

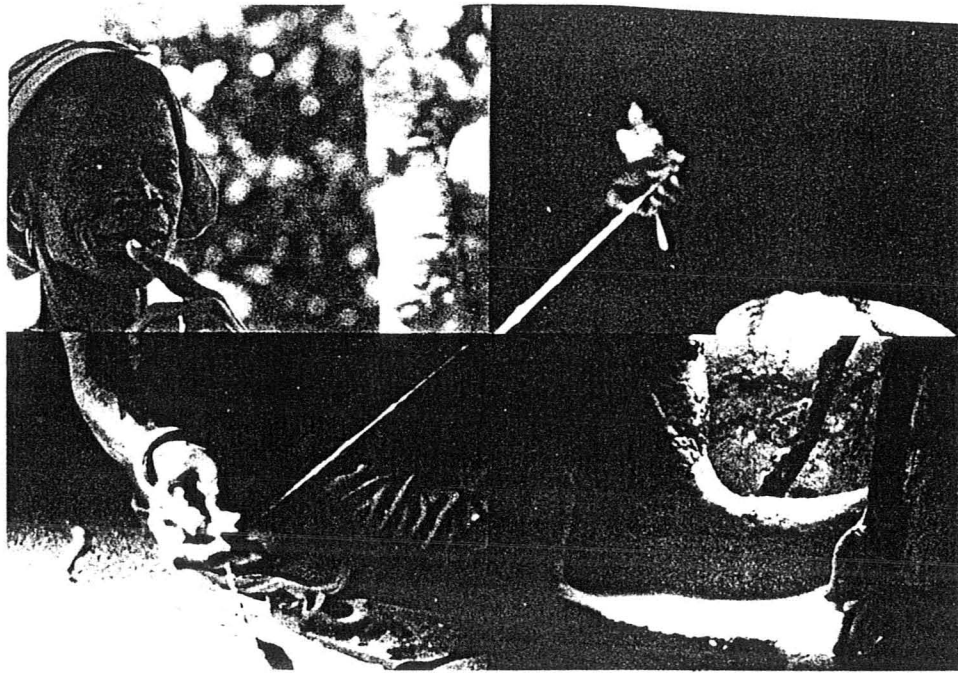
At the same time, to acknowledge that “writing” need not be thought of exclusively as text-based is to celebrate other modes of expression as equally valid. The South Asian

woman is not just miming an activity representative of writing as story-telling; although this is a possible and legitimate interpretation, she can also be seen as engaging in the craft of threading/sewing in its *own* right. In a broad sense, writing is an activity in which women of colour can participate. Trinh's photographic still is an illustration of this agent in action. As Trinh carefully points out later in this chapter, "To say this [that too many women are silenced despite their struggles to write], however, is not to say that writing should be held in veneration in all milieus or that every woman who fails to write is a disabled being" (7). In this context, her citation of Nikki Giovanni's poem *Gemini*, which is used as a caption for a series of images that depict crafts (of painting and sculpting) and people at play, in conversation, and in thought (14) is highly appropriate. Giovanni writes, "*Poetry is the culture of a people. We are poets even when we don't write poems...*" (14). Images of poetical activities themselves function, too, as visual poems, a visual type of writing — although this is not to suggest that the images constitute writing itself. Images of women of colour participating in these poetical activities furthermore constitute an inclusive gesture. If photographic images have historically tended, as Wrexler has argued, to exclude race, class and gender, Trinh's discussion, which never leaves these questions, includes what traditionally has been left out in pictures and subsequently ignored in critical discussions. Writing, a contested medium of expression to which Third World women have been denied access, becomes, through Trinh's inclusionary, visionary poetics/theory, a medium in which they can, and ought to, express themselves.

These are important points to which Trinh returns, again, through her selection of

photographic stills (25), this time from her film *Naked Spaces: Living is Round*. In this later selection, the stills are organized in two sets of four (Figure 3). The first set interests me more because it is so closely tied to the first images which I have been discussing so far. Here, Trinh makes no attempt to represent a continuous action (in the first series of three images, the same South-Asian woman is shown in varying poses, although it is obvious that they occur relatively close in time). Rather, the arrangement resembles a collage of related, but not quite contiguous, images. If I “read” them from left to right, as I would any Western script,⁵ the first image represents an African woman glancing pensively towards the viewer, her index finger pressed idly to her lips. The following image has more obvious connections with the third and fourth images; the hand that extends the thread left, for example, finds its relative match in the fourth frame. The light at the bottom of the second frame extends into the third frame. Once again, however, images and text are threaded closely together; we find that the title of the film from which the images are taken, as well as the ordering of fragmentation implied by collage are the subject of the images’ caption: “*Words, fragments, and lines that I love for no sound reason; blanks, lapses and silences that settle in like gaps of fresh air as soon as the inked space smells stuffy*” (25). Even the caption (which once, again, is excerpted from the text “proper”), acknowledges the broadness, the expansiveness of writing. The thread, here more loosely related and more forcefully brought together,

5. This reading strategy is not inherently the only, nor, perhaps, even the correct one. Rather, it is one that I turn to out of habit, having been trained to read texts (and images) in Western schools. A case may be made for other readings which may yield other valid interpretations.



*Words, fragments, and lines that I love for no sound reason;
blanks, lapses, and silences that settle in like gaps of fresh air as
soon as the inked space smells stuffy (Stills from NS)*

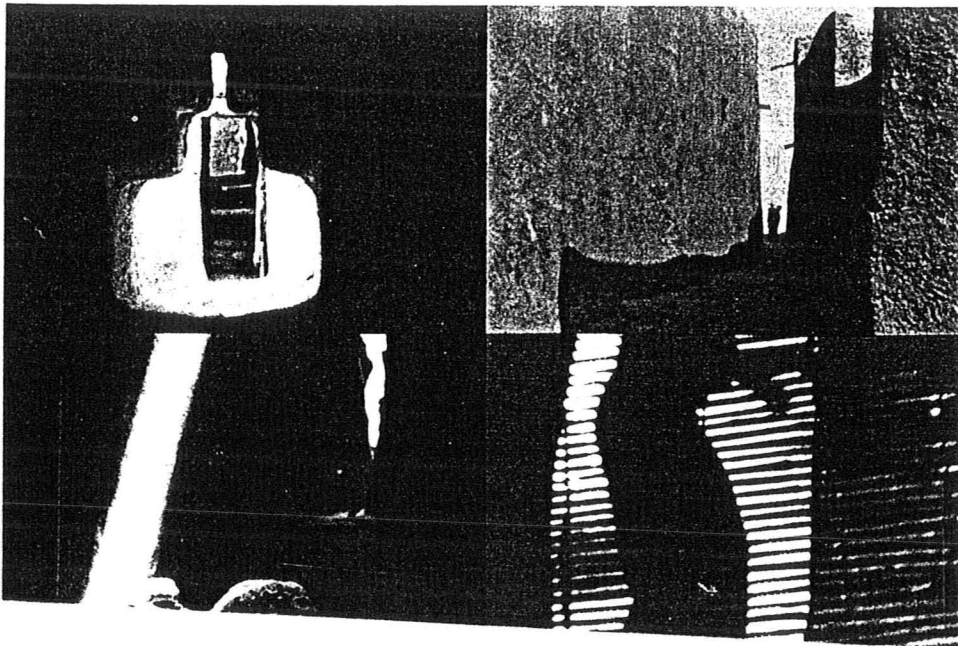


Figure 3

suggests the necessity of images, their sheer inextricability from texts: their play of light and dark exemplify the “inked space” characteristic of words on a page, and the “gaps of fresh air” are the blanks, the pauses between words. To extend the logic of this last point, images themselves can be seen as constituting these fundamental pauses in texts. /Trinh’s apparent love of, her reliance on images, suggests that images⁶ are as necessary in delineating and defining texts as the blank spaces between groups of letters are essential in distinguishing words and to deriving semantic meanings. /

This view of the relationship between text and image is in marked opposition to the way that Peter Ian Crawford theorizes textual/visual practices in ethnographic film and writing. Like many commentators on film, Crawford engages with the issue of realism — not a surprising concern, given his field. Grounding his remarks on the relationship between images and texts in the distinction between analog (a continuum) and digital (non-continuum) communication, Crawford argues that

at an abstract level, this [the fact that words are an articulation of reality whereas images are an expression of reality] may be an appropriate distinction but when it comes to actual writing and filming as discursive practices this is no longer the case. In order to be intelligible and explanatory (or articulate) film has to distance itself from its intrinsic “presence” established by the image’s insistence on “being there.” Writing, on the other hand, wrestles with its intrinsic “absence” in attempts to diminish the imposed distance between itself and the “other” and hence convey a sensuous understanding of what “being there” is like. In the case of film, distancing is more often achieved by employing digital devices, most notably words (for example, narration). In

6. The space between images themselves could also be interpreted as a “gap of fresh air,” a pause from the “inked space,” necessary in their very constitution as images. My thanks to Susie O’Brien for raising this point.

the case of writing, a sensation of presence is conveyed by means of analog elements of communication. This often implies the use of *images*, either in the literal sense, in which photographs are inserted in the text, or by adopting a writing style which loosens the digitalised straitjacket of academic jargon through extensive use of metaphors, word-images and poetics (or . . . the stylistic use of epigraphs). (70)

Despite the title of the chapter (“Film as Discourse: the Invention of Anthropological Realities”) from which I excerpted this passage — a title which would suggest that Crawford acknowledges or at least recognizes the discursive construction of “reality,” or a reality which is not so much “out-there” but which emerges through (con)textual manipulations — Crawford nonetheless reaffirms the real in his insistence on the image’s “presence” as “being there.” This would imply that images, in an ethnographic context especially (as well as in other filmic/written genres) validate the texts which they accompany and which accompany them. Not surprisingly, this logic carries us back to Barthes’ view, discussed in Chapter One, of the “analogon” (a term that is not so different, after all, from Crawford’s embrace of the image as a form of “analog communication”), to the popular conception of camera images as truthful, as well as to their frequent deployment as evidence. For Trinh, whose work consistently attacks such efforts to capture the “real” in the interests of a supposedly objective anthropology, this conception of text/visuals ironically renders *invisible* the discourses that underwrite the ways images are constructed and perceived.

Trinh’s manipulation of images, on the contrary, should be viewed as an unmasking, a visualization, even a revelation of such discourses. Her second chapter “The Language of Nativism: Anthropology as a Scientific Conversation of Man with Man” specifically grapples

with the issue of representation, the tyranny that potentially can be exercised by an unethical manipulation of both text and image. Addressing the problems that being named — as distinct from naming, which enables subjects a measure of agency — renders in terms of having a subject position ascribed, Trinh notes that the practice of classification keeps hidden its objectives at the same time that it attempts to disclose, objectively of course, the characteristics of the subjects which the practice thus delimits. For Trinh, “[t]he difference . . . is naming, like a cast of the die, is just one step toward unnam[ing], a tool to render visible what he has carefully kept invisible in his manipulative blindness” (48). Compared to the other chapters, Trinh’s incorporation of images here is remarkably, even conspicuously, restrained, with only three sets of stills in total. Such restraint is, I think, strategic: Trinh distinguishes her visualizing, discursive practices from conventional, ethnographical/anthropological ones, in which the voyeuristic gaze “others” Third-World subjects, objectifying and subjecting them. Here, images operate again as complements to text; whereas Trinh’s prose hyperbolically parodies that of the Master in order to reveal the irrationality of anthropology’s claim to the legitimating status of science, the relative paucity of images acknowledges and respects the right of imaged subjects, Third-World subjects, to non-voyeuristic autonomy. This is in marked contrast to traditional ethnographic films, in which the visualizing practices could be said to constitute a form of cultural colonization. In traditional ethnographic film, “Natives” are named as a different race, discernibly “other” than the Master that views and comments on them. In this sense, fewer images are as effective at visualizing discourse as a superfluity of text. Unlike Crawford, Trinh’s concern is clearly with

the ethics of the visualization and textualization of “otherness” rather than with the realistic integrity of cinematic images.

In *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam*, Trinh’s strategic juxtaposition of images and texts deconstructs traditional documentary techniques in order to interrogate assumptions of realism and scientific objectivity in field/filmic practices that continue to be valorized even by more critically self-conscious anthropologists/ethnographers such as Crawford. Constructed around a series of interviews — a staple of documentary films — involving Vietnamese/Vietnamese *emigré* women, SVGN reveals what normally is hidden in more “realistic” films: the very constructedness of such scenes. As one of the narrators in the film remarks: “Interview: an antiquated device of commentary. Truth is selected, renewed, displaced, and speech is always tactical.” Included in the completed film, for example, are shots that would usually be edited out, shots such as the one which shows the lighting and staging (a photographic still appears in *Woman, Native, Other*; 112). Even the way that the narrative unfolds in SVGN illustrates, in a manner reminiscent of the metafictionality of Kogawa’s *Obasan*, the ways that documentary techniques and practices reveal themselves to be surely as much fiction as fact. As Trinh comments in the film, “By choosing the most direct and spontaneous form of voicing and documenting, I find myself closer to fiction” (1992; 78).⁷ Whereas images included in the text “proper” of *Woman, Native, Other* function as complement, anchorage, and excess with respect to this text, texts in SVGN — included in

7. All references to Trinh’s film are taken from the transcriptions included in *The Framer Framed*.

the form of subtitles positioned next to, or superimposed over, interviewees, as well as, one could argue, in the untranscribed form of voiced speech — make “visible” the discursive strategies which documentaries frequently seek to aestheticize, ironically, in their attempts to capture the real. The text that accompanies SVGN, in other words, operates as another type of image in order to destabilize the evidential author-ity which writers like Crawford confer onto images themselves.

Another limitation of Crawford’s analysis is that it neglects to distinguish the difference between film and photographic stills, an issue which is of relevance to Trinh, who is always careful to emphasize differences and heterogeneities. By combining film and stills under the general term “images,” Crawford implies that the two are indistinguishable. This is not surprising, however, when we consider that most of the critics who even talk about photographic stills and film, rather than simply images, assume no essential difference exists, or at most, that the former is constitutive of the latter. André Bazin, for example, builds his theory of realistic cinema from the photographic image, whose ontology, he argues, is grounded in an objective copy of reality. For Bazin, it is the photographic lens alone — a technology transferred to the medium of film — which “can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very power of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model” (241). We can no

doubt anticipate Trinh's objections to this view, which tends to assume that an image is simply an image, not worthy of theorization. Others who do deign to comment on photographic stills and film emphasize the latter's mobility. It would appear that critics tend to take the intuitive approach to the issue. Noël Carroll, for instance, notes that moving pictures are distinguishable from photographic stills to the extent that movement in the former is an artistic choice. "The difference between slides and films," Carroll argues, "applies across the board to the distinctions between every species of still pictures When it comes to still pictures, one commits a category error, if one expects movement. It is, by definition, self-contradictory for still pictures to move. That is why they are called *still* pictures (64). Similarly, Stephen Heath subscribes to what we might call the constitutive view of still photographs. "Photography and cinema," he asserts, "share the cameras. Photography is a mode of projecting and fixing solids on a plane surface, of producing images; cinema uses the images produced by photography to reproduce movement, the notion of the flow of images playing on various optical phenomena to create the illusion of a single movement *in* the image, an image of movement" (27).

Ron Burnett is one of the few who objects to this untheorized contrast, noting that photographic stills, although arguably constitutive of film, should not be treated *as* film itself. In his discussion of the problems involved in reviewing and theorizing film, Burnett observes that

the framed image extracted from a film, either for purposes of illustration or quotation, valorizes the pictorial and is really the sign of a crisis, the crisis of how to reconstitute processes of visual communication and experience for the

purpose of analysis, description and interpretation. Films are converted into a series of photographs as if they are a text to be “read.” Images are connected to each other by a system or by a code which can, so to speak, be extracted from the continuum that governs their projection. The code comes to stand for the images not only constraining their meaning but governing their interpretation. The difficulty with this approach is that few distinctions are drawn between text and film, among notions of textuality, projection, and performance. (77)

Burnett’s comments, which stress the incommensurability, the non-substitutability of film, still, and text, are applicable to Trinh’s works, which weave, as we have seen, film, still, and text together at the same time that they carefully acknowledge the differences between and among them.

Such incommensurability and non-substitutability could be productively examined through translation theory.⁸ In his remarks on the “task of the translator,” Walter Benjamin stresses not translation but the translatability of a work. In prose replete with organic, genealogical metaphors, Benjamin argues that the relationship between the translation and the object before it is translated is best characterized as a kinship rather than as a straightforward reflection or substitution. “We may call this connection [to the object being translated] a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital connection,” Benjamin proposes, adding that

[j]ust as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original — not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. (71)

8. I thank Will McConnell for his helpful suggestions on this issue.

In other words, translations are related to, but not the copy of, or equal to the objects which they can only hope to resemble. Jacques Derrida's translation, in turn, of Benjamin's influential theory of translation redresses the notion of "translatability." Whereas Benjamin acknowledges the fact that a work is not always translated well, he has faith that it is translatable, that is, that it will one day have the afterlife of a faithful translation. Derrida, on the other hand, ponders how translatable something like a "proper" name could be, pointing to the most famous figure of the multiplicity of tongues, the name Babel, commonly recognized as representing the *untranslatability* of speech(es). For Derrida, the task of the translator is not so much to render a good translation that is akin to the original, but to acknowledge the untranslatability, the unrelatedness of things.

Trinh presents the triangulation among film/still/text in terms of a theory of translation that stresses the heterogeneity of the three media, a heterogeneity that cannot be reduced to a system of equivalence or substitution. We might note here that SVGN is not only a "documentary" which questions the genre of documentary through the interview mode; the film also addresses the issue of translation as a means of deconstructing "documentary" and of destabilizing, as we have seen, the evidential value of testimony, whether in the form of film, still, or text. Instead of stressing the originary authenticity of a speaking subject, Trinh foregrounds the complexities of expecting and demanding that subjects speak this way, that is, authentically and truthfully. The stories which are narrated in the first part of the film, notably, are not the stories of the women who are presented as speaking them. Rather, the filmic story is a representation of a textual presentation, Mai Thu Van's *La Femme au*

Vietnam (1983), a book consisting of transcribed interviews of Vietnamese women collected over five years and translated into French. Trinh then translated the French translation of the Vietnamese oral testimony into English, which was further translated through the Vietnamese actors' performance in the filmed version. In the second part of the film, in which the identity of the performers is revealed as such, the women represent themselves, a strategy that has been interpreted by some reviewers of SVGN as contradicting the film's efforts to expose the fictiveness of the interview format.

Yet even when the actors play themselves, they do not simply *present* a fixed subjectivity, but rather a highly self-reflexive negotiation of subjectivities. Indeed, they speak about their awareness of their roles in the film as performers, of the women interviewed in Vietnam as well as of themselves in America. As Trinh explains in a number of interviews, the actors decided the terms and contexts of their self-representations. Responsible for their self-images, the actors selected the clothes they wished to be seen in, and the settings with which they wished to be associated, settings ranging from a fishpond to an elementary classroom, in which one woman wanted to be shown as a cultural ambassador of sorts, teaching American children the history of the *ao dai*, the Vietnamese traditional dress.

The film's title, *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam*, thus positions these negotiations of subjectivities in translational terms. Referring to the recent socialist tradition in which women's identities are sociopolitically grounded in terms of nationhood, the film's title comes from the coy response which a proper woman would give to a suitor who asks her whether she is married. To say, "*Yes, I am with husband, his surname is Viet and his given name is*

Nam” (1992; 51), is to answer both yes and no, and to affiliate self with nation. But if the name of Vietnamese women, in Vietnam and of the diaspora, properly is the name of the nation torn apart for centuries by war, how can it be translated? How can a proper name, as Derrida asks, be properly translated? Trinh’s quotation of this “proper” identification in *SVGN* ironizes the very notion of propriety in terms of translation, as part of a sustained feminist critique of this practice of identifying Vietnamese women with nationhood. For Trinh, this mode of self-identification is untranslatable to the extent that the discourses that construct the “proper” name as such refuse to admit the political exigencies that brought about this form of representation; they refuse to recognize the representationality of their project.

To present translation as performance, on the other hand, is to acknowledge and highlight the representationality of translation. As one of the narrators in the film asks, “Do you translate by eye or ear?” (80). For Trinh, translation, like the genre of documentary in which it is frequently featured, is not straightforwardly a presentation. “Translation,” according to one of the filmic voices (spoken by Trinh), “seeks faithfulness and accuracy and ends up always betraying either the letter of the text, its spirit, or its aesthetics” (80). We might more honestly view translation as always already a performance, a self-conscious interpretation. This is why the texts in *SVGN* frequently do not match the speeches which they accompany. The English texts also do not always approximate the Vietnamese “testimony.” Nor does Trinh employ synchronic voice all the time; to stagger the time between the physical movement of lips and the sound-track is to emphasize the

representational nature of this “testimony.”

To this extent, Trinh’s incorporation of SVGN (as well as her other films) in *Woman, Native, Other* in the form of photographic stills might best be viewed as a re-presentation, or perhaps more accurately, a re-representation with a difference. The photographic stills, then, are not the films themselves; at best, they are translations of the films from which they are taken, and acquire new, different meanings once they are recontextualized. For example, in a pair of photographic stills a woman is shown in a moment of contemplation that is ostensibly illuminated by the oil lamp nearby. But according to the adjacent image, the scene is revealed to be more likely illuminated by a spotlight (Figure 4). Both stills are accompanied by the following caption: “*With time, it is between me and myself that silence settles down. My intimacy is in silence. Still, I have to give advice to other women who come looking for some light on their problems!*” (81). This caption, however, bears no resemblance to the speech that accompanies the same scene in SVGN, a scene that, in the filmic context, even more obviously ironizes the notion of enlightenment or illumination. In SVGN, the woman speaks about her sense of mis-recognition and self-alienation when she reunites with her sister at long last:

My sister sat still. She was staring at me as if I came from another planet. I could see a glimmer of revolt in her eyes. Suddenly her cold, grave voice told me: “You, my little sister . . . the socialist doctor! . . .” She stood up from her chair, took my hand and led me to a mirror: “Look at yourself at least once!” I had not, indeed, looked at myself in a mirror for years, and I saw an old, worn-out woman . . . I gazed at my [own image] with sustained attention and realized I wore the same clothes, the same wooden shoes for as long as I could remember. I didn’t think another world existed. I was stirred to the depth of my soul by a mad anguish and my mind became confused. I



With time, it is between me and myself that silence settles down. My intimacy is in silence. Still, I have to give advice to other women who come looking for some light on their problems! (Stills from SVGNN)

Figure 4

became aware of my own existence! . . . (1992; 70)

That the image clearly speaks (or has conferred upon it) a different message when recontextualized suggests that a linear equivalence between films, photographic stills and texts is not possible. Rather, the relational terms remain fundamentally mutable and flexible. Moreover, Trinh's painstaking efforts to illustrate the characteristics of the terms underscore paradoxically the (in)discreteness of each category as well as their non-totalizability. To suggest that the triangular relationship is equivalent is to homogenize the categories, to declare the unitariness of subject-positions, and to subsume differences within the Master's hegemonic discourse.

Perhaps the most notable example of Trinh's strategy of re-representation is her employment in SVGN of the technique of rephotography, or the reproduction of "documentary," archival footage. This strategy is similar to the parodic mimicking of the Master's voice in Chapter Two of *Woman, Native, Other*. In SVGN, Trinh repeats the ways that Vietnamese women have been visually represented in order to interrogate the frequently unspoken and undisclosed discourses that construct the ways that this representation unfolds and is received. Given that the Vietnam war was, as Jean Baudrillard and others have observed also one of visual representations, Trinh's strategy here specifically redresses the potential tyrannical abuse of the image, as her strategy in some parts of *Woman, Native, Other* attempts to answer to the potential tyrannical deployment of the Master's words. To use and abuse such images, which construct Vietnamese women as heroines, is not only to recontextualize the images but also to shift the terms of their reception. Trinh thus reveals

that such a construction objectifies the women that the images ostensibly celebrate. Through her re-visioning and re-contextualization of images, Trinh asks: In whose interests were these images mobilized? *Who* are these women whose images are forced to bear the weight of such ideological overdeterminations? The techniques also fundamentally acknowledge the differences between the first and second contexts, the differences, that is, between the modes of representation and between images and their translation. Trinh remarks to Judith Mayne in an interview that

the use of news footage and photography has its own problems in film practices — especially documentary practices. The images have both a truth- and an error-value. In other words, they are above all media memories. This is where the desire to create a different look and reading becomes a necessity. In the film the older news photography is not only selectively reproduced, it is also deliberately reframed, de- and recomposed, rhythmized, and repeated with differences. Needless to say, media images of Vietnam are not only ideologically loaded; they are also gender clichés. So the point is not simply to lift these news images out of their contexts so as to make them serve a new context — a feminist reading against the grain, for example — but also to make them *speak anew*. (1992; 209-10)

Such a repetition could be seen as a type of quotation. Again, Trinh here attempts to trouble the authority of images; the re-positioning and re-representation of these images function to contradict any claim anyone may make that images tell a totalizing, immutable truth. Trinh's quotation of her own filmic images, through their incorporation as photographic stills in *Woman, Native, Other*, similarly grounds her practice as non-authoritarian; her own images, she implicitly argues, must themselves be constantly interrogated, re-viewed as representations, as non-totalizing translations whose meanings are fundamentally heterogenous as to exceed the frames of text and image.

Grounded in categories characterized by their shifting expansiveness, subjectivities, here delineated textually/visually, cannot be wholly summarized or properly named as one unitary presence. Rather, as the close but incommensurable interrelationship between text and image in both *Woman, Native, Other* and *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam* illustrates, representations must remain heterogenous precisely in order to contest the authority of Master discourses. This is why Trinh as author/filmmaker speaks with the awareness that she could order the speech of others. This is also why for her, properly speaking, the “name” by which subjects identify themselves should instead recognize their plurality as a number of names. To envision the pronominal “I” by which the author asserts his/her authority as “I/i” is to attempt a different kind of speech, an honest speech, which respects and maintains the differences between selves and others. Identity/(ies) are not so simply comprehensible as reflected image(s) in a mirror; they are reflections of reflections whose origin is not traceable to a “pure” self, but rather are manifest in refracted selves. As Trinh argues,

The differences made between entities comprehended as absolute presences — hence the notion of *pure origins* and *true self* — are an outgrowth of a dualistic system of thought peculiar to the Occident (the “onto-theology” which characterizes Western metaphysics). They should be distinguished from the differences grasped *both between* and *within* identities, each of this being understood as multiple presence. Not one, not two either. “I” is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. “I” is, itself *infinite layers*. Its complexity can hardly be conveyed through such topographic conventions as I, i, or I/i. Thus I/i am compelled by the will to say/unsay, to resort to the entire gamut of personal pronouns to stay near this fleeing *and* static essence of Not-I. Whether I accept it or not, the natures of *I* and *Not-I*, *us* and *them*, or *him* and *her* is not (cannot) always (be) as clear as we would like it to be. Despite our desperate, eternal layers that form the open (never finite) totality of “I,” which is to be filtered out as superfluous, fake, corrupt, and

which is to be called pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic? Which, indeed, since all interchange, revolving in an endless process? (90, 94)

In both *Woman, Native, Other* and *SVGN*, then, Trinh reveals the instability that inheres in the construction of subject(s) by making visible the discourses that underwrite their various and ever-changing representations.

? / Trinh's concerns and the enabling insights that her strategic manipulation of texts and images yield have obvious relevance in Asian North American literary studies, although her theories have more frequently been applied in postcolonial studies. Like other Asian North American artists, including the ones who have been the focus of this thesis, Joy Kogawa and Chuang Hua, Trinh emphasizes the importance of examining representation as a determinant of the subjectivities that they ostensibly merely describe. Fundamental to Trinh's arguments, expressed in both her film and her book, is the ethics involved in the production and reception of representation. Unlike the other two writers, whose approach to image through texts might best be described as metaphorical, Trinh's literal incorporation of images and visualization of text functions to complicate, in turn, text through image and vice-versa. Unlike Chuang Hua, for example, whose protagonist negotiates her identity/ies through the consolatory trope of film, Trinh asserts that such negotiation is fundamentally a mediation between different modes of representation. In other words, by foregrounding the interrelationship between texts and images in more explicit ways than the other two writers, Trinh is able to demonstrate or perform her deconstruction of the Master's discourse, as well as to illustrate that other, resistant forms of self-representation are possible.

Conclusion

It would not be a meaningful or even unusual insight to observe that we live in a visual culture, or, conversely, that we live in a text-based culture. As I have tried to demonstrate in these three chapters, images and texts implicate and complicate each other in ways that defy the notion that one or the other medium exists in discrete terms. But to recognize that images and texts are fundamentally entangled is only the beginning: how and why they entangle, and the discourses which entangle them need to be examined carefully. In my efforts to analyze the interrelationship between/among texts and images in this thesis I hope to suggest that the issue of representation remains an abiding preoccupation among Asian North American artists, and thus merits more extensive study.

Although in many respects the texts and film which I selected for analysis in this thesis are quite different, they share the struggle to represent the difficulties of self-representation. Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, and the ^{work} ~~text~~ of Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* and *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam* demonstrate that there are no essential identities, that much of what we understand as subjectivities are constructed through representations. Film and photography, as visual media which are complexly interwoven with the texts that accompany them and which they, in turn, illustrate, foreground the ways that such representations are handled, constructed, perceived and received. As Naomi and Fourth Jane realize in their efforts to comprehend their selves and worlds, film

and photography are not necessarily reflections of a reality, but an ordering of experience which is constructed as reality. Similarly, Trinh's ironic handling of photography, film, and text illustrates that the "real" is a product of discourse.

All four works also textualize images and visualize texts — strategies which function to demonstrate the ethical imperative to re-view and read carefully, to recognize representations as such and not simply as straightforward presentations. It is out of this recognition that a resistant, counter-discourse is possible. As Joy Kogawa argues, the very techniques of documentation which enabled the disenfranchisement of Japanese Canadians during and after the Second World War can be subverted through a re-visionist manipulation of photography. In *Crossings*, the confusions which attend *emigré* experiences are reconciled, albeit nostalgically, through the representation in text of the representational possibilities afforded by the medium of film. Film in *Crossings* attempts to capture the mobility which results in the confusions, as well as to provide a psychological compensation for these confusions. In Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other* and *Sur-Name-Viet-Given Name-Nam*, the inextricability of texts and images acknowledges at the same time the differences between and among them, an acknowledgment that, in turn, stresses the heterogeneity of representations. Ultimately, it is heterogeneity that links these texts and film together. Indeed, in ^{her} their obsession with image and text, ^{Trinh} these authors fundamentally interrogate the differences which emerge throughout their treatment of representation.

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