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# Resisting Diaspora and Transnational Definitions in Monique Truong's the Book of Salt, Peter Bacho's Cebu, and Other Fiction

Debora Stefani  
*Georgia State University*

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RESISTING DIASPORA AND TRANSNATIONAL DEFINITIONS IN MONIQUE  
TRUONG'S THE BOOK OF SALT, PETER BACHO'S CEBU, AND OTHER FICTION

by

DEBORA STEFANI

Under the Direction of Ian Almond and Pearl McHaney

ABSTRACT

Even if their presence is only temporary, diasporic individuals are bound to disrupt the existing order of the pre-structured communities they enter. Plenty of scholars have written on how identity is constructed; I investigate the power relations that form when components such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, class, and language intersect in diasporic and transnational movements. How does sexuality operate on ethnicity so as to cause an existential crisis? How does religion function both to reinforce and to hide one's ethnic identity? Diasporic subjects participate in the resignification of their identity not only because they encounter (semi)-alien, socio-economic and cultural environments but also because components of their identity mentioned above realign along different trajectories, and this realignment undoubtedly affects the way they interact in the new environment. To explore this territory, I analyze Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, Peter Bacho's *Cebu*, Linh Dinh's "Prisoner with a Dictionary" and "'!','" and Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*.

INDEX WORDS: American literature, Asian American literature, Diasporic literature, Identity, Language, Sexuality, Religion, Multiethnic, Postcolonial, Postmodern, Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt*, Peter Bacho, *Cebu*, Linh Dinh, "Prisoner with a Dictionary," "'!','" Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*

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DEBORA STEFANI

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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DEBORA STEFANI

Committee Chair: Ian Almond

Pearl McHaney

Committee: Renée Schatteman

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
1    A NEW APPROACH TO DIASPORIC STUDIES AND ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE.....	31
1.1    Transnationalism and Diaspora Reconsidered.....	32
1.2    A New Approach .....	38
1.3    Asian American Literature and Diasporic Studies Side by Side.....	44
1.4    A New Approach to Analyze Asian American Literature.....	47
1.5    Conclusion.....	53
2    IS IT AN ETHNIC OR A SEXUAL CRISIS?.....	55
2.1    Convergence of Postcolonial, Neocolonial, and Diasporic in Ben Lucero.....	56
2.1.1    “ <i>America, Please Forgive Me; I had Sex with a Filipina</i> ” .....	62
2.2.    Diaspora versus Exile in <i>The Book of Salt</i> .....	69
2.2.1 <i>The Burden of Queering the Empire</i> .....	70
2.2.2 <i>Self-inflicted Violence: a Way to Counteract the Empire</i> .....	73
2.2.3 <i>Ethnicity at the Service of Sexuality; Sexuality at the Service of Ethnicity</i> .....	76
2.2.4 <i>Where is home? Ethnicity and Sexuality Answer</i> .....	79
2.2.5 <i>Defying the Ideology of Nationalism</i> .....	83
2.3    Conclusion.....	86
3    NO AMERICANNES GRANTED: THE CONFLICTUAL INTERSECTION BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND RELIGION.....	89
3.1    A Look at Crucifixions: Anthropological Explanations.....	89

3.1.1	<i>Ben's Reaction to Carlito's Crucifixion</i> .....	95
3.1.2	<i>The Complex Interplay of Religion and Ethnicity: Religious or Ethnical Surrender?</i> .....	100
3.1.3	<i>The Defeat of the Hybrid</i> .....	107
3.2	Gish Jen's <i>Mona in the Promised Land: A Celebration of Hybridity and a Move towards a Postethnic America?</i> .....	111
3.2.1	<i>Is Ethnical Authenticity Still Possible in a Postmodern World?</i> .....	114
3.2.2	<i>Mona's Conversion to Judaism: a Question of Wholeness or a Struggle with Racial Essentialism and Family Expectations?</i> .....	117
3.2.3	<i>A Battle Lost: No Americanness Granted</i> .....	122
3.3	Conclusion.....	124
4	DISEMPOWERING RESISTANCE.....	128
4.1	The Subaltern Can Only Murmur.....	127
4.2	A Fake Attempt to Resist Colonization.....	134
4.3	Conclusion.....	140
	CONCLUSION.....	142
	NOTES.....	147
	WORKS CITED.....	149
	WORKS CONSULTED.....	167



## INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to *Theorizing Diaspora*, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur exhort scholars “to move beyond theorizing how diasporic identities are constructed and consolidated and ask, how are these diasporic identities practiced, lived, and experienced?” (9). In their transnational journey, diasporic subjects encounter different (and similar) socio-political, economic, and cultural environments. They enter pre-structured communities that behave according to rules and regulations negotiated throughout decades, centuries, millennia. How do they participate in the socio-political life of the host country? What economic factors determine their new place in the workforce? What aspects of the new culture will they accept and re-elaborate? Which ones will they struggle with or abruptly refuse? Even if their presence is only temporary, diasporic individuals are bound to disrupt the existent order. This disruption affects newcomers as well as natives; it forces the latter to reassess and bargain new subject positions for themselves. As scholars have been writing abundantly on the effects of immigration and diaspora on the natives, I concentrate on the ways diasporic subjects ascribe new meanings to their identities.

What power relations form in the course of this process? “All diasporic journeys are composite [...]. They are embarked upon, lived, and re-lived through multiple modalities: modalities, for example, of gender, race, class, religion, language and generation” (Brah 184). Diasporic subjects participate in the resignification of their identity not only because they encounter (semi)-alien, socio-economical and cultural environments but also because components of their identity such as sexuality, religion, gender, language, and economic status realign along different trajectories, and this realignment undoubtedly affects the way they interact in the new environment.

Influential for the writing of my dissertation is Lisa Lowe's discussion of how the transnational movement of capital has modified the construction of gender. Lisa Lowe states

For in the complex encounters between transnational capital and women within patriarchal gender structures, the very processes that produce a racialized feminized proletariat both displace traditional and national patriarchies and their defining regulations of gender, space, and work and racialize the women in relation to other racialized groups. These displacements produce new possibilities precisely because they have led to a breakdown and a reformulation of the categories of nation, race, class, and gender. (*Immigrant* 161-62)

Lowe illustrates above a possible scenario resulting from the clash between transnationalism and women oppressed by patriarchy. How is identity formation then affected by transnationalism?

The immigrant as descriptor rhetorically references that position of being both of and not of—that transnational space that cannot be singly located in space and time. By anchoring American cultural studies with the figure of the immigrant rather than that of the assimilated citizen, the orientation of such studies, while remaining specific to the U.S. cultural and political context, is reconfigured to accept axiomatically *difference* and *mutability* rather than *identity* and *fixity* as the default quality of the national character. *Transnationalism in this sense becomes a strategy for recognizing the incompleteness of narratives of national identity formation.* (Chuh, "Imaginary" 292) (My italics)

If transnationalism emphasizes that the process of national identity formation is not complete, then are we, scholars in Asian American studies, not consolidating the racialized hierarchy already in place in the United States? Sau-ling C. Wong crucially contends, "Connecting to

African origins is a powerful means of undoing the cultural amnesia white society attempted to impose. In contrast, a denationalized Asian American cultural criticism may exacerbate liberal pluralism's already oppressive tendency to 'disembody,' leaving America's racialized power structure intact" ("Denationalization"139). Wong doesn't condemn transnational and diasporic studies as fields of study per se. She does, however, identify a tension between Asian American and diasporic studies, mainly because, in her opinion, Asian American scholars are more fascinated by what she claims is the focus of diasporic studies, i.e. the roots of specific peoples, rather than focusing on the issues, such as assimilation, that affect Asian Americans as members of the Asian American community.

In the introduction to *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, Braziel and Mannur admit that older models of diaspora studies "privilege the geographical, political, cultural, and subjective spaces of the home-nation as an authentic space of belonging and civic participation, while devaluing and bastardizing the states of displacement or dislocation, rendering them inauthentic places of residence"(6). Nonetheless, in her article "The Aesthetics of Dislocation," Ketu Katrak calls for the inclusion of the categories of race, ethnicity, and nation in defining diasporic subjects. British scholar Brah stresses the interplay of gender, class, religion, and language in the diasporic experience. In her article published in *Melus*, Sophia Lehmann reminds us that "Language is the repository of cultural identity. Language serves to create a home within diaspora" (1). Although Braziel and Mannur's book provides infinite stimuli, its objective is "to examine within an interdisciplinary frame, both the historical phenomena of migrations and diasporas and how these movements *also inflect* identity formation in relation to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality" (7) (my italics). My study goes beyond the "also inflect."

To showcase my argument, I analyze three novels: *The Book of Salt* by Monique Truong, *Cebu* by Peter Bacho, and *Mona in the Promised Land* by Gish Jen. I also examine two short stories by Linh Dinh from his collection *Blood and Soap*: “!” and “Prisoner with a Dictionary.” The reasons I chose these texts are manifold and best explained if I illustrate the rise and development of Asian American literature. Bella Adams distinguishes between five periods. The first period ranges from 1880s to 1920s. She groups together 1930s, 40s, and 50s. The third period covers 1960s and 70s, while 1980s and 1990s are separate categories. Sau-ling C. Wong and Santa Ana discern three periods. Like Adams, they start from the 1880s, but their first period doesn’t end until the 1950s. The 60s, 70s, and 80s are one single category, while the 90s are apart. While I agree with Adams that there are enough differences in themes to justify the split of the time frame 1880s- 1950s into two groups, I believe that the decades of 1960s, 70s, and 80s share sufficient characteristics to form a unique cluster. I further divide the development of Asian American literature according to the geographic areas the artists are from. Therefore, we have Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, South Asian and South East Asian American literatures. As the label “European literature” cannot exemplify the complexity of the literatures of each of the countries that form the continent, so it is true for Asian American literature.

#### Deconstructing stereotypes (1880s-1920s)

Asian immigrants were subject to harsh immigration laws and quotas, such as the National Origins Act of 1929 that prevented Asians of any nationality to relocate in the USA. The Chinese Exclusion act of 1882 prohibited Chinese immigration for ten years. The Geary Act (1892) reconfirmed that the Chinese were not allowed into the United States for another twenty years, and in 1902 the government decided to halt Chinese immigration permanently. It wasn’t

until WWII, when China fought alongside America, that the law was repealed. Autobiographies and texts mixing autobiographical and non-autobiographical elements were among the first Asian American texts. Through these, Chinese-born writers attempted to deconstruct American stereotypes of Chinese. In general, there was the need for both Chinese and Japanese writers to bring the West closer to the East.

### *Chinese and Japanese American Literature*

Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States after 1848. They came first in search of gold and later they were imported for the construction of the transcontinental railroad. These immigrants were forced to work eighteen hours a day; they lived in extremely poor conditions and they had to deal with racism and discrimination on a daily basis. All these factors contributed to the Chinese creative inactivity (Wong, "Chinese American" 39). Moreover, the first-generation immigrants were poor peasant workers in China and did not have means to earn an education; thus, they had difficulties in writing in their own language (Hsu and Palubinskas 9).

King-Kok Cheung traces the literature of Chinese American back to the early twentieth century, when authors wrote only in Chinese. The first works are mainly recording of the Chinese oral tradition. Since these works were in Chinese, they remained hidden from the public for a long time, until specialists decided to translate them. One such work is *Jinshan geji*, a collection of poems, which was published for the first time in two volumes in 1911 and in 1915 but was brought to the light of Anglophone scholars only in 1987. *Jinshan geji* or *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown* (as published in 1987), though,

“were not transcriptions of oral recitations; rather, they were composed in written form by members of ‘poetry societies’” (Wong, “Chinese American” 43).

Two other important authors belonging to the early twentieth century are Yan Phou Lee and Sui Sin Far. The former is considered by critics an “Ambassador of Goodwill.” Ambassadors of Goodwill were individual writers coming from the Chinese middle class. “Their writing is characterized by efforts to bridge the gap between East and West and plead for tolerance by making usually highly euphemistic observations about the West on one hand while explaining Asia in idealized terms on the other” (Kim, *Asian American* 24). In his autobiography, *When I was a Boy in China*, credited as the first Asian American text, Yan Phou Lee attempts to demystify the stereotypes Americans had of the Chinese and at the same time demonstrate how Chinese are educated and forward-thinking people. Sui Sin Far, Edith Eaton’s pen name, is most known for *Mrs Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* (1912; rpt 1995) and for her non-stereotypical portrait of Chinese Americans. Through an objective lens, Far depicts Chinese as having the same feelings, emotions, and desires as Americans. In *Assimilating Asians*, Chu praises Far for challenging the trope that the husband is responsible for the Americanization of the couple and the wife is the keeper of Asian culture.

As the alias Onoto Watanna suggests, Far’s sister, Winnifred Eaton chose to identify herself as a Japanese American. Most of her work is set in Japan, but while the protagonists of her first novels are Japanese women, in later texts she focuses on biracial individuals and on interracial marriages. “By exploring themes that might otherwise have been taboo if she had set her narratives in North America, she chartered new literary territories: not only as the first Asian-American novelist but as the first to investigate what it means to be Asian and Caucasian at the same time” (Chubbuck). Interesting is the case of Ling-ai Li, who was born in Hawaii in 1909,

fifty years before Hawaii became a U.S. state. In both her plays *The Submission of Rose Moy* (1925) and *The Law of Wu Wei* (1929), which were performed in Hawaii but never reached the mainland, Li anticipates the concerns of Asian American writers, from the second period onwards, about the relationship between first and second generation immigrants, in that she stages the conflict between the traditional father and the more modern child.

The first generation of Japanese Americans had the same fate of the first generation Chinese Americans. Both had neither the time nor the strength to compose literary texts after the strenuous hours of work. Thus, the majority of Japanese American literature in English was produced by Nisei writers. The Issei that wrote in English belonged to the highest social classes and their literature had nothing to do with the hard life as a plantation worker in Hawaii or as farmer or small-business owner in the mainland. Etsu Sugimoto is an example of such writers. Her *A Daughter of the Samurai* (1925) is an autobiographical text in which Sugimoto illustrates Japanese costumes and traditions in an attempt to bring America closer to Japan.

#### Politicizing Asian American Texts (1930s-1950s)

Writers of the 1930s to 1950s “demonstrate an increasingly politicized aesthetic in Asian American literature that is only subtly and, for some critics, too subtly conveyed in the early literary texts by the Gold Mountain poets, Yan Phou Lee and the Eaton sisters” (Adams 54). They do not simply discuss discrimination and racism, but they explore who Americans are, and examine America’s assimilationist agenda, albeit usually concluding that the assimilated self is superior to the one who retains some characteristics of the culture of the mother country. Other themes include the exploitation of Asian workers; the conflictual relationship between Asian parents and their American-born children(female and male writing); the Asian woman as the

keeper of Asian culture and the white woman as agent of assimilation (male writing); and Japanese internment camps.

This period also saw the first products of Filipino American literature. Filipinos started migrating to the United States after the end of the Philippine-American war (1899-1903), initially to better their education, and later to improve their and their families' economic situations. Between 1898 and 1933, Filipinos were U.S. nationals and thus they were not subject to immigration quotas. However, in 1934 the Tydings-McDuffie Act promised the Philippines independence in ten years but reduced Filipinos to aliens. During WWII, President Roosevelt granted citizenship to those Filipinos who enlisted in the American army.

### *Chinese American Literature*

Like the first Ambassadors of Goodwill, Chinese American authors during WWII were seen as cultural mediators. Of these, the most important are Pardee Lowe and Jade Snow Wong. Both wrote autobiographical works. In Pardee Lowe's *Father and Glorious Descendant* (1943), the writer records "his reminiscences of [his] father and the relationship between the patriarch and the rest of the family" (Hsu and Palubinskas 16). *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) by Jade Snow Wong portrays the protagonist's struggle against sexual discrimination, racism, and a patriarchal system. The protagonist is finally free when she completes her Americanization process. Immediately after WWII, two authors stand forth: Diana Chang and C.Y. Lee. Diana Chang, who wrote *Frontiers of Love* in 1956, was the first American-born Chinese to publish a book in the United States. *Frontiers of Love* centers on identity issues of three Euroasians living in Shanghai. C.Y. Lee is the author of *The Flower Drum Song* (1957), in which the protagonist,



Mr. Wang, “a guardian of the rigid morals of old China, comes into conflict with his Americanized son” (Li L. 181).

### *Japanese American Literature*

The most known Nisei writer of the pre-war period is Toshio Mori. His collections of short stories *Yokohama, California* were to be issued in 1942, but the war postponed the publication until 1949. In *Yokohama, California*, “Mori takes his readers into the parlors and kitchens of Japanese American homes, into Oakland Japanese American ghetto, and finally into the assembly centers and war relocation camps” (Kim, *Asian American* 164). All of the characters are Japanese American, yet Mori does not exoticize them, rather he positions them in a larger social context (Yogi, “Japanese American” 131). Another example of Nisei pre-war writing are the poems of Toyo Suyemoto. She has not published a collection in 1950s, but her work appeared in the most influential Japanese American literary magazines. The agonies and the heroic resistance of the Japanese Americans in the internment camps are the themes of her poems (Hayashi 290).

After the internment experience, many Japanese Americans did not want to be reminded of their heritage and struggled to be assimilated into the mainstream America. In spite of these circumstances, Nisei continued to write (Yogi, “Japanese American” 134). According to Yogi, since Hawaiian Japanese suffered the shock of the internment camps on a smaller scale than their brothers in the mainland, it was easier for Hawaiian Nisei to write about the Japanese American experience (134). Perhaps the most famous accounts of the Japanese internment are given by Hisaye Yamamoto and Monica Sone. Though her collection of short stories, *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*, was not published in its entirety until 1988, Yamamoto’s most famous stories

were published between 1948 and 1960. Central to Sone's autobiography, *Nisei Daughter* (1953), is the relationship between Japanese mother and Japanese American daughter.

Even though it was almost ignored, *No-no Boy* was presented to the general public in the 1950s. *No-no Boy* is the only novel by John Okada to have been published. Okada's novel deals with the difficulties of readjustment of a no-no boy. No-no boys were Japanese Americans internees who replied "no" to the following questions posed by the American government: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?" and "Will you swear unqualified allegiances to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?" (Yogi, "One or the Other" 1). Clearly, these two questions were formulated to test Japanese Americans' love for the country of freedom and opportunities. Another novel to receive full recognition only later is *All I Asking for Is My Body* by Milton Murayama. The novel, originally published in 1959, deals with the life of a plantation family in Hawaii during the 1930-40s and "it is also one of the first works by a Nikkei to incorporate 'pidgin English'" (Yogi, "Japanese" 139).

### *Filipino American Literature*

The first important Filipino American writer is José García Villa, who started first as a writer of short stories and then turned to poetry. His collection of short stories *Footnote to Youth: Tales of the Philippines and Others* (1933) is semi-autobiographical. Like Villa, Carlos Bulosan, the best known Filipino American writer of this period, was born in the Philippines, but unlike Villa, who came to the United States to improve his education, Bulosan immigrated in search of

a job. Bulosan experienced firsthand the exploitation of Asian workers, but soon he started unionizing workers, fighting for both native and foreign-born seasonal laborers. His autobiographical novel *America Is in the Heart* (1946) aims at obtaining a better treatment for other Filipinos in the United States (Kim, *Asian American* 47). As many other Filipino writers, Bulosan believed that he had to address the American audience because America was considered by Filipino writers as the cultural center of the world and because America had better publishing facilities (47). In “Be American,” Bulosan shows his antithetical relationship with America. On one side, he portrays the hard life of Filipino laborers on the west coast. On the other, America “roll[s] like a beautiful woman with an overflowing abundance of fecundity and murmurous with her eternal mystery, there she lies before us like a great mother. To her we always return from our prodigal wanderings and searchings for an anchorage in the sea of life; from her we always draw our sustenance and noble thoughts , to add to her glorious history” (2081). America is here depicted like a mother nurturing her immigrant sons.

#### Claiming Asian American subjectivity (1960s-1980s)

More poetry and plays than fiction were produced in this period, but without doubt the fundamental literary event is the publication of *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974) edited by Frank Chin, Shawn Wong, Jeffrey Paul Chan, and Lawson Fusao Inada. *Aiiieeee!* is not only the first effort to anthologize the works of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American writers, but it is the first attempt to build an Asian American literary tradition. The editors vow to persevere in fighting against racist stereotypes and discrimination in order to claim an Asian American subjectivity. Thus, the need to assimilate, prevalent in the previous periods, seems to have been substituted by the urge to assert an Asian Americanness. According

to Wong and Santa Ana, male and female Asian American writers work in different ways in building a national subject. While male writers try to rescue male Asians from emasculating caricatures by resorting to both historical and imaginary, highly masculine figures, female writers work to establish a “a matrilineal heritage” through mother-daughter relationship (Wong and Santa Ana 195). Writers of this period, in fact, continue to portray conflicts between Asian parents and American-born children, often privileging the new Asian American identity over the parents’ Asian ways.

This period is also characterized by a diversification in the Asian population. In 1965, immigration restrictions were lifted and Asian countries had the same quotas as other European countries. The Vietnam War (1959-75) caused many from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam to immigrate to the United States. “By the 1980s the Asian American population was predominantly immigrant” (Adams 139). How did the American-born Asians react to this immigration surge? “They exacerbate[d] their situation by stereotyping immigrants and by comparing them to animals and, more often, by describing their physical appearance as revolting” (Adams 138). Even though this attitude cannot be excused, it can perhaps be historically situated. Writers and characters needed to distance themselves from the newly arrived immigrants in order to accentuate their Americanness.

### *Chinese American Literature*

The time frame 1960s-80s is marked by the “pen war,” as Adams calls it, between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston (101). Chin accused Kingston (and others, such as David Henry Hwang and Amy Tan) of inventing Chinese customs or presenting new versions of Chinese traditions. Kingston admitted she was resorting to memories and mythology, yet she was

dumbfounded at the aspects of her book praised by American critics. “I had not calculated how blinding stereotyping is, how stupefying. The critics who said how the book was good because it was, or was not, like the oriental fantasy in their heads might as well have said how weak it was, since it in fact did not break through that fantasy” (qtd in Adams 87). What American critics including Chin did not understand was that Kingston was trying to show how these myths were being revised in an American context.

In his plays, *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974) as well as in his short stories, Frank Chin “is determined to forge a uniquely ‘Chinaman’ language fusing the cadences of Cantonese and urban black vernacular to the English Language” (Wong, “Chinese American” 48). Chin was influenced by Louis Chu’s *Eating a Bowl of Tea: A Novel of New York Chinatown* (1961). In this novel, Chu portrays the figure of the emasculated, bachelor-society-man, whom Chin wants to rescue and transform into a more masculine Chinese American individual. Maxine Hong Kingston is best known for *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1975) and *China Men* (1977). While *The Woman Warrior* is about life as a Chinese woman, *China Men* depicts the experience of living as Chinese and as a human being (Tyler 211). In building a Chinese American female identity and in rescuing the abjected Asian woman, Kingston received the help of Amy Tan. Although Amy Tan is still an active writer (*Saving Fish from Drowning* came out in 2005), her most famous novel is *The Joy Luck Club*, in which she explores the relationship between Chinese mothers and American daughters. Despite her commercial success, Tan is often accused of reinforcing the dichotomy between West and East by presenting Asia as socially backward. Asian women, oppressed by a patriarchal system, have no other way out than to immigrate to America. Of stereotyping Asians is accused David Henry Hwang as well, especially in his play *FOB* (fresh off the boat). Hwang’s

most successful play is *M. Butterfly* (1989), in which a French diplomat falls in love with a Chinese opera singer, who turns out to be a man, thus queering the original *Madame Butterfly* by Puccini. Another noteworthy author is Chuang Hua, whose novel *Crossings* is the most significant example of high modernism Chinese American literature (Wong, “Chinese American” 49). Among poets, the names of Li-Young Lee, who recently won the Fellowship of the Academy of American Poets, and Arthur Sze, who won the American Book Award in 1996, stand out.

### *Japanese American Literature*

Japanese American literature of this period is dominated by poetry and drama. The most distinguished poets are: Garrett Hongo, Mitsuye Yamada, Lawson Fusao Inada, Janice Mirikitani, David Mura, and Ai. Both Inada and Mirikitani focus on war and on the rediscovery of Issei and Nisei heritage. In his collection of poems *After We Lost Our Way* (1989), Mura attempts to demonstrate to the reader the connection that exists between the identity of an individual and the historical events s/he is bound to go through (Kamada 245). Ai is the winner of the American Book Award in 1986 for *Sin* and of the National Book Award in 2000 for *Vice*. Ai claims no single ethnicity, being of mixed race- predominantly Japanese and African American. Her racial identity informs her work, which is centered around “the theme of transcendence beyond spiritual or bodily trauma” (Goodspeed-Chadwick). Ai and playwright Velina Hasu Houston share the same racial background. Houston’s *Tea* (1985), explores the dynamics within the community of Japanese American war brides in Kansas. While Momoko Iko’s *Gold Watch* directly stages the experience of the internment camps, Gotanda’s *A Song for a*

*Nisei Fisherman* (1983) and *Sisters Matsumoto* (1999) explore the effects of this terrible historical mistake.

### *Korean American*

The most anthologized Korean Asian American writer is Cathy Song, who wrote *Picture Bride* (1983), *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light: Poems* (1988) among many other collections of poems (Huang, *Columbia Guide* 206). To all, her work is central the experience of women (Sato 277). Among the fiction writers, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha is the Korean American author who has generated most scholarship, followed by Richard E. Kim, Ty Pak, and Ronyoung Kim. All, except for Ronyoung Kim, were born in Korea. In Cha's *Dictee* (1982) the main topic is the division of Korea in two separate states and "the paradox of identity: a distinct 'Korean' ethnonationality that has been irrevocably transformed by a history of foreign invasions, colonial reculturations, and transnational migrations" (Kang 33). Richard E. Kim is the only Korean author ever nominated for a Nobel Prize. His last book, *Lost Names: Scenes from a Korean Boyhood* (1970) portrays the traumatic conditions of Korean American under the Japanese occupation. Ty Pak's collection of short stories *Guilt Payment* was published in 1983. These short stories "highlight the incongruity of the immigrant's Korean American life with [the] Korean past" (164). In Ronyoung Kim's *Clay Walls* (1986), Haesu and Chun are a young couple that attempts to adjust to the new American life they have been forced to choose, since Chun was unjustly accused of participating in illegal activities against the Japanese government.

### *Filipino American Literature*

Apart from Bulosan, the second best-known Filipino American author is Santos Bienvenido. His *What the Hell for You Left Your Heart in San Francisco* (1989) "could be

considered the quintessential Filipino American novel to date [...]. Not only is its setting American, but also are its characters and the attitudes and values that they cling to or pervert in the course of their lives” (Gonzalez 70). Of ten years earlier is *Scents of Apples: A Collection of Short Stories*, which can be considered an example of diasporic work, since the protagonists prefer the Philippines to the United States and long to going back there one day. Worth mentioning is also Linda Ty-Casper, author of *Awaiting Trespass (A Pasión)* (1985) and *Wings of Stone* (1986). *Awaiting Trespass* is a passion<sup>i</sup>, and “like the passion of Jesus Christ, deals with the suffering and agonies of ordinary people under the tyrannical rule of martial law implemented by the Marcos regime” (Huang, *Columbia Guide*).

#### *South Asian American Literature*

South Asian American writers are artists that immigrated from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh and whose work focuses on such issues as colonial tyranny, postcolonialism, caste system, and diaspora. Ketu H. Katrak distinguishes between two generations of South Asian American writers. The first one belongs to the 1950s and 1960s and includes poets such as Zulfikar Ghose, author of *The Loss of India* (1964) and A.K. Ramanujan, who wrote *Speaking of Siva* (1973) also worked after the 1970s (“South Asian,” 196). Perhaps, the most critical texts in this time frame are *Meatless Days* and *Jasmine*, both published in 1989. In *Meatless Days*, a memoir, Sara Suleri describes the experiences of women in her family as they are shaped by Pakistan’s violent history. In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee “maps the immigrant experience of a protagonist who finds the West exciting and full of possibilities; Jasmine transforms herself by finding an authentic American identity” (Singh 241). Together with Chinese American Amy Tan, Mukherjee often reinforces the binary opposition between East and West.



### Diasporic Selves (1990s-present)

This period sees a further diversification of the Asian presence in the United States due to the relocation of South East Asian refugees and the semi-voluntary immigration of professionals from South Asia. As a result, writers discuss ethnic heterogeneity, while they continue to fight ethnic essentialism. In the 1990s, writers and critics alike focus on the effect that (neo)colonialism and imperialism had on the agency of the subaltern, but since the 2000s, they have shifted to the way in which forces of globalization and transnationalism contribute to the formation of identity. Moreover, the crumbling of nation-states directs the attention toward the experiences of diasporic individuals. Inevitably, Asian American writers play a part in defining postmodernism and in turn postmodernism influences Asian American texts. To portray the postmodernist fragmented self, writers move away from discussing their characters simply in terms of ethnicity, and explore other aspects of identity, such as gender, sexuality, and class. This is not to say that male writers have stopped fighting against the stereotypes of the Asian male subject and female writers have renounced subverting the patriarchal order. On the contrary, both male and female writing revise manhood and womanhood taking into consideration sexuality and socioeconomic status. Because in this time frame, there has been an explosion in the publication of Asian American texts, I will discuss only the most significant.

### *Chinese American Literature*

Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Shawn Wong, one of the editors of *Aiiieeeee!*, continue publishing successfully in the 1990s to the present. Authors Gish Jen and David Wong

Louie are quite well-known in the academic world. Jen's and Wong's novels deal with experiences of assimilation. Rising stars are Lan Samantha Chang, whose book *Hunger: A Novella and Short Stories* (1998) follows two sisters as they move from China to Taiwan and finally to America, Alexander Kuo, whose work *Lipstick and Other Stories* (2000) "explores cross-cultural issues related to China and the United States" (Huang, *Columbia Guide*), and Faye Myenne Ng, whose latest novel *Steer toward Rock* was published in 2008. Ng, though, is most famous for *Bone*, which "sabotage[s] the stereotypes traditionally associated with Asian American literature as primarily centering on a quest for origins and/or identity" (Izzo 138). Homonymous Mei Ng published only one novel, but *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998) is the first Asian American work to openly discuss bisexuality. Perhaps, the Chinese American writer whose work best reflects the changes in the definition of the Asian American subjectivity is Patricia Chao. Her 2005 *Mambo Peligroso*'s protagonist is half Japanese and half Cuban. Thus, we have a Chinese writer writing about a different ethnicity than her own and discussing issues related to mixed-raced people. In poetry, noteworthy are John Yau and Timothy Liu. Yau's poetry concentrates on how meaning, including the meaning of ethnicity, "is always deferred, always residing elsewhere" (Mar 84). Liu's poetry deconstructs the prejudices against Asian gay men.

### *Japanese American Literature*

The literature of this period is dominated by women: Lois-Ann Yamanaka (Japanese Hawaiian), Karen Tei Yamashita, Cynthia Kadohata, Julie Shigekuni, and Kimiko Hahn. Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* (1997) caused a scholarly stir because of the stereotypical portrayal of Filipinos. Yamashita has had her share of scholarly attention, but for a different reason.

Yamashita's "writing ...defies simple categorization. Three of her four novels are set outside the United States" (Hsu 75). Cynthia Kadohata's two novels *The Floating World* (1989) and *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (1992) "not only follow the long literary tradition of stories of coming-of-age but also contribute to a postmodern form of fiction. Cast within a loose and free-associative structure, both narratives stitch together a series of disjointed episodes and render a seemingly progressive journey" (Yu 121). In her last novel, *Unending Nora* (2008), Shigekuni joins authors like Mirikitani and Yamamoto in revoking the Japanese internment camps. Hahn's book of poems, *The Unbearable Heart*, won the American Book Award in 2008. "Hahn's thematic concerns and technical strategies demonstrate a feminist poetics that represents the female body as a site of contending ideologies" (Xiaoqing 180).

### *Korean American*

Korean Hawaiian author Nora Okja Keller's fiction is dominated by a "transnational appropriation of Korean history and myths .... In *Fox Girl* [, for example, Keller] incorporates the fable of fox girl into the story of a young sex worker on a US military camp town in Korea" (Schultermandl 10). Korean Hawaiian Gary Pak's works instead focus on the Hawaiian community. Besides Okja Keller and Pak, three other significant writers are Susan Choi, Chang-rae Lee, and Don Lee. In her *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, Betsy Huang defines *American Woman* by Choi a work of Asian American crime fiction. In this category, could fit Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, in which "language become the figure that equates both Puritans and Chinese as...immigrants from other lands with equal claims upon the privileges of citizenship" (Corley 61). In his latest novel, *Wrack and Ruin* (2008), Don Lee returns to the town of Rosarita Bay, which he created for *Yellow* (2001). Among the poets, the

most successful is Myung Mi Kim, whose poetry collection *Under Flag* (1991) investigates the fragmentedness of Korean women's identity.

Less well-known fiction writers are Sook Nyul Choi, Mary Paik Lee, and Leonard Chang. In her two novels, *Year of Possible Goodbyes* (1991) and *Echoes of the White Giraffe* (1993), both set in Korea, Choi portrays the life of under the Japanese occupation. Lee's *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America* (1990) is set both in Hawaii and in California and narrates the story of a Korean American family and her struggle with poverty and racism. Strangely enough, the protagonists are all men and the worst racists are white women (Kim, "Korean" 169). Chang's first novel, *The Fruit 'n Food* (1996), "depicts the economic, social, and cultural sources of the tensions between Korean Americans and African Americans" (Kich).

### *Filipino American*

Filipino American literature of this period centers around three figures: Han Ong, Jessica Hagedorn, and Peter Bacho. In *Fixer Chao* (2001), Ong "not only looks at the way transnational labor and people figure in the United States, but also gives a wry and humorous view of the way culture from the third world has been received, marketed, and commodified" (Ty 152). *The Gangster of Love* by Hagedorn has an open ending. At the beginning of the book, Filipina teenager Rocky is forced to follow her brother and mother to the United States. In America, Rocky pursues her own version of the American dream, but after her mother's death, Rocky visits her demented father in the Philippine. The book ends here without telling the reader if Rocky returns to the Philippines for good. Bacho's *Nelson's Run* was published in 2002, eleven years after *Cebu*. In both novels Bacho focuses on the theme of sexuality. His latest novel is a true product of the ethnic literary scene of the last ten years; as many other ethnic American

writers, in *Leaving Yesler* (2010), Bacho recounts the identity crisis of a young mixed race (black, Puerto Rican, and Filipino).

### *South Asian Literature*

While Mukherjee continues to publish, Meena Alexander, who wrote poetry through the 70s and 80s, is reborn as a fiction writer. In *Nampally Road*, Mira teaches Wordsworth's poems in India, but realizes that British have nothing to do with the reality outside the classroom. "Mira's plight symbolizes the rupture in identity implied in the history of British imperialism in India" (Shah, "Meena" 24). The main character in *Manhattan Music* attempts suicide to reconcile her Indian with her American identity. Along with Mukherjee, scholars are very much interested in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Her collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1995) "is thematically unified and explores, questions, rearticulates, and redefines the South Asian cultural construction of the feminine" (Moka-Dias 88). Her novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) testifies to the author's use of Indian oral traditions and story-telling. However, the most anthologized author in this category is Jhumpa Lahiri, whose short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), won the Pulitzer Prize. As Divakaruni, Lahiri, too, explores the topic of arranged marriage, in her novel, *The Namesake* (2003). Two other authors worth mentioning are Indira Ganesan and Thrity Umrigar. *The Journey* (1990) presents Ganesan's version of the trope of the American-born child who travels back to her parents' mother country. In Umrigar's latest novel, *If Today Be Sweet* (2007), an Indian widow must decide to keep living in Bombay or to join her son in America.

One of the major South Asian contemporary poets was Agha Shahid Ali, who wrote *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991) and *The Country without a Post Office* (1997). In "one of the central poems of *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, [Ali] utilizes the formal features and

phrases of Emily Dickinson's poetry in order to trace the loss of a friend to AIDS" (Shah, "Agha" 32). In his second poetry collection, the central theme is the violence in Kashmir, which the author explores through the impossibility of communication because all postoffices have been shut down (Shah, "Agha" 32).

### *South East Asia*

The most anthologized South Asian American authors are Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Wendy Law-Yone. The first one is a Malaysian American poly writer. She wrote a memoir, various volumes of poetry, short stories, novels, and she is also a remarkable feminist critic. Through her lyrical language in *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homeland* (1996), Lim narrates her life in Malaysia and her experiences as a student in the United States. Themes of identity, transition and the emigration from Asia to America dominate her poetic work as well. *The Coffin Tree* (1985) by Burmese American Wendy Law-Yone "is a novel in the form of a memoir being written by an unnamed woman recalling her childhood in Burma and her subsequent immigration to the United States" (T.C. Ho 108). Both Monique Truong and Thi Diem Thúy lê left Vietnam on boats. Truong is the author of *The Book of Salt* (2003) and *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010), in which the ethnic identity of the narrator is revealed only near the end. When asked why she made this narrative decision, Truong answered that she did not want her protagonist to be marked only by her ethnicity (Personal Interview). According to Betsy Huang, in *The Gangster We are All Looking For* (2004), lê "restructures the relation between the gaze of the dominant culture and the immigrant-refugee as object by appropriating the power of the colonial/assimilationist eye. To that end, lê controls the narrative design ... through atypical autobiographical techniques" (19). For example, she uses vignettes and arranges them in non-

chronological order. As Lê, Lan Cao too writes about the Vietnamese refugee experience, in *Monkey Bridge* (1997). Rising star is poet and novelist Linh Dinh. Dinh's collection of short stories, *Fake House* (2000), explores the relationship Vietnamese Americans have with Vietnam.

The reasons behind my choice of authors, Truong, Bacho, Jen, and Dinh, are both academic and personal. Since the first day I arrived in this country, I have been fighting against the centripetal forces of this vortex that is America. Little by little, America forces you to undergo a cleansing process, through which all your non-American identity traits are eliminated or at least minimized. Once you are at the bottom of the vortex, you are completely sanitized and ready to function in an American society. Consequently, I did not select texts from the first two periods because most Chinese and Japanese authors do not adopt a critical stance toward assimilation. As I previously stated, the decades of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s are dominated by an urge to construct an Asian American subject and to establish an Asian American tradition based on western traditions. The authors of this period tend to portray an antagonistic relationship between the West and the East and foreground nationalistic matters. I wasn't interested in the early stages of development of the Asian American subject because I needed more mature writers who did not reinforce the binary opposition between western and eastern culture. Out of the last period, there are a number of texts I could have studied. For example, I could have chosen Ng's *Eating Chinese Food Naked* or Keller's *Comfort Woman* for their treatment of sexuality, but these texts don't tackle assimilation critically; they simply assume their non-assimilated self are inferior to their assimilated one. Initially, I was going to examine *The Gangster of Love*, as Hagedorn doesn't privilege the country of origin over the country of adoption as do many authors of the second and third period. *Gangster*, however, received mainly

negative reviews, due to the fragmented narrative structure. I also considered on Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homeland*, but I wanted to concentrate on fiction.

I was immediately fascinated by Bacho's treatment of religion and sexuality in *Cebu*, but above all, I knew I had found my text when I reached the ending. The death of the protagonist reveals that the process of assimilation isn't always successful. *Cebu* is in a way the negation of the American dream. At that point, I needed to contrast *Cebu* with a book in which the protagonist achieved the American dream, yet still resisted assimilation. *Mona in the Promise Land* was the perfect fit and dealt with the theme of religion. This study, however, begins with *The Book of Salt*. At the end of the novel, not only does Bính not privilege America over the country where he has recently immigrated, but he is also left "stateless" (Troung, "Personal Interview"). Lastly, while most Vietnamese novels center on the refugee experience and portray America as the country that saved the "boat people" from an evil country, Dinh's short stories criticize openly the relationship between the United States and Vietnam.

Before delving into the power relations that are born out of the intermingling of identity modalities, I interrogate the terms "diaspora," "transnationalism," and "immigration" to lay the foundations of my argument in chapter one. As William Safran and Robin Cohen's definitions reveal, lists of criteria that identify who is and who is not diasporic read like requirements for a job: one either qualifies or one does not. Most importantly, the point of departure for the definitions of "diasporic" and "transnational" has thus far been the nation-state. In order to depart from these mechanical notions of diaspora, I argue that diaspora should not be considered a fixed condition but a transitional one. In this way, we as scholars can not only disrupt the binary opposition home/host country, but we are also able to consider the other countries through



which the diasporan travels and the kinds of relationships she establishes and with whom. Examining diaspora as a transitional status helps study those immigrants who present “diasporic dimensions,” to use a Cliffordian term (303), so that we can close the gulf between diasporans and immigrants despite some scholars’ resistance. In the course of interrogating the aforementioned terms, I also notice that scholars prioritize ethnicity and nationality over class, gender, and sexuality in their conceptions of diaspora. I urge scholars not to simply focus on one single modality; rather, I invite them to investigate the intersection between these modalities.

My re-envisioning of diaspora also benefits the relationship between Asian American studies and diaspora studies in spite of the doubts of scholars such as David Leiwei Li and Sauling Wong who fear that a diasporic perspective disregards issues of racism, citizenship, and class. I acknowledge Li and Wong’s concerns, especially because scholars tend to romanticize the figure of the diasporan; yet, comparing the journeys of diasporic individuals with the experiences of migrants who have been in the United States for some time might uncover new power relations, as long as the experiences of diasporans are contextualized in time and place. Kandice Chuh, author of *Imagine Otherwise*, seconds a diasporic approach, but she also proposes to erase race and nationality as grounds on which Asian Americans negotiate their subjectivity because she believes a national subject is no longer a possibility for Asian Americans. I disagree with her claim, and I assert instead that Asian American discourse should investigate the interaction between modalities such as religion, ethnicity, language, and sexuality to uncover other ways to narrate Asian American subjectivity. In the chapters two, three, and four I showcase my approach to Asian American and diasporic literature, with analyses of *The Book of Salt*, *Cebu*, *Mona in the Promised Land*, “‘!’,” and “Prisoner with a Dictionary.”

I begin the second chapter by claiming that the terms “postcolonial,” “neocolonial,” and “diasporic,” if considered in isolation, do not describe Ben Lucero, the protagonist of *Cebu*, thus reinforcing the idea that my approach would lead to a better understanding of Bacho’s character. Through the analysis of the intersection between sexuality and ethnicity, I prove that sexuality causes Ben’s ethnic crisis, which then turns into an existential one. Even though he is a Catholic priest, Ben has an affair with Ellen Labrado, a Filipina. Ellen is not of Malayan or Chinese descent; she is Filipina American. Her ethnicity allows Bacho to avoid the criticism that he hypersexualizes a non-white woman. Bacho plays with the myth of the Caucasian mestiza, too. Though Ellen’s physical aspect resembles that of Maria Clara, who is the betrothed of the Filipino-Spaniard protagonist of Jose Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* and who, in turn, is modeled after the Virgin Mary, Ellen is a prostitute. Moreover, without knowing, Ellen confirms the stereotypes Americans have of Filipino. For Ben, the affair with a Filipina confirms his deepest fear, that he is indeed Filipino. Even though Ben has tried to resist being Filipino all his life, a revelatory nightmare shows he is also afraid of not being Filipino and of being able to survive in such an ethnically plagued society such as the American one without claiming an ethnicity.

In the second chapter, I also consider how the interaction between sexuality and ethnicity affects the ideology of nationalism and how it transforms the meaning of home in *The Book of Salt*. In his father’s home, Truong’s protagonist, Bính, has no gender. It is through the relationship with Blériot, the French Chef of the governor’s house where Bính works, that Bính’s gender is recognized, and it’s only when the farmers at the market notice that Blériot and Bính are lovers that the Vietnamese Bính acquires a sexual identity. Bính queers the relationship between colonizer and colonized and the foundation of the empire in several ways: he belongs to a lower social class; his ethnicity renders Blériot and himself culpable of miscegenation; his

sexuality exposes a different kind of threat that lies not in “yellow men raping white women” but in “yellow men raping white men.” The masculinity of the empire is questioned, and the colonizers appear vulnerable and easy to overthrow. Five years after he relocates to Paris, Bính receives a letter from his brother who urges him to return home, but Bính decides to remain in the French city for several reasons. The death of the father does not guarantee the eradication of the ideology of heterosexuality and patriarchy from Bính’s old home. The encounter with Ho Chi Minh, the man on the bridge, has a profound impact on the Vietnamese cook. However, his decision not to leave for Vietnam doesn’t mean Paris is presented as the stereotypically liberating place. Homosexuality might be acceptable if the partners are white; same-sex relationships between people of another race do not epitomize liberation from sexual norms but fall into animalistic behavior. I also show how, through the relationship between Bính and the man on the bridge, Truong defies the ideology of nationalism. If the nation state requires ethnical homogeneity and heterosexuality, which Ho Chi Minh suggests Bính embraces resists cultural homogeneity, and by depicting Ho Chi Minh as gay, Truong dislodges sexual homogeneity as well.

In the first half of the third chapter, I examine the relationship between religion and colonization and how this relationship affects ethnicity in *Cebu*. When Ben travels to Manila to bury his mother, he witnesses the crucifixion of one of his aunt’s employees, Carlito. I argue that Carlito’s crucifixion destroys Ben’s image of Catholicism as a unified religion, i.e. a religion that offers only one interpretation of the events in the Bible. In Lyotardian terms, Ben is looking for consensus in a place where there is none. The lack of consensus brings him to question his position within the Church and within society. After abandoning his subject position temporarily because of the affair with Ellen, Ben reassumes it when assisting a Filipino at the protest against

the Americans. Ben's "remembering" in front of the American embassy in Manila that he is a priest cannot be simply cast as fortuitous. It is his ethnicity - or better what *he* considers his ethnicity - that revives his religious position. It is his Americanness that informs his faith. Back in Seattle, Ben feels he has completely recovered his faith and his training, though he feels the need to distance himself from Seattle's recent Filipino immigrants. However, *Cebu's* protagonist is fighting a lost battle as an episode of barkada marks the return of his old ghosts. Towards the end of the novel, Ben has yet another chance to prove he is truly a priest when a young Filipino confesses to having committed a murder. When the latter points his gun at Ben demanding absolution, Ben asks God to decide. When he refuses to absolve the Filipino, he thus condemns himself to death. Bacho's priest is a meek, indecisive, and cowardly character, who, rather than taking action, waits passively for something to happen or for someone to act in his place. But this time, not reacting is fatal. By failing as a priest, he also fails as the prototypical second generation immigrant who fights hard to achieve the American dream. In contrast to Bhabha's claim that the process of splitting in the colonized leads to agency, Ben's hybridity doesn't empower him. Quite the opposite, it condemns him to death. Ben fails as a hybrid because, in an American context, ethnicity overpowers the other modalities of sexuality, religion, gender, age, and economic background.

In the second half of this chapter, I analyze the relationship between religion and ethnicity in *Mona in the Promised Land*. Contrary to the claim that Jen celebrates postethnicity in her novel, I contend that the author asserts how racial essentialism is still ingrained in American society and, thus, self-affiliation doesn't necessarily mean society will perceive the individual as he or she wishes to be perceived. Despite all her efforts, Mona Chang, the protagonist of *Promised Land*, is in fact not perceived as an American. Ethnicity should indeed

be examined as a question of perception and not in terms of naturalness and authenticity since no individual could claim successfully to be authentic if the recognition of his or her identity depends on another individual. Additionally, I refute the argument that Mona becomes Jewish because as a Chinese American she lacks wholeness. We, as scholars, can't rely on concepts of wholeness to analyze hybrid characters because we would only perpetuate racism and exoticism. I argue instead that through her conversion Mona is trying to fight against racial essentialism and family expectations.

In my last chapter, I maintain that the interaction between class and language reinforces Bính's subalternity. Despite his brother's insistence, Bính does not learn to speak French fluently. Unlike his brother, he knows a Frenchman will always consider him inferior no matter how well he can speak the colonizer's language. Although Bính's unwillingness to learn more than a few words might empower him in Vietnam and although one could even judge his behavior as resistance against the empire, once in Paris, his limited French prevents him from communicating with his potential employers, thus appearing untrustworthy and unsuitable for any position. Moreover, language or lack of it emphasizes his powerlessness by denying his existence. If he can't speak to other people, it is as if he doesn't exist. The encounter with Lattimore, Gertrude Stein, and Alice B. Toklas appears promising for Bính's situation. Nonetheless, though at first Bính's alter egos, "Bee" and "Thin Bin," seem to empower the Vietnamese cook by allowing him to think of a different future for himself, language and class pair together to suppress Bính's voice.

By interacting with colonization, language emphasizes the submission of the colonized in "'!" and in "Prisoner with a Dictionary," by Linh Dinh, as well. The hyperreality that America sells to Vietnam creates the need for Vietnamese to learn how to be American. Although the

protagonists of both stories buy into this system, one may contend that, at the same time, they defy the empire by inventing a new language. Yet, both their creations rely on a fake reality born out of a hyperreality constructed by the empire in the first place.

In the introduction to *Queer Diasporas*, the editors Benigno Sánchez-Eppler and Cindy Patton state, “[I]dentity is viewed as strategic, rather than essential, contingent on, reproduced, decaying, co-opted, in relation to material and discursive factors that, especially in the context of sexualities, are always a complex lamination of local onto global onto local. Sexuality is not only essence, not timeless, it is also not fixed in place; sexuality is on the move” (2). I agree with the editors’ claim that sexuality is affected by economic, political, social restructurings and local or global changes of residence. Sánchez-Eppler and Patton, as well as other scholars I have read, conclude that local and global movements affect identity, yet they do not examine the forces behind these changes. In my dissertation, I analyze these forces and investigate how they intersect and what type of new power relations form as a result of these intersections using a new approach, one I hope will be adopted by other scholars.

## 1 A NEW APPROACH TO DIASPORIC STUDIES AND ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

This dissertation grew out of the necessity to find a new term for describing immigrants whose experiences present “diasporic dimensions,” yet are not considered diasporic and to simultaneously respond to the complaints of various scholars, as we shall see below, about the conflation of the term “diasporic,” “transnational,” and “immigrant.” That said, the problem does not lie so much in the allegedly merging of these terms, but in their obsolete, mechanic, and rigid definitions. Scholars parameters for defining diaspora and consequently transnationalism and immigration, as established by the privileging of the Jewish experience, and of forced dispersions at the expense of other (voluntary) diasporic/immigrant realities cannot account for the socio-economic, political, ethnic, religious, sexual, gender and age-related oppressions that the twenty-first century diasporic/immigrant has to face. For example, should only communities who were fortunate enough to establish home institutions in the host country deserve the title of diasporic? Should long-term resident aliens who “willingly,” says Spivak, and I add, “or unwillingly,” suspend their civil rights because insecure of where they will go next be considered simply immigrants? (“Resident Alien,” 47). To address these and other closely linked debates, which I cover in this chapter, I propose diaspora should not be seen as fixed but as a transitional status. Moreover, I exhort scholars to examine the interaction between identity components such as sexuality, language, religion, and ethnicity. Because of their increasing diasporic dimension, my approach to diaspora also benefits Asian American studies, though for a different set of reasons. Although the Asian American movement was born to claim American subjectivity for its constituents, Asian Americans were turned into the model minority with a dual result. It highlighted their foreignness rather than their Americanness, and it divided Chinese and Japanese from Filipino, Koreans, and Vietnamese. Asian Americans were condemned to become

ethnic Americans. To restore justice, in her book *Imagine Otherwise*, Chuh suggests adopting a subjectless discourse, but her proposed theory disallows nationality and ethnicity as modalities Asian Americans should engage with to claim America. Since I believe that a world without racism is a chimera, I highly doubt that disregarding national and ethnic narratives of subjectivity will help the United States move forward as a country. In fact, my approach entails analyzing the interplay of different identity modalities so as to discover new ways of narrating experiences of American subjectivity.

### 1.1 Transnationalism and Diaspora Reconsidered

Steven Vertovec laments that the meanings of the terms “international,” “transnational,” and “diasporic” are often blended together. I investigate the concepts of transnationalism and diaspora to attempt a clarification, and I dwell on the definition of diaspora for the purpose of this chapter. I don’t expect my findings to be the ultimate answer to the confusion between the two terms, nor to be exhaustive; rather, they point to the stagnant and mechanical definitions of diaspora that can no longer encompass the experiences of individuals living in the twenty-first century.

One of the most-cited definitions of transnationalism is the one given by Basch et al. in their seminal work *Nations Unbound* (1994).

We define “transnationalism” as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships – familial,



economic, social, organizational, religious, and political – that span borders we call “transmigrants.” (7)

Bash et al. highlight the relationship between the immigrants’ homeland and hostland.

Interestingly, Basch et al. refute the term “hostland” and propose instead “country of settlement” because, in their opinion, “hostland” presupposes that the country where the immigrants settle down is willing to accept newcomers. Moreover, “hostland” emphasizes that newcomers are temporary guests. However, for stylistic reasons, I will use both terms. In *Transnationalism* (2009), Vertovec departs from the binary opposition home/host country and describes transnationalism as “sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders –businesses, non-government organizations, and individuals sharing the same interests (by way of criteria such as religious beliefs, common cultural and geographic origins)” (3). Vertovec is quick to specify that formal relationships involving governments, the import-export of goods, and the across-nation travel still fall under the term “international.” Kokot et al. (2004) also stress the high frequency of movements across nations, and add that transnationalism is not a novelty, but that it has intensified with the economic changes in a postmodern world. In *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Ong distinguishes between “transnationality” and “transnationalism.” While transnationality is “the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space” (4), transnationalism “refer[s] to the cultural specificities of global processes, tracing the multiplicity of the uses and conceptions of ‘culture’” (4). For example, some European countries’ cultural identity has suffered because of globalization, whereas in Asia global practices have had a more positive outcome (Ong 17); Chinese entrepreneurs have begun to practice, what Ong calls, flexible citizenship, since “the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement ...

induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (6). In other words, some people hold multiple passports, and children might have parents living in separate countries. These practices are not an invention of postmodern society, yet, according to Ong, under late capitalist conditions, individuals embrace this transnationality rather than choosing to simply settle down in one place.

Despite enticing developments in the field of transnationalism, such as Ong’s, the nation-state seems to be the pin around which all the above definitions turn. “‘Transnational’... foregrounds in a peculiar manner the importance of the nation as prime protector of a subject’s legal identity, the nation state being still the first guarantor of property rights, human rights, and lading bills” (Lim, “Being Diasporic” 254). Although scholars are enthusiastic about transnationalism, they seem to forget that leading a transnational life might not be as empowering as they deem. Other scholars such as Lim and Vertovec are responsive to this problem and urge theorists to distance themselves from the nation-state as the pivoting force in analyzing the change brought on by globalization. Diaspora studies are also guilty of using the nation-state as the main referent for their theories. Yet, while transnationalism reinforces the role of the nation state, “experiences of unsettlement, loss, and recurring terror produce discrepant temporalities – broken histories that trouble the linear, progressivist narratives of nation-states” (Clifford 317). For Clifford, diasporas disrupt the progress of the nation-state, and through their cosmopolitan nature, question the assimilationist policy of certain countries; however, later on in this chapter, I will show the relativity of Clifford’s statement.

Diaspora stems from the Greek verb *diaspeirō*. “It is a compound of *speirō*<sup>ii</sup>, ‘to sow, to scatter’ like seed, and *dia* ‘from one end to the other’” (Vertovec 129). Up until the mid 1970s, the term “diaspora” referred mainly to the experience of the Jews. Later, scholars began to apply

it to peoples who had undergone similar difficulties as had the Jewish population. Although it is believed the term “diaspora” first appeared in the Bible, Sheffer asserts it can be found in Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War* written in 431 B.C. (8). Dufoix claims that in the Septuagint Bible, the product of the translation from the Hebrew text into Greek (third century BC), contrary to what scholars thought until recently, “diaspora” was not used to render “the Hebrew terms galut,<sup>iii</sup> galah, and golah. These were rendered in the Septuagint by several other Greek words... Instead, ‘diaspora’ always meant the threat of dispersion facing the Hebrews if they failed to obey God’s will, and it applied almost exclusively to divine acts” (4). “Diaspora” as associated to a dispersed group of people sharing religion and culture came only afterward (Dufoix 4). Dufoix’s explanation accounts partially for the depiction of the Jewish experience as catastrophic. In his crucial book, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Robin Cohen furthers Dufoix’s claim. Even though the majority of the Jewish population had been forced to scatter long before 70 AD, the Christian theologians depicted the destruction of the Second Temple in a disastrous tone because they wanted to underline that God had punished the Jews for killing his Son (Cohen 7).

In the last thirty years, the meaning “diaspora” has been stretched to cover a myriad of phenomena: the dispersal of ethnic communities, minorities oppressed within their own homeland, guest-workers, and corporate executives spending a considerable amount of time outside the country where they reside, to cite a few. Some have been debating whether immigrants, who do not belong to a minority, and who voluntarily migrate to another country, should be considered diasporans. For example, Sheffer makes the case for groups of elderly Europeans who retire in Italy or Spain. In the essay “Deconstructing and Comparing Diasporas,”

William Safran refuses to accept such flexibility, and he distinguishes between immigrants and diasporans.

Diasporas... represent 'the leading edge of globalization' because they are not merely minority communities; their members have moved around- that is, have emigrated from their native countries to other countries. This, of course, can be said of immigrants as such; but diasporas comprise special kinds of immigrants because they have retained a memory of, a cultural connection with, and a general orientation toward their homelands; they have institutions reflecting something of a homeland; they harbor doubts about their full acceptance by the hostland; they are committed to their survival as a distinct community; and many of them have retained a myth of return. (10)

Members of a diaspora believe they have common ancestors, they share social and cultural values and beliefs, their gaze is constantly turned towards their country of origin, and if the hostland permits, they try to build organizations that will help them keep in contact with the homeland.

Cohen seems more flexible in his characterization of diasporas<sup>iv</sup>. By comparing Safran's definition with Cohen's, one can see that Cohen retains most of Safran's features and contributes some of his own. In contrast with Safran, who only recognizes catastrophic dispersals, Cohen identifies several new types of diasporas: victim (Jewish, Armenian, and African), imperial (British), labor (Indians), trading (Chinese and Lebanese), and cultural (Caribbean). Both social scientists emphasize the cultural, often economic and political, commitment of diasporas to their *idealized* homeland and their yearning to return to their original land. Whereas Safran admits that a community of diasporans can be ethnic or religious, Cohen focuses only on ethnicity. In fact,

according to Cohen, even though they moved from Persia to India and then from India to Europe, Parsees are not a diaspora because they are a world religion and, in his opinion, world religions have no intention of returning to or founding a home. Cohen seems to conform to the trend of concentrating on the ethnicity and nationality of a community which started in the 1990s<sup>v</sup>. Religion was left aside as a feature of diaspora because, as Sheffer remarks, religions are transnational groupings. To be fair, however, in the second edition of his *Global Diasporas*, Cohen claims “world religion[s] [are] connected in various and complex ways to the diasporic phenomenon” (141). Moreover, in recent years, the study of the interrelatedness between religion and dispersion has regained territory (Cohen 141). Finally, continuing our comparison, while Cohen envisions the possibility that diasporas might thrive in the host country, Safran only focuses on the difficulties of settling in a new country. To Safran’s definition, Cohen also adds diasporas with the same ethnic background but living in separate countries might entertain a sympathetic relationship among each other.

Despite the groundbreaking works by Safran, Cohen, Sheffer, and their disciples, their studies “tend to regard diasporas as mechanistic, static, and divisive” (Goh<sup>vi</sup> 2). New diasporas form, old diasporas change, or their members assimilate in their country of settlement. Furthermore, Clifford warns against lists of features and ideal types of diaspora because communities might result in having some of the characteristics, thus they might “become identified as more or less diasporic” (306). These definitions read like the rules for the admission to a luxurious club, to which one is not admitted if she doesn’t meet all the requirements, and those who manage to be members seem to have been endowed with sanctity. In other words, diaspora is an ideological construct that needs undermining. In the next section, I propose a different approach for investigating diasporas that I hope will disrupt the ideology of diaspora.

## 1.2 A New Approach

To destabilize the existing notions of diaspóra, I argue that diaspora should not be considered a fixed condition but a transitional one and I invite scholars to analyze the interplay between modalities such as class, gender, age, sexuality, and religion. In the following pages, I present why my approach should be adopted.

Diasporas are sustained by institutions. If in the beginning, members of a diaspora might keep individual contacts with family back home, once they establish organizations, the majority of the interactions occur with counterpart institutions in the country from which they came (Sheffer 26). These institutions are established only if the “ethnic or religious community [has] an elite that is committed to the maintenance of a diasporic culture and ideology” (Safran 18). And yet, as Safran himself admits, “The retention of diasporic identity depends on the political institutions, ideologies and policies of the hostland” (18). Clearly, the more tolerant the country of settlement is, the easier it is for diasporic members to organize and institutionalize themselves. What happens to those peoples who decide or are forced to settle in a less welcoming country? If scholars adopt the notion of diaspora as a transitional state and simultaneously examine the interaction between the different identity modalities, they will be able to observe in what other ways and through what other means dispersed peoples might keep in touch with relatives or friends in their homeland, with natives in countries they passed, as well as with other diasporic subjects they might have encountered during their journeys.

Scholars have investigated the reasons why groups left their homes as well as the conditions in which diasporas were born; they have elucidated the consequences of a welcoming or unwelcoming host country. In short, most definitions of diasporas rest on the binary opposition between homeland and country of settlement, yet “the diasporic subject is often not

simply constructed or situated in a dichotomy of ‘home,’ ‘not-home’ or departure and arrival but also in triangulations of departures, journeys, temporary arrivals; or in complex locations of ‘home,’ ‘not-home,’ ‘temporary homes,’ ‘diasporic community home’ and so forth” (Lim, “Being Diasporic” 242). Scholars have distinguished between voluntary and involuntary dispersions. If we want to depart from the Jewish experience as the archetypal diaspora, we need to discriminate between the two types, Cohen claims. Sheffer has a different opinion. He firmly believes that the difference between voluntary and involuntary diasporas does not further the understanding of “the the nature of diasporas, their organization, and their behavior in host countries. This is especially true regarding the economic backgrounds of such migrants” (76). For Sheffer, the migrants’ richness or poorness at the onset of the dispersion doesn’t affect the conditions in which they will have to adjust to their new life because they will all bond over their immigrant fate and over their common ethnic-national background. Sheffer seems to have forgotten that members, within a single diaspora, might belong to different social classes. I concede that during the first few months rich and poor may help each other in completing forms, in finding a place to stay, etc., but soon enough class distinction resurfaces. Purely because diasporans come from the same country doesn’t necessarily mean they are going to bond and work together to build a community. They might form alliances with other diasporans of the same class but of a different nationality. Even in the case in which institutions are eventually established, the economic disproportion will continue to cause tension within the community. Scholars need to consider how class interacts with nationality and ethnicity to uncover other power struggles. I don’t mean to essentialize class, as other identity components such as sexuality and gender also interfere and produce additional and different power alignments. Nor do I suggest we should abandon nationality as a part of someone’s identity; yet, we should not

concentrate merely on one single modality; rather, we should examine the interplay of these modalities so as to deconstruct diaspora as an ideological construct. Moreover, analyzing the temporality of the different moments in the journey of the diasporan destabilizes the opposition home/host country, as a “shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important as the projection of a specific origin” (Clifford 306). Home might be the country where diasporic individuals came from, but the countries, the regions, the towns they passed have also helped shape the political, social, cultural beliefs, i.e. the identity they possess once in the host country.

Another problem in the definitions of diaspora is that diasporans share little with immigrants. Clifford asserts that people crossing the border between Mexico and California for work on a regular basis may not be diasporic, but “there may be, however, diasporic dimensions to their practices and cultures of displacements, particularly for those who stay long periods...” (303). I don’t wish to discuss here the difference between diasporas and borderlands,<sup>vii</sup> but it’s important to stress that while Clifford acknowledges a “diasporic dimension” to immigrants, for both Cohen and Safran immigrants are categorically two different species<sup>viii</sup>. In spite of this open-mindedness, Clifford argues that “In distinguishing ... affluent Asian business families living in North America from creative writers, academic theorists, and destitute ‘boat people’ or Khmers fleeing genocide, it will be apparent that degrees of diasporic alienation, the mix of coercion and freedom in cultural (dis)identifications, and the pain of loss and displacement are highly relative” (312-13). Even though it is true that Asian business families might experience displacement less acutely than extremely poor and genocide survivors might, the former may also be considered diasporic. Safran argues that “oppression is not a sine qua non of the diaspora condition,” but he also insists that a population which left their original country but now



constitutes the majority in the country of settlement loses the label of diaspora (15). For Safran, white, Anglo-Saxon protestants have turned into an oppressor of minorities, and for this reason they can't be considered diasporans.

Moreover, Clifford thinks that individuals who immigrate to countries with an assimilationist ideology suffer from nostalgia or loss only temporarily because they will soon realize their dreams (307). To believe that each immigrant will achieve success is a chimera. Safran claims, that since immigrants leave their home country in search of a better life, they willingly assimilate (11). Safran's statement might have been true a hundred and fifty years ago, but recent technologies, such as email, facebook, and skype enable immigrants to nurture a profound attachment and maintain loyalty to their home country.

The line between immigrants and diasporans is difficult to draw for several reasons:

Surveys and polls have shown that upon their arrival in host countries, very few migrants are emotionally or cognitively in a position to make a firm decision whether or not they intend to live away from their homelands permanently, and whether or not they wish to maintain their connections with the homelands.

Furthermore, relatively few immigrants or refugees who voluntarily decide to leave their homelands because of ideological and political reasons are driven by prior intentions to settle and integrate or assimilate into their host societies, on the one hand, or to join or organize diasporic entities, on the other. (Sheffer 77)

We don't have enough information on the reasons why individuals join a diaspora or choose/are forced to assimilate (Sheffer 72). What some scholars fail to remember is that one is not born a diasporan; one becomes a diasporan. Diaspora is not a fixed entity. It's a process. Moreover, "the time periods during which transient individuals and groups are allowed to remain and choose to

remain in host countries before they finally decide to settle there permanently, or migrate to a secondary or tertiary host country, or return to their homeland are highly variable, making generalizations difficult” (Sheffer 16). In a global world, in which transnational economic, political, and cultural activities occur more rapidly and more frequently than they did thirty years ago, people are relatively more mobile.

But what about entire communities in the United States which speak only Spanish and interact mainly with other Spanish speaking communities? For Clifford, they are not diasporas, as within three generations they will become ethnic Americans (311). Safran too thinks only time can tell if a community is a diaspora. “When does a transstate community begin? At dispersion? At the establishment of institutions that represent the group outside of space? When does it end?” (Dufoix 56). A diaspora lasts as long as its institutions maintain the diasporic culture alive, Safran replies; however, Dufoix charges these kinds of answers with “the illusion of continuity” (55). Not only are scholars such as Safran implying diasporas might last forever, but they also do not contemplate that the political and socio-economic conditions of the country of settlement could change. The home country too is not a fixed entity. In addition, Dufoix argues that essentializing diasporans’ experiences does not allow experts to trace the changes that might occur in diasporic subjects. For example, an economic diasporan could turn into a political one and vice versa; even though she might have moved to a new country for economic reasons, she could develop an interest in the politics of the home country. Or a diasporan who initially was an active political member might then decide to leave politics behind and remain in the host country where salaries are higher. If we considered the experiences of diasporans as transitional, we would be able to explore more attentively the similarities between diasporic and immigrant subjects. More importantly, this approach would also permit us to investigate how diasporas

need not remain forever oppressed minorities, and to examine more closely how a diaspora changes its nature, thus disrupting the ideology of continuity pointed out by Dufoix.

There have been other attempts to solve the problems regarding the definition of “diaspora.” Sheffer discusses the existence of incipient diasporas, “i.e. diasporas in the making, groups of migrant who are in the initial stages of forming organized diasporas” (75). His idea disrupts the notion that diaspora simply exists rather than came to be, but it emphasizes too strongly the nexus of ethnicity and nationality. Dufoix’s attempt is probably the one that departs the most from the canonical definitions of the diasporic condition. He proposes four modes to analyze the relationship between populations abroad and their “referent-origin,” the term he employs instead of homeland, and which does not have the negative connotations associated with homeland. The first mode is the centrop peripheral, in which the institutions of a national group have close contacts with the homeland and vice versa, but do not necessarily collaborate with each other. In the enclaved mode, local organizations aim at keeping people in touch with each other. “The enclave is based not on a formal link of nationality but on a shared identity” (62). In the atopic mode, the relationship between communities which share the same ethnicity, religion, and a common origin, but which live in different states. These communities have no interest in the regime in their home country. The last mode, the antagonistic, describes groups which share the same nationality but live in different states work together against the current government in the home state. Although Dufoix declares his model is not a typology, that none of the modes exist in a pure form, and that populations can move back and forth between the four modes, the relationship with the homeland is still the focus of his analysis. Yet, his analysis does acknowledge that “populations living abroad, whether or not united by nationality, do not necessarily share the same referent-origin” (66). If diaspora is seen as a transitional status, the

homeland will not be privileged and the hostland will not be demonized. Some could argue that this kind of approach would diminish the importance of, or even erase, the historic conditions that caused populations to disperse and/or that there will be the danger of homogenizing diasporic experiences instead of highlighting their particularities. This is why we also need to analyze the interplay of components of diasporic subjects, such as gender, sexuality, economical status, and so on.

### 1.3 Asian American Literature and Diasporic Studies Side by Side

Over the past thirty years the field of Asian American studies has increasingly moved closer to diaspora studies, although it has been transnational since its inception (Mazumdar 40). In the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American activists and scholars looked at transnational matters for examples they could use to interpret national issues and to legitimize their program (Wong, “Denationalization” 128), and the program was focused on claiming American nationality for Asians living in the U.S. In recent years, however, a diasporic perspective has been presented as “a more advanced and theoretically more sophisticated (in short, superior, ...) stage in Asian American studies” (Wong, “Denationalization” 135). Clearly, Wong has reservations about a possible overlap between Asian American and diaspora studies, though historical reasons could explain why the two fields drew closer together. Under the pressure of a progressively more international economic market, in 1943, the United States repealed the exclusion acts in order to allow the transfer of people and capital from America to Asia and vice versa. These provisions together with the rise of the Asian markets and consequently the intensified flow of Asian capital caused diversification in Asian American population. Asian American scholars took notice of these changes. They “cautioned against subsuming Asian American historical experience within

the received narrative of the nation and proposed placing it in the context of international labor and capital migration” (D.L. Li 196).

In spite of these historical explanations, Asian American studies is divided between those who believe the field will profit from embracing Asian diaspora as an epistemological object, mainly because diasporas question the power of the nation-state, and those who are convinced that this move “not only disregards ‘race’ as a central category of address and analysis, but also virtually dismisses ‘nation’ as a viable ground for critical alliance” (D.L. Li 202). D. L. Li grants that the studying of Asian diaspora might disrupt the East West opposition, but both he and Wong fear that scholars will become disinterested in the domestic plague of racism and in the initial project of “claiming America.” I believe Asian American studies should adopt a diasporic perspective as long as the experiences of both diasporans and Asian American subjects are historically and geographically contextualized. To dissipate the doubts raised by scholars such as Wong and D.L. Li, I suggest we pay closer attention to the interaction between identity modalities such as class, gender, sexuality, religion, and age.

A diasporic perspective enables us to compare the experiences of displacement of those who have been in the country for several decades with those of the diasporans who have just arrived. Moreover, if we consider diaspora as a transitional status, we pay closer attention to the composite journeys of diasporans since, for example, a Vietnamese might have lived in France or Germany before coming to the United States. Thus, we could better investigate how dealing with the state apparatuses as well as interacting with the people of previously visited countries shaped the diasporic subject. Still, there are doubts. First of all, because the term “diaspora” is believed to critique the ideology of the nation-state, some Asian American scholars worry that focusing on Asian diaspora might lead to denationalization and to a disavowal of nationality claims on the

part of Asian Americans. It cannot be denied that the nature of diasporas possesses a centrifugal force that destabilizes the hegemony of the nation-state. Yet, at the same time it activates a centripetal force; even though diasporans might not assimilate, they have to participate in the perpetuation of the ideology of the host country by abiding by its rules and laws. We cannot forget that “identities of migrant populations continue to be rooted in nation-states” (Basch 8). Moreover, diasporas as well as immigration, legal or illegal, and other transnational practices trigger a series of defense mechanisms on the part of nations, such as border patrolling and more restrictive immigration laws (Lim, “Immigration” 298). For Lim, nationalisms are dormant. They could always resurface violently or they could disguise themselves under different practices; for example, the dominant group may diminish a minority (“Being Diasporic” 243). She also puts Wong’s and Li’s fears to rest, when she claims that “Current diasporic trends in Asian American communities may be said to give rise to more complex, even fragmented cultural nationalisms” (243). As she explains, both Vietnamese and Filipinos have published their own separate anthologies.

Secondly, Wong and other scholars<sup>ix</sup> warn that comparing diasporas with minorities might overshadow issues of class that have been affecting minorities for a long time, but Chuh responds that in the current global economy, it is has become more and more difficult to determine by whom minorities and newly arrived immigrants are oppressed and against whom they are resisting (*Imagine* 7). Nevertheless, there is the risk of homogenizing the experiences of Vietnamese, Hmong, Chinese diasporans simply because they all come from the same continent (Wong, “Denationalization” 138). Additionally, studying Asian diaspora side by side with Asian American minorities will “encourage the conflation of Asian Americans with Asians” (D.L. Li 198). Even though in her book Chuh aims to prove how adopting a transnational perspective

undercuts racial essentialism, I share some of Wong's and D.L. Li's preoccupations, specifically, that this new perspective might decontextualize the cruelties and the battles both Asians and Asian Americans had/have to endure. I also cannot deny the truth in Ong's statement: the "diasporan subject is now vested with the agency formerly sought in the working class and more recently in the subaltern subject" (15). Scholars tend to romanticize the powers of diaspora refusing to acknowledge that being a diasporic subject is not empowering. Wong advises "historiciz[ing] the push to globalize Asian American cultural criticism. Without such historicizing, one of the most important aspirations of denationalization – to dialogize and trouble American myths of nation – may end up being more subverted than realized" ("Denationalization" 135). I agree with Wong that we cannot forget the unrelenting struggle to obtain American citizenship, nor can we ignore that Asian Americans are still not full-fledged citizens. To complete Wong's recommendation, I propose that we explore more effectively the interaction among identity components. Through this approach, we could dismantle existing power structures and discover unknown ones produced when these modalities align differently because of the different geographical and temporal contexts.

#### 1.4 A New Approach to Analyze Asian American Literature

How do we determine the canon of Asian American literature? *Modern Fiction Studies* dedicated its 2010 Spring issue to investigating the features of Asian American literature. Within this issue, Jennifer Ann Ho interrogates the Asian American community as to whether white American authors who write about Asian Americans should be included in Asian American literature syllabi. Should they? Or do we decide a text belongs to Asian American literature according to the ethnicity of the writer or according to the content of the text? Do we consider

audience at all? In the same issue, Christopher Lee argues for the eradication of the term Asian American. In her book, Chuh maintains we should keep the label, but we should restrain from “definitional debates” of the kinds Ho embarks on because these “cannot but end in a dead end, where one either is or is not found to be a ‘real’ Asian American, whether a particular representation is or is not found to be ‘authentic’” (*Imagine* 21). To support her claim, Chuh explains that if we insist on defining the borders of Asian American literature, we are perpetuating the idea that “to ‘know’ American [can] be captured by a subject-driven discourse where subjectivity bears the legacy of Enlightenment liberalism’s celebration of the nation-state” (*Imagine* 29). An Asian American national subject cannot exist for Chuh; therefore, she proposes that Asian American studies be a “subjectless discourse.” “I mean subjectlessness to create the conceptual space to prioritize difference by foregrounding the discursive constructedness of subjectivity” (Chuh, *Imagine* 9). Rather than emphasizing the similarities between Asian Americans and Euro Americans, we should eschew 1970s melting pot nations and should concentrate on the differences in order to undermine the long-standing and racist systems and eventually achieve justice. Although I share some of Chuh’s concerns, I don’t believe a subjectless discourse is the answer to the pressing questions of Asian American criticism. Through an excursus in the history of the label “Asian American,” I argue that race and nationality are still categories Asian American criticism should consider when examining Asian American texts, and I also claim more attention needs to be paid to the interactions among other modalities such as gender, language, sexuality, and class.

As I mentioned earlier, the term “Asian American” was born out of the necessity to obtain group rights for the Asian population, mainly Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino, who lived in the United States. “Asian American” was not simply a replacement for “Oriental,” an



adjective that stereotyped Asians as dirty, mischievous, submissive, inscrutable, effeminate for the men, and highly sexual for the women. It was also intended to vindicate a population who had been abused to advance whites' wealth; Chinese almost single-handedly built the transcontinental rail road, while Japanese and Filipinos were exploited in the Hawaiian sugar plantations. Additionally, it meant to demand American nationality for people who had been seen as foreign, and who had been questioned about their allegiance to the United States; first, second, and third-generation Asian Americans were imprisoned in internment camps during WWII. But in the effort to "claim America," the different Asian nationalities were conflated in one racial-continental term. Since it was first invented, the label "Asian American" has come to represent an ethnically and economically more diversified population than the one from the 1960s. "The new immigration almost immediately made irrelevant the fundamental assumption that had guided the struggle for Asian American: the rootedness of Asian American in U.S. history" (Dirlik 522-23). If in the 1960s "Asian American" may have indicated a working-class, first or second-generation Chinese, in the twenty-first century it may refer to a recently immigrated, middle class Indian. Chuh admits, "the term homogenizes diversity such that recognizing 'difference among' fractures its intelligibility" (*Imagine* 21). If the label has always been criticized because its referent kept diversifying, in recent years, this criticism has intensified because the Asian population in the United States now includes students who return to their countries of origin once they finish their program, business men who live in America part of the year, and so on.<sup>x</sup> Therefore, some scholars, among whom Dirlik and C. Lee, have proposed the abolition of the label "Asian American." "Although it continues to evoke histories of racism and resistance, its meanings cannot be contained or resolved within those terms," C. Lee explains ("Asian American" 37). Even though she is in favor of retaining the category "Asian American,"

Chuh furthers C. Lee's argument by claiming that "Asian American... cannot stand as the national subject" because, in the attempt, to establish subjectivity, Asian Americans have bought into the American ideology of "ex pluribus unum" (*Imagine* 23). They believed that if they demonstrated they were as American as the Euro Americans and simultaneously showed that Asian Americans were a homogenous reality, they would have been considered American. This did not happen. Asian Americans were instead made the model minority. "That stereotypical image precisely bespeaks simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, thus bearing the particular function of being at once a signifier of assimilative potential and the limitations proscribing that possibility" (Chuh, *Imagine* 12). The identitarian and assimilatory ideology of the United States has not only turned Asian Americans into the model minority, but it has also caused divisiveness among Asian Americans. Chuh provides as an example of divisiveness the controversy about Lois-Ann Yamanaka's book *Blu's Hanging*. In the novel, set in Hawaii, a Japanese is raped by a Filipino American. Yamanaka was accused of stereotyping Filipinos and the Filipino community was outraged when the Asian American Studies Association gave Yamanaka the award for best fiction in 1998. To remedy this divisiveness and above all to restore justice, Chuh proposes that Asian Americans prioritize difference over identity or better a differential approach over an identitarian one. "We [Asian Americans] can reinhabit and rearticulate difference not as the otherness constructed by certain practices of power, including certain paradigms of knowledge, but instead as the basis for unification" (147). Only if Asian Americans consider intra-Asian differences, can they shape other narratives of subjectivity "that might not be immediately visible within, for example, a nation-based representational grid, or one that emphasized racialization" (Chu 11). If Asian Americans want justice, they need to abandon the search for national

subjectivity. Exactly for this reason, debating who does and who doesn't belong to Asian American literature, like J. A. Ho does in her essay, is superfluous, according to Chuh.

Before explaining why notions of belonging are indeed worth discussing, let me illustrate J.A. Ho's points. In her research, Ho states that Asian American literature today portrays not only ethnic conflicts but also other themes unrelated to race. But if an Asian American author writes about the life of a Euro American truck-driver, how can we read that text as Asian American? "The unspoken rule in defining Asian American literature has rested on the body of the writer (their Asian phenotype) as well as their place of residence" (J.A. Ho 209). Aren't we racializing literature in this case? I disagree with Ho that the Asian ethnicity of the writer automatically grants Asian American status to his work, but I do agree with her that Asian American literature should include works about Asians and Asian Americans by American authors of *all* ethnicities. In 1998, Li wondered "whether Asian Americans can hear the resonances and validate their appearances through one of their own, or whether they should continue their dependency upon whites to write about them, either out of respectful compassion or for the purpose of cultural hijacking" (179). Thirteen years later, J.A. Ho is aware that depictions of Asian or Asian Americans by Euro American Americans might be questioned for their (in)authenticity, and for this reason, J.A. Ho proposes that only works that further the understanding of Asians and Asian Americans should be categorized as Asian American regardless of the author's ethnicity. For J.A. Ho, books such as *Snow Falling on Cedars* by Euro American David Guterson cannot be considered Asian American literature because they stereotype Asians. While J.A. Ho laudably attempts a definition of Asian American literature despite its resistance to be defined, I am interested in commending efforts such as J. A. Ho's because they deal with topics, about which, ironically, Asian American scholars such as Chuh as

seem to be weary: race and ethnicity. I do realize Asian American authors and critics have been relentlessly accused of depicting only “ethnic tribalisms,<sup>xi</sup>” but as Linda Martín Alcoff argues, “today race has no semantic respectability, biological basis or philosophical legitimacy. However....in the very midst of our contemporary skepticism toward race stands the compelling social reality that race, or racialized identities, have as much political, social and economic salience as they ever had” (qtd in Jerng 186-87). Our lack of engagement with racism means the system managed to convince us that racial discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans has dissipated simply because we see a few more Asian American actors on television. If anything, the problem lies in those who believe that “if there are white bodies in the novel, there is no race” (Jerng 191). All American literature is ethnic as ethnicity is one of the components that makes us who we are.

Although it is not his primary focus, C. Lee, too, attempts to expand the definition of Asian American literature by analyzing *The Boat* by Vietnamese Australian Nam Le, who graduated from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and lives now in the United States. Le’s collection of seven short stories features Vietnamese and Vietnamese Australians and is set mainly in Australia except for one story, which is set in America. While Lee discusses *The Boat* as an Asian American text, I question why this collection qualifies as a work of American literature, given that the author, who is Vietnamese Australian, has been in the United States for less than ten years. What makes Le’s fiction American? Let me provide another example. If a French student chooses to do her PhD in Chicago and while in the United States decides to write a novel in English about French immigrants in the twenty-first century, will that novel be French American? American? French? I do not have a clear answer to these questions, nor I am going to enumerate the reasons why it could fit in all three categories. The point is that nationality is

becoming increasingly an unreliable feature for categorizing literature since more and more people migrate, even if temporarily, for economic, political or work-related reasons, just to name a few. Nonetheless, contrary to what Chuh believes, Asian American scholars should still engage in debates about the national (and racial) borders of Asian American and American literature because the rights of Asians and Asian Americans living in the United States are being violated. Even though rerouting Asian American discourse toward difference promotes the study of intra-Asian differences, “a view of difference as pure, private, and individual eliminates the historical role of race in the formation of U.S. democracy” (D.L. Li 202). Instead of a “subjectless discourse,” which erases race and nationality as grounds on which Asian Americans negotiate their subjectivity, I argue that Asian American discourse needs to focus on other modalities such as sexuality, class, and language to possibly uncover other ways to narrate Asian American subjectivity. I argue that this is possible by analyzing how these identity components interact in different geographical and historical contexts.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Through an examination of the terms “transnationalism” and “diaspora,” I conclude that the definitions of both these terms focus on the nation-state. Moreover, definitions that consider diasporas only as communities with established institutions, that center around the antithetical relationship between home and host country, and that stall on the difference between voluntary and involuntary dispersions can no longer describe the experiences of the postmodern migrant. While I expose the ideological character of these definitions, to dismantle completely the ideology behind the term “diaspora,” we need to start by viewing diaspora as a transitional and not as a fixed status and, secondly, to investigate the interplay between identity modalities such

as gender, age, language, and class. My approach will allow scholars to discover other ways in which dispersed people gather together. For example, they may form communities based on gender and class rather than through nationality and language. It will also invite scholars to go beyond considering simply the axis of home-host country and look at how other states might have shaped the journey of the diasporan. Additionally, we will be able to review the definition of immigrant and discover how some immigrants may actually be considered diasporic. Whereas some may only see the drawbacks of this approach, such as the homogenizing of diasporic experiences and the erasing of the reasons that caused diasporas in the first place, I believe my proposal will highlight how diasporas are lived rather than how they are constructed.

In this chapter, I also argue that the field of Asian American studies might gain from examining the intersection among identity modalities. Although exploring the diasporic dimension of the Asian American experience is sometimes presented as more enlightened than concentrating on the racial issues of Asian Americans, it is undeniable that given the current economic climate, diaspora studies will have an impact on (ethnic) American studies. At the same time, the journeys of Asian immigrants need to be placed in a historical and geographical context. Certainly, we cannot leave aside issues of nationality and ethnicity, as Chuh suggests, simply because narratives of American subjectivity along these modalities have not been successful so far. On the contrary. I argue that matters of nationality and ethnicity are intrinsically linked to questions of class, religion, sexuality, and language. To demonstrate how my approach helps deconstruct ideologies in-place and uncover unknown ones, I analyze the relationship between sexuality and ethnicity in Bacho's *Cebu* and Truong's *The Book of Salt*, religion and ethnicity in *Cebu* and Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*, language and class in *The Book of Salt* and Dinh's "'!''" and "Prisoner with a Dictionary."

## 2 IS IT AN ETHNICAL OR A SEXUAL CRISIS?

In *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, Viet Thanh Nguyen claims, “By its very nature the Asian American body politic is defined not only by race and class –the traditional intellectual lenses of Asian American studies – but also, simultaneously, by gender and sexuality, to such an extent that Asian American writers, male and female, often articulate their concerns about race and class through gender and sexuality” (6). As I mentioned in the introduction, identity is composed of several modalities such as age, race, sexuality, gender, class, and so on, and these modalities realign along different axis depending on the power struggles that the individual encounters. In this chapter, I would like to examine how the modalities of ethnicity and sexuality intersect in *Cebu* and *The Book of Salt*. What new power relations will form out of this encounter? How are these relations going to affect the protagonist’s process of identity construction and the way he relates to other individuals in his own ethnic community and to the Others? Because both *Cebu* and *The Book of Salt* deal with diasporic experiences, I will also discuss how the interaction between sexuality and ethnicity affects the ideology of nationalism and how it transforms the meaning of home.

I would like to delay the discussion of *Cebu* and *The Book of Salt* and provide first a definition of sexuality and stipulate one of race and ethnicity. I don’t intend to overwhelm the reader with an account on sexuality, race, ethnicity and their discontents, yet, while defining sexuality might be a relatively easy task, establishing the boundaries of the terms “race” and “ethnicity” is comparable to determining the depth of an abyss. Therefore, it is imperative to clarify the meaning of these words. In this dissertation, sexuality denotes, “A person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which he or she is typically attracted” (“sexuality”).

Interestingly, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, this meaning of the term appeared for

the first time in 1897. Before exploring what “ethnicity” implies, “race” needs to be defined. Although some sociologists believe that race has little biological foundation when applied to human beings, I hold true that “race” describes a group of people/s sharing peculiar physical traits, as for example, skin color. Nonetheless, I share with Eriksen the notion that race is a cultural construct (5). Whereas ethnicity is generally believed to refer only to cultural characteristics such as a common language, religion, customs, etc., I agree with Nagel, when she claims that ethnicity is a more comprehensive concept encompassing race (110). However, in order to avoid essentializing this concept, it is crucial to point out that ethnicity is not fixed; it is a process. Moreover, “ethnicity is a relationship between two or several groups, not a property of a group; it exists between and not within groups” (Eriksen 58). It varies according to the situation and the groups interacting.

## 2.1 Convergence of Postcolonial, Neocolonial, and Diasporic in Ben Lucero

In the beginning phase of this project, I meant to prove that Ben Lucero, the protagonist of *Cebu*, was a postcolonial subject, but somewhere in my work, I started questioning if the term “postcolonial” was actually appropriate for someone who grew up in America. As Rebecca Fine Romanow and Bill Ashcroft and others lament, the term “postcolonialism” has been extensively abused to the extent that we risk extrapolating the term from its historical foundation- the process of colonialism. Elleke Boehmer defines postcoloniality as “that condition in which colonized peoples seek to take their place forcibly or otherwise, as historical subjects” (qtd. in Singh and Schmidt 18). Even though Ben did not experience colonialism first-hand, he is the product of postcoloniality. He is the son of immigrant parents “whose personal histories are microcosms of historical moments in Spanish/Philippines and US/Philippine relations” (Pisares 87). In truth, can



a second-generation immigrant's identity be determined solely by his or her parents' origins? In *Cebu* this would, first of all, demand considering the protagonist "solely as a product of the colonial experience" (Romanow 3). Second, in the context of the United States, scholars should explore other parameters other than the opposition colonizer-colonized in evaluating diasporic subjects (Singh and Schmidt 29). Immigrants and their families come in contact with other realities – other immigrants, who may or may not have left behind an ex-colony, for example. Moreover, the fact that two individuals emigrated from previous colonies, or even from the same colony, does not automatically ensure that they experience colonialism and postcolonialism in the same way or to the same degree, simply because of their status as postcolonial subjects. Third, if we regard Ben's parents' postcolonial past as the single determining factor in shaping Ben's identity, we would "privilege the geographical, political, cultural, and subjective spaces of the home-nation [of his mother] [...], while devaluing and bastardizing the [state] of displacement or dislocation [ and home-nation of his father], rendering [it an] inauthentic plac[e] of residence" (Brazier and Mannur 6). However, Ben Lucero does not diminish the country where he was born. On the contrary. He fights till the end the idea that American-born Filipinos and the recent immigrants from the Philippines, or F.O.B.s as the nationalist discourse named them, might have anything in common. When Ben is summoned to listen to the confession of a dying first-generation Filipino accused of killing Ben's mother's friend, he thinks "Immigrant greaseball. Find your way through the needle's eye. Teddy [Ben's friend] was right. Two tribes, them and us; the twain never meant to meet" (152).

Would "diasporic" apply more accurately to Ben's condition? Diasporic people "define themselves in terms of diaspora rather than nation" since for them nation has no permanent meaning (Lehmann 3). Ben Lucero would say that his nationality is American, consequently

discarding “diasporic.” But what does diaspora<sup>xii</sup> mean? Does the concept of “diaspora” include only individuals who willingly or unwillingly, because of political, economical, religious, gender and sexuality-related factors, “cros[s] and re-cros[s] [of] borders of space, time, race, culture, language, history and politics [...]” in search of a more suitable place to live? (Zhang 140). Even though Ben experiences another culture, is exposed to a language other than English, and encounters a different socio-political system, he does not suffer the typical sort of persecutions<sup>xiii</sup> associated with diasporas. Are diasporers solely those who long to go back to their place of origin? In that case, not only does Ben not even long to go to Cebu, but once there, he also cannot wait to leave the Philippines. Yet, not all diasporas subscribe to the ideology of return. However, the definition discussed above favors the place of origins and consequently first-generation transnational immigrants. Could second generation immigrants be diasporic? In “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities,” Avtar Brah revises and expands the meaning of “diaspora.” For Brah “diaspora” is not just a concept, but a space where the politics of border and dis/location meets. This diasporic community includes the strictly diasporic subjects as well as the natives. Within it

a group constituted as a ‘minority’ along one dimension of differentiation may be constructed as a ‘majority’ along another. [...] In other words, ‘minorities’ are positioned in relation not only to ‘majorities’ but also with respect to one another, and viceversa. Moreover, individual subjects may occupy ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ positions simultaneously, and this has important implications for the formation of subjectivity. (Brah 189)

Growing up in this type of community Ben Lucero had to negotiate his position as a Filipino American against non-Filipino Americans and prove he did not belong together with those

Filipinos who refuse to be part of the model minority; against other diasporans and disprove the stereotype that Filipinos were “bad subjects<sup>xiv</sup>” as defined by Nguyen in *Race and Resistance*. He had/has to construct his position under the gaze of the Old-timers and while interacting with bright new-comers, demonstrate to both of these groups that he was a full-fledged member of American society.

Yet, I don't completely agree with Elisabeth Pisares's assessment of Ben Lucero. For Pisares, the protagonist of *Cebu* is an assimilated Filipino American who speaks the language of neocolonialism. Ben “aligns himself with Spanish and US colonial discourse represented by, respectively, celibacy and historical amnesia” (Pisares 80). If through his appalling reactions to the Filipino contextualization of Catholicism and Filipino political and social order, Ben perpetuates the discourses of neocolonialism, his behavior can be seen a consequence of his relationship with the United States. His status as an assimilated Filipino American is conflicted, though Ben is not necessarily aware of this. If he had completely cut off his legacy, working in a parish with a predominant Filipino population would have no effect on him. Instead, he resents his mission. By claiming that Ben is, consciously or not, fighting complete absorption into American society, I do not mean to say that Bacho presents a split identity as does John Okada. In *No-No Boy*, after refusing to fight for America against the Japanese, Ichiro, Okada's protagonist, laments:

I am only half of me and the half that remains is American by law because the government was wise and strong enough to know why it was that I could not fight for America and did not strip me of my birthright. But it is not enough to be American only in the eyes of the law and it is not enough to be only half an American and know that it is an empty half. I am not your son and I am not

Japanese and I am not American. I can go someplace and tell people that I've got an inverted stomach and that I am an American, true and blue and Hail Columbia, but the army wouldn't have me because of the stomach. That's easy and I would do it, only I've got to convince myself first and that I cannot do. I wish with all my heart that I were Japanese or that I were American. I am neither [...]. (Okada 16)

The theme of the identity divided in two belongs to the first phase of Asian American literature as discussed in Sau-ling C. Wong and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana's "Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature." Bacho writes during the third phase, a phase that privileges hybridity, gender and sexual transgressiveness, and diasporic journeys. King-Kok Cheung asserts that, whereas identity politics -with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity- governed earlier theoretical and critical formulations, the stress [in this third phase] is on heterogeneity and diaspora. The shift has been from seeking to "claim America" to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America; from centering on race and on masculinity to revolving around the multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. (qtd. in Wong and Santa Ana 197)

Writers belonging to the third phase still discuss the politics of assimilation, but rather than concentrating on how to become an American, they examine the characters' relationship with their parents' places of origin. The characters might visit their parents' country, as for example in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* or might even decide to go back to where they started their journey as in Jessica Hagedorn's *Gangster of Love*. While the literature of the first phase aimed at disproving Asian men's femininity and the works of the second phase revised the role of the woman in the immigrant's life, in the third phase, writers understand that not only race and

gender but other modalities too, such as class, sexuality, age, and ethnicity, affect the way an Asian American experiences the United States and the way he or she faces a possible return to the origins as well.

At the beginning of the *Cebu*, the protagonist has not completed his assimilation. I am not suggesting that the path by which one becomes who he or she is has an end, as that would doom identity to no further progress. Yet, assimilation is not fixed; it is a process. When Ben flies to the Philippines to bury his mother, he has a crisis, which, contrary to Pisares, I firmly believe is ethnic. I do not want to deny that Ben has a religious *défaillance* coupled with a rebirth of sexuality, but this happens in Cebu and Manila. If, at a superficial level, Ben's sexual intercourse with Ellen could be interpreted as the rebellion against one's own responsibilities which occurs when one travels to a foreign land, the narrator promptly reassures the reader. Ben had "been on vacations before –away from his parish and his duties –but the awareness of his vocation had never left him. Ben had always been a priest, on duty or off. It was bankable, but this time in Manila was somehow different" (Bacho 94-95). Furthermore, several components such as sexuality, gender, religion, class, race, and cultural background form identity and these components establish power relations among them that then mutate according to one's experiences. Not only does Ben resign temporarily from his vows to the church, but he loses his virginity specifically to a Filipino woman. The book ends with Ben's death,<sup>xv</sup> but his ethnic crisis has no resolution.

I return to what I originally meant to prove: is Ben Lucero a postcolonial subject? Is he neocolonial? Diasporic? None of these terms regarded in isolation can characterize Ben's complex and unique self. Ben cannot live outside history. As much as he would like to do so, he cannot put his ethnic origins under erasure. Nor can we expect him to revolutionize the

relationship between the United States and the Philippines. Above all, he has to bargain his position with natives as well as with other Filipinos.

### 2.1.1 “*America, Please Forgive Me; I had Sex with a Filipina.*”

What type of new alliances form when subjects like Ben Lucero, as defined above, travel back to the country of their parents and what changes do these new alliances trigger in the identity of the subjects in question? Jee Yeun Lee claims that in the study of diasporas scholars “rely on heterosexist conceptions of kinship and lineage to define community” (qtd. in Eng, *Racial* 207). In *Cebu*, Bacho attempts to reverse this trend by choosing a Catholic priest as the protagonist of his novel. As an American Catholic priest Ben is denied the possibility of forming a family and thus, according to a patriarchal reading of diaspora, his Filipino American-ness will have no legacy. Yet, Ben could still pass on his ethnic legacy not through kinship but through preaching and applying the understanding of differences necessary to build a community.

How do we explain then the fact that Ben has sex with Ellen, a Filipina? The attentive reader notices that the arrival in Manila, where Ben meets Ellen, is marked by a sexual remembrance. At this point in the novel, Bacho mentions that before entering the seminary Ben used to indulge in masturbation, though once he began studying at the seminary, the fervent nights disappeared. A few pages later, the narrator reveals Ben “was still a virgin – dry humping while on vacation from the seminary didn’t count” (96-97). Bacho could have mentioned this information earlier or not at all. Consequently, we cannot help but make a connection between the protagonist’s “sudden” sexual re-awakening and his intercourse with Ellen. One could argue that as a neocolonial subject, Ben tries to reaffirm his power over the ex-colony. However, instead of interpreting this encounter relying on the binary colonizer/colonized, let us move

toward a more cultural analysis, therefore answering the call from Grewal and Kaplan who report on the need for a historical and cultural approach to work on gender, patriarchy, and I would add, sexuality, rather than resorting to the old nation-state model.

In an attempt to explain why Ben sleeps with a Filipina, I would like to discuss the change in beauty standards that began with the Spanish and continued with the American colonization of the Philippines. In 1938, Guia Gonzales Balmori won the title of Miss Philippines in the 12th National Beauty Contest. She had “finely cut features” (Bacho 97), “light skin, and Español nose” (91). The victory of Gonzales Balmori testifies to this change. “Both the Spanish and the Americans imposed their own image of beauty – an image different from that possessed by the Malay majority” (McFerson 13). Ellen Labrado, whose American father she has never met, is a beautiful woman with dark green eyes, nicely chiseled features and long legs. The long legs certainly imply she is taller than most Filipino women of Malay, Chinese, or indigenous descent. A tall figure is linked to “foreign colonial ancestry and a smaller size with the diminutive stature of ‘negritos’” - the informal name of Aeta populations, who are believed to have originated from Melanesia or from India, or Africa (McFerson 14). Why did Bacho choose a woman with American blood as the initiator into Filipino culture? Why not opt for a woman with a more Malayan or indigenous aspect, or a Chinese-Filipina for that matter? If Bacho had decided for the second option, the Malayan woman would have become an exotic diversion and the book would have been read like one of those cheap romances or one of those 19<sup>th</sup> century novels written by a white male perpetuating the image of the non-white woman as hypersexualized and determined to strip the American man of his innocence. Furthermore, given his coward nature and his already estranged relationship with his ethnic background, Ben would

have never accepted a woman of Malayan descent as the one who initiates him into Filipino culture, not to mention as a sexual authority.

Some may argue that Bacho shapes Ellen after the myth of the Caucasian mestiza. During the Spanish occupation, the children of Spanish men and Malay women ranked immediately after the Spaniards born in the Philippines, who in turn were topped by the pure Spaniards (McFerson 20). The same position was not assigned to the offspring of Chinese women and Spanish men because Spanish were prejudiced against the Chinese, and, even more interestingly, the sons and daughters born out of the relationship between a Spaniard and an indigenous were disqualified as mestizos (McFerson 20). As mentioned above, the Spanish standards of beauty impacted the Filipinos, who came to idealize figures like Maria Clara, the betrothed of the Filipino-Spaniard protagonist of Jose Rizal<sup>xvi</sup>'s *Noli Me Tangere*. For McFerson, Maria Clara is modeled after the Virgin Mary. "She is beautiful, demure, modest, patient, devoutly religious, cultured, submissive, pure, and fair-skinned" (27). The myth of the mestiza still survives in contemporary society. Despite the fact that Ellen has dark green eyes and nicely chiseled features, she does not completely embody the stereotype of Maria Clara. In fact, Bacho does not conform to the Filipino idealization of the Caucasian mestiza; instead he plays with it. Though the American reader and possibly not even the Filipinos of second and third generations might not know about the myth of the mestiza, it is crucial to stress that Bacho revisits it in his own terms in order to reaffirm his identity as a Filipino American author. Not only does Ellen have brown skin, but she is also quite the contrary of "demure, submissive, and pure." Before working as an assistant for Ben's Aunt Clara, she used to be a prostitute.

The fact that Ellen Labrado was a prostitute who is described like a fallen angel and a madame fatale seems to lead the scholar back to the hypothesis that *Cebu* is in fact one of those



works in which the foreign woman seduces the naïve white male. Bacho confuses the scholar all the more by placing, immediately after the first meeting between Ben and Ellen, crucial scenes that seem to espouse the stereotypes Americans have of Filipinos. In the first of those scenes after Ellen confirms the legend that Filipinos eat dogs, the narrator recounts that while telling war stories one of Remedios's old friends implied that Filipinos ate Japanese dead soldiers. Without her knowing, Ellen corroborates that Filipinos eat dogs and humans. One of Ben's worst fears acquires substance. Filipinos are indeed primitive as Americans believe them to be. The second scene sees Ben witnessing a fight between Ellen and another woman. In Ben's view of the Philippine world, Ellen's behavior is justified because Filipinos are violent. Finally, the episode in the church of Quiapo represents the climax in the faltering of Ben's vocation. At this point, Ben is sufficiently vulnerable that he can notice that Ellen is "blunt, tough, and honest" (121); all qualities he doesn't possess. Ben is described as having a submissive rather than a dominant nature. He is a follower rather than a leader. Even if his father wanted him to practice the sport of boxing, "in all of his years, Ben was rarely struck with a solid right, and that was fine with him. Fighting became, above all else, a game, and his greatest pleasure came not from belting a foe – he wasn't mean and didn't have much power anyway- but from making his miss, miss, and miss again" (107). Ben moves through life by dancing around his opposer but never directly facing him. This kind of attitude can also be observed at his parish, where Ben is not happy because he doesn't want to deal with other Filipinos. He keeps ruminating to himself that he will write to the bishop and ask to be moved, but he never follows through. Ultimately, he is a coward. When growing up, he would hang out with boys of other ethnicities, though he would run before the situation got too serious. "He knew how Filipinos could nurture hatred, black and

seemingly eternal, treating it like a pet sore to be scratched routinely to keep it from healing. Teddy was like that, and Ben was afraid that, at his own deepest core, he was too” (157).

Ben Lucero spent his life trying to fulfill his parents’ expectations and at the same time trying not to be what Americans thought Filipinos were. When he was younger, he participated with the other American-born Filipinos in taunting the newly arrived so “anxious not to be part of an accent and manner of speech so foreign and strange” (140). Despite his best efforts at assimilating into the dominant society, Ben is constantly reminded that “as a whole, the Filipinos [are] rowdy and, depending on the city and its demography, usually consorted with blacks or Mexicans to wreak different types and degrees of juvenile havoc” (107). Not only were the Filipinos riotous, they also joined forces with other non-Caucasian Americans, thus in this way they involuntarily strengthened the Americans’ prejudice that Filipinos were not worthy of American citizenship. “Filipinos were often seen as ‘criminally minded,’ as troublemakers, willing to ‘slash, cut or stab at the least provocation.’ They were called ‘headhunters’ and ‘untamed’ and primitive savages, on the same level as the American Indians” (Takaki 325).

The United States did not welcome Asians and passed several exclusion acts from 1882 to 1965 to prevent further immigrations from Asian countries. To be historically correct, Filipinos were exempted from these laws as their mother country was an American territory. Yet, if America couldn’t stop Filipinos from immigrating to the mother country, it expected them to behave as her forefathers: work hard and no complaints. More subtly, it assigned two positions, to use a Foucauldian expression, to the new comers: model minority or bad subject. “The formation of the Asian within as a ‘model minority’ is a classificatory wonder of the dominant social strategy: it detaches Asians from their association with other racial ‘minorities’ by hailing them as a white-appointed ‘model,’ while it distinguishes them from the unmarked ‘true’

nationals by calling Asians their ‘minor’” (D.L. Li 10). Moreover, by positioning in either of these two categories, Americans limited the immigrants’ agency - at least theoretically. Though in the last forty years Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Koreans, and Vietnamese have fallen into the category of model minorities, there have been attempts at resisting stereotypification: from the Chinese railroad strikes to the Japanese plantation laborers protests, from the Civil Rights Movement, to the Los Angeles 1992 riots. Limited by American society and by religion,<sup>xvii</sup> which reinforces obedience to the ruler, Ben has lived passively until the encounter with Ellen. This passivity is highlighted in the scenes that I discussed above that portray Ben as a listener (first scene) and as a spectator (second and third scene). Having sex with Ellen means to finally take action.

The brief relationship between the two should mark a cathartic moment in the story, the moment in which Ben starts his transformation into someone who makes things happen rather than passively waiting for life to choose for him. Ellen shows him that the American stereotypes about the Filipinos have some foundation. People eat dogs since they have nothing else to feed themselves with. She becomes a prostitute because she has to opt between dying of hunger and living. The key here is that “she used to;” She has conquered her assigned subject position as a prostitute. Instead of following her example, he retreats back to his old self at first.

The Phillipines was too far beyond him, and now his only wish was to leave. For the first time since arriving, he thought of home –a sanctuary much safer than the madhouse he had entered- and how he longed for Seattle’s cool air, clean streets, and pronounced sense of order. Dad had mustered there, and the family stayed. Ellen? He couldn’t face her, either. She had raised questions for him- had made visible an otherwise unseen side- but these would be sorted out away from Manila. He knew he

was running, and he was ashamed. Ellen deserved better, but there was so little of him left. (133)

In Ben's eyes, having sex with Ellen validates the stereotype that Filipinos are passionate, primitive, and have no control over their instincts. More gravely, what should have been a cathartic moment, causes his worst fear to come true. He himself incarnates those stereotypes. After sleeping with Ellen, Ben has a revelatory dream, in which his psychology professor scolds him and pronounces, "That's the problem with Filipinos – no caution, no control" (124). Therefore, the crisis that strikes Ben is an ethnic crisis. He interprets his actions in ethnic terms.

On one side the protagonist of *Cebu* is afraid of admitting his ethnicity because it would mean being primitive, violent, and undependable. The subject possessing these qualities would be doomed and cast out of society. He would be condemned to live the life of a hermit and in the long run, he would cease to exist, for human beings need to identify others as Other from themselves in order to identify their own selves. On the other side, we (seem) to come upon a contradiction. In the dream, the psychology professor and Ben's mother utter Ben's death sentence. The psychology professor asserts "The nail that stands up is the one that gets hit," while the mother cries out "I should have had you neutered" (123-4). Both statements show the fear of being cut off from the possibility of behaving as a Filipino –at least in Ben's eyes. Americans see him primarily as a Filipino. As bodies in African American, Latino, Native American literature, indeed in the works written by minorities, "bodies in AA lit are never just individually significant but point instead to the intersecting relationships of race, class, gender, and sexuality that ascribe meaning and substance to the very idea of an AA body in the first place (versus the normative, unmarked body of dominant American culture)" (Nguyen 17). If he is denied a chance to identify himself as a Filipino, then who is he? The ethnic crisis becomes an

existential crisis. It is a different kind of existential crisis than the ones we read in Asian American novels of the first period. Ben's dilemma doesn't reside in "Who am I? American or Filipino?" but in "Who am I? Do I exist without ethnicity?" Bacho explores the possibility of existing simply as human beings without being identified as belonging to a particular ethnic background.

## 2.2. Diaspora versus Exile in *The Book of Salt*

Repudiated by the empire and denied his place in the Old Man's house Bính is left with no other choice than to leave Vietnam. Does this make Bính a diasporer or an exile? In their introduction to *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas*, Barkan and Shelton differentiates between exile and diaspora. Diaspora is chosen while exile is forced. Exile

connote[s] suffering, a negative term evoking displacement, refugee status, and above all the myth of an eventual, and possibly soon, return. In contrast, Diaspora [means] a chosen geography and identity. Exile [is] largely revered for the cultural stamina of the exiled, their constant loyalty to the historical memory of the communal life, rejection of assimilation, and struggle for authenticity and sacrifice. In contrast, the Jewish diaspora [for example] has been envied for its material success and simultaneously denigrated as selfish and failing to contribute to the general good. (4)

No government action expels Bính from Indochina; technically Bihn chooses to leave Vietnam, thus categorizing him as a diasporic. Yet, what are Bính's alternatives? Finding a job in the province of Saigon administered by the Governor's house, which has recently written his name in the black book? If his mother, the only person who always accepted him for who he was, is

forbidden to see her son, is it of any consequence if Bính moves fifty miles north of Saigon or to any other place on the planet? Why does he, a French colonized, choose to move to Paris, in the core of imperialism? Legally speaking, he has in France as many rights as in Vietnam. Even though he has been displaced from Vietnam, he can certainly not ask for refugee status. Spivak asserts that the subaltern must engage in the colonial hegemony. “When a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony. Unless [one] want[s] to be [a] romantic purist or primitivist about ‘preserving subalternity’ – a contradiction in terms– this is absolutely to be desired” (*Critique* 310). Once in Paris, he has no part in his assimilation or lack thereof. He struggles to remain loyal to the Vietnamese way of cooking food, but “the attempt to preserve his foodways is sometimes accompanied by humiliation” (Xu 140). It seems that the definitions of diaspora and the one of exile overlap, or both cannot accurately describe Bính’s experiences. How does Bính deal with colonial hegemony? How does living in Paris affect his identity? Why does he remain at the center of imperial power at the end of the novel? Answering these questions will, I hope, lead to a more complete and accurate definition of Bính’s life and add to the scholarship in Asian American and diasporic studies.

### 2.2.1 *The Burden of Queering the Empire.*

Before answering the questions above, I would like to examine how Binh’s sexual identity is constructed, so the reader can have a better understanding of how sexuality interacts with ethnicity in *The Book of Salt*. In Paris, Binh’s body is more marked than in Saigon.

To them, my body offers an exacting, predetermined life story. It cripples their imagination as it does mine. [...] My eyes, the passersby are quick to notice, do not

shine with the brilliance of a foreign student. I have all of my limbs so I am none of the soldiers imported from their colonies to fight in their Grande Guerre. No gamblers and whores joined to me at the hip so I am not the young Emperor or Prince of an old and mortified land. Within a few seconds that they have left to consider me before they stroll on by, they conclude that I am a laborer, the only real option left. Every day when I walk the streets of this city, I am just that. I am an Indochinese laborer, generalized and indiscriminate, easily spotted and readily identifiable all the same. It is this curious mixture of careless disregard and notoriety that makes me long to take my body into a busy Saigon marketplace and lose it in the crush. There, I tell myself, I was just a man, anonymous, and, at a passing glance, a student, a gardener, a poet, a chef, a prince, a porter, a doctor, a scholar. But in Vietnam, I tell myself, I was above all just a man. (152)

The clause “I tell myself” weakens the assertion, “In Vietnam, I was above all just a man.” Indeed, it seems as if the narrator is trying to convince himself that that is the case. When he was a child, Bính was as important as a mop, good enough to clean the floor, when his father missed the spittoon. For the Old Man, his fourth child’s name was simply “Stupid.” “Look at Stupid over there. Good thing she [Bính’s mother] dried up after him. The next one would have been a girl for sure!” (45). Not only is Bính constructed as the entity that serves to reinforce his father’s patriarchal power, he is also not assigned a gender. He is not a man, yet he is not a girl. It is through the relationship with Blériot that Bính’s gender is recognized. As Bính says, he traded the career of a garde-manger for Blériot’s penis: the life of someone who is “seen” only in terms of his use value exchanged for feeling a human being. I am not aiming to glorify Blériot but to elaborate on the assertion that Blériot, as representative of the empire, dominates the subaltern

Bính. I concur with scholars such as David Eng, Wenying Xu, and Deborah Cohler that Blériot occupies the dominant position because he is French and a Chef. Yet, if we look closer, their relationship is much more complex; underneath the cover, nets of power relations intersect. “The body is always simultaneously (if conflictually) inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power (Bhabha 67). It’s only when the farmers at the market notice that Blériot and Bính are lovers that the Vietnamese acquires a sexual identity. He is constructed as a homosexual. He now possesses a marked identity as opposed to the un-marked identity of the garde-manger. Even though one could argue that if the Governor-General exploits Bính’s economic value, and Blériot sees in him only his sexual value, it still stands that Bính’s identity is doubly marked because of his sexuality and because he is the lover of a French man. The farmers “had seen me before, but now they really looked at me, wondering where my allegiance lay. Whether I was the kind who would betray his own to save his Monsieur the equivalent of a couple of centimes. Whether I lived off of their blood or his money” (63). The farmers reject the Vietnamese garde-manger because he has dared to elevate himself to the level of the colonizer. On one hand, as a result of his betrayal, he no longer belongs to the Vietnamese community. On the other, the farmers judge him as unreliable because of his homosexuality.

When the relationship between Blériot and Bính is brought to light, Blériot denies all charges. In the 1920s and 1930s gay men and women could gather in specific venues in two major European cities: Paris and Weimar Berlin (Farmer). If during this time Paris relaxed its sodomy laws, in the colonies the situation was completely different. The colonizer had to abide by the moral principles instilled by the Catholic Church, so as to maintain order, and consequently, keep integral the patriarchal structure, on which the empire was based. Needless to



say, Bính has the worst punishment, since he queers the relationship between colonizer and colonized and the foundation of the empire in several ways. He belongs to a lower social class; his ethnicity renders Blériot and himself culpable of miscegenation; his sexuality exposes a different kind of threat, which lies not in “yellow men raping white women” but in “yellow men raping white men.” In the first case, white women might bear children who might endanger the empire; in the second case, the problem could be graver. The masculinity of the empire will be questioned. The colonizers will thus appear vulnerable and easy to overthrow. Furthermore, Bính’s homosexuality confirms the stereotypes against the natives. The natives are perverts; they behave like animals in that they cannot control their instincts. For these reasons, they need to be subjected to firm moral rules in order to prevent them from disrupting the colonial regime.

### 2.2.2 *Self-inflicted Violence: a Way to Counteract the Empire*

In his article “Sexuality, Colonialism, and Ethnicity in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* and Mei Ng’s *Eating Chinese Food Naked*,” Xu writes, “With his labor, his art, and his stories devoured by his employers, Bính becomes an allegory for the colonized vulnerable to the cannibalistic practices of colonialism - practices that boorish the Self by consuming the Other” (141). The colonizer feeds himself with the blood of the colonized. Xu continues by asserting that “reduced to an arrested history and humanity, the colonized becomes ossified in their inferiority. As Bính understands it, a person cannot be truly human when denied the possibility of becoming, and he must mutilate himself frequently to be reminded that he is a sentient being, not an object” (142). In Xu’s interpretation the Vietnamese cook is a victim without hope. I, instead, believe that Bính’s cutting himself is one of the ways he grapples with colonial power. In the following passage, Bính describes what he feels when he indulges in his habit.

When placed in such context, my habit is not so bad, I have, of course, thought about it. The satisfaction that could be drawn from it. Saucing the meat, fortifying the soup, enriching a batch of blood orange sorbet, the possible uses are endless, undetectable. But that is an afterthought. I never do it for them. I would never waste myself in such a way. It is only a few minutes of my day, usually in the late evening hours when all the real work has been done. The extreme cold or the usual bouts of loneliness will trigger it. I want to say it is automatic, but it is not. I have to think about it each time, consider the alternatives, decide that there are none. I want to say it brings me happiness or satisfaction, but it does not. It gives proof that I am *alive*, and sometimes that is enough. (64-65) (My italics)

“Alive” in this case means breaking free from the ways the colonizer constructs him. The Parisians see him as an Indochinese. The farmers in Bilignin think he is an “Asiatique” freak. Stein and Toklas treat him as a child that is incapable of taking care of himself. Bính wants to be able to determine the content and the boundaries of his own self. This is why he said he never does it for the colonizer but for his own well-being. It cannot be denied that cutting oneself works as a metonymy for committing suicide. Why then does Bính feel alive when his life is actually slipping away from him? Why does he feel alive by annulling himself? Going back to Xu’s metaphor, by eating the colonized, the colonizer accomplishes two goals. He satisfies his desire to eliminate the Other; he assimilates the Other. In this way the colonized has no longer his identity, and a new one is imposed on him. Bính opposes this by erasing himself. That way there is nothing to eat; there is nothing for others to construct.

One cannot forget to mention that Bính refers to his habit in conjunction with two people in two separate instances. “When Monsieur and Madame see red, they think anger, death, a site

of danger, a situation requiring extreme caution and care. Ridiculous, overblown, entirely misunderstood. Red on my fingertips, Má, means that I am still here. Red releases you thick from my body. Red is what keeps you near” (190-1). In this passage, Bính reveals that cutting himself reminds him of his mother. As a matter of fact, the first time he cut himself he was peeling onions with his mother, though at that point in time, he cut himself by mistake.

I remember, yes, a caress, a slight sensation, and when my hands are shaking it feels like a tickle. In the beginning I preferred the blade to be newly sharpened, licked against a stone until sparks flew, white and blue. Now I know that such delicacy would only deny me that part that I savor the most, the throbbing of flesh compromised, meeting and mending. And sometimes when it is deep enough, there is an ache that fools my heart. Tricks it into a false memory of love lost to a wide, open sea. I say to myself, “Ah, this reminds me of you. (74)

In this last excerpt, Bính invokes the chef of the Governor-general house. Xu explains that Bính here uses “a strong sexual undertone as though the remembrance of mother’s love evokes remembrance of sexual love” (142). I believe the link between Chef Blériot and Binh’s mother has also another nature. Bính existed through them. His mother constructs him as a human being— as opposed to his father who only sees him as an object and his brother who considers him as someone to save, while Blériot constructs him as a gay man. The Vietnamese cook stops cutting himself, when he meets Marcus Lattimore or as he calls him, Sweet Sunday Man. “I do not need a reflection in a mirror, red on the blade of a knife, proofs that this body of mine harbors life. [...] I am in the center of a hive, and it is sweet Sunday man who is the persistent bee” (149). What force prevents Bính from indulging in his habit? After the first night Bính and Lattimore spend together, Bính declares “I am at sea again. I am at sea again” (104). For Bính being at sea

means never arriving at a destination. “Believe me, I never had desire to see what was on the other side of the earth. I needed a ship that would go out to sea because there the water is deep, deeper than the hemmed-in rivers that I could easily reach by foot. I wanted the deepest water because I wanted to slip into it and allow the moon’s reflection to swallow me whole” (250). He longs to be swallowed into nothingness, to erase himself from the face of earth. Never reaching shore means one could hope for something better without ever coming across it- or wanting to, like the basket weaver, who looked and looked for a better place to plant his hyacinths and never located it. He ended up pursuing his obsession of finding something more by becoming a sailor. Deciding to settle down entails knowing where to go, what to do, and who to be, but Bính has a strong desire of not knowing. Bính’s confession that he feels as if he were at sea again is followed by his declaration that for a man like him, it is best not to know. Then, he corrects himself and tells of the first time when “ignorance recommended itself to [him]” (105). It was when he identified himself as a monkey. It pained his mother to realize her son knew how he was constructed by his father, and in turn Bính was hurt to see his mother upset. Not comprehending how others see one allows one to live unmarked. Yet, one’s existence depends on somebody else identifying one as *something*. The alternative is a life of misery and loneliness.

### 2.2.3 *Ethnicity at the Service of Sexuality; Sexuality at the Service of Ethnicity*

Bính experiences this tension between the longing to live unmarked and the desire to be marked as is evident in this passage: “As I begin to understand what you are saying to me, I become acutely aware of my skin. I detect the existence of forgotten terrain. I believe that my relationship to this city has now changed. I have been witnessed. You have testified to my appearance and demeanor. I have been sighted. You possess a memory of my body in this city,

ink on a piece of paper, [...]” (109-10). Lattimore not only sexualizes Bính – after all, it is he who asks “the Steins” permission to borrow the expertise of the Vietnamese cook – but he also racializes him by revealing his true origins.

I hide my body in the back rooms of every house that I have ever been. You hide inside your own. Yours is a near replica of your father’s, and you are grateful for what it allows you to do, unmolested, for where it allows you to go, undetected. This you tell yourself is the definition of freedom. As for your mother’s blood, you are careful not to let it show. You live a life in which you have severed the links between blood and body, scraped away what binds the two together. (151)

Sweet Sunday Man is, in fact, an African American passing as white. If we examine the relationship between the two gay men from Bính’s perspective, ethnicity allies with sexuality in “witnessing” him and in testifying to his existence as a marked human being. According to Xu, Truong decides to have Lattimore reveal his secret to Bính, so as to convince the reader not to condemn him too easily. Granted that Lattimore’s revelation is a writer’s strategy, one still wonders why Lattimore confides in Bính such a critical detail about his life. “I [Bính] tell you to speak in the language of your birth” (111). “You reply that if you return to the place where the moss hangs, wavy haired from the trees, where mosquitoes bloody the nights, you will not want to stop. You will talk for hours, unearthing words whose origins lie within the shades of magnolia trees, whose roots have grown strong from blood-rich soil” (111). There is a certain nostalgia in these words, a nostalgia that can only originate from a man who cannot go back to his land of birth. Sweet Sunday Man had to move to the North to guard his secret. He is a Southerner, but he is not a southern gentleman. He has a father he cannot name and although he

said, “a southerner without his father’s surname is a man freed,” his words are full of irony (112). He is rootless as he cannot claim his origins.

In her study on diaspora, Brah writes, “‘minorities’ are positioned in relation not only to ‘majorities’ but also with respect to one another, and vice versa. Moreover, individual subjects may occupy ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ positions simultaneously, and this has important implications for the formation of subjectivity” (189). Bính’s African American lover occupies a minority and a majority position at the same time. Even if his ethnic background allows him to align with Bính in the bedroom, he is nevertheless in a more dominant position because he has money and because he can live in the crack, although sometimes he can fall through the cracks as when Gertrude Stein asks Bính, “Is Lattimore a Negro?” (189). His ability to hide his real identity backfires when he is surrounded by white people. If deviation from sexual norms is almost a must in the artists’ world, miscegenation is still a taboo.

Bính is aware that he and Lattimore are from two different racial backgrounds. “When we are together in your garret, I recognize it [Lattimore’s stance] as an assumption that you try to get rid yourself of, shaking it free from where it clings to your body. In there, in the only rooms in this city that we in truth can share, your body becomes more like mine. And as you know, mine marks me, announces my weakness, displays it as yellow skin” (151-52). Yet, Bính tries to overcome the racial difference between him and his lover by turning the love affair into an economic transaction. He tells Lattimore about the cupboard where Alice B. Toklas collects Stein’s manuscripts hoping his “value to [Lattimore] [...] would surely increase, double and sustain itself. Value, [he has] heard, is how it all begins” (150). He wants to sell his knowledge to cancel out race. What Bính doesn’t fathom is that his lover will never renounce the privileges

that come with passing for white. For Lattimore, having a homosexual lover might be scandalous, but having a homosexual lover of an “inferior” race would be inconceivable.

Although Bính swears his homosexuality is not a curse and he has never judged himself less than a man, his sexuality becomes a burden at this point of the narrative. It increases his chances of being exploited. It shoves him further down the subalternity ladder. More significantly, sexuality here is the necessary condition- the mathematical “only if”- that enables an economic exchange. Furthermore, one must not make the mistake of considering Bính as the sole victim. There is no doubt as to who the villain in this equation is, yet Lattimore fits in the role of the victim too; a victim of his decision to pass as white. He sells his sexuality in order to ensure his ethnic fraud. In other words, sexuality is at the service of ethnicity.

#### 2.2.4 *Where is Home? Ethnicity and Sexuality Answer*

Lattimore abandons Bính shortly before Stein and Toklas return to the States. Since his lover vanishes, Bính can join his Mesdames. After all, he finds financial stability at their service. He himself admits he doesn't want to start skimming through the job postings. He is scared as he doesn't want to sink to the same state of mind of five years earlier, when he almost committed suicide. He has no family, no friends in Paris. What's keeping him from jumping on the same ship Stein and Toklas are boarding? America might be the land of opportunity for Caucasians, but Stein's inquisitiveness about Lattimore's true race, her denigration of African American gospel music, and Bính's lover's own experience in the South warn Bính, that if he were to immigrate to the States, he would be marked there, too. He would be classified as Other, yet at the same time he would be “just another Asian,” a non-identifiable entity in the heap of Others. One could argue that in France, Bính is just another Indochinese. As the Vietnamese cook

himself remarks, “[W]e Indochinese belong to the French” (142). Despite the fact that the French cannot distinguish between a Vietnamese, a Cambodian, or a Lao, and even though these peoples are aware of their subaltern position, they also develop a sense of belonging for the country that colonized them. This sense of belonging authorizes Bính to claim he is more entitled than his Mesdames to live in France. Quite obviously, once in America- or in any other country- this perverted relationship between colonizer and colonized would lose intensity. Lastly, one cannot forget to consider a matter that might seem solely practical, but it is fundamental to survival: Bính cannot speak English. For such reasons, the Vietnamese cook cannot follow his employers. By having the protagonist not move to America, Truong subverts the unwritten conventions or erodes one of the pillars of Asian American literature: the immigrant who leaves his country behind fulfills his dreams in America.

A few weeks prior to the Steins’ departure, a letter from Anh Minh, Bính’s brother, announces their mother is deceased and their father is dying. Anh Minh urges his brother to go home. Can Bính go home after spending eleven years outside Vietnam? Is home still Home for him? Unlike for other first generation immigrants, home is not a place Bính can return to if he cannot support himself. Home, for Bính, is not the idealized locus of peace and harmony safe from unjust laws and racism. Rather, it reminds Bính of the abuse he suffered because of his father’s brutality and meanness. His father’s house is where people come to gamble and drink. It is where his mother was raped by her husband and then relegated to a dirty room. Nonetheless, home represents his mother’s love for her bastard child, even though Bính took this love for granted. “I, like the basket weaver, looked at the abundance around me and believed that there was something more. [...]I stood looking at your straw hat, hanging in its usual place at the entrance to the kitchen, and I, blind, saw there nothing but a fraying chin strap, moving listlessly



in the sun” (249). His mother is also a source of admiration, for “she wanted to watch her husband grow old, decrepit. She thought of how his body would look floating down the Mekong, out into the South China sea. She, unlike [Bính] never allow[ed] [her husband] to take away the land that she call[ed] home” (198). Bính regrets his lack of courage to claim his father’s land/fatherland as his, too. Therefore, home for Bính represents something he never had, but did not realize he had (his mother’s love) and did not comprehend that he should have demanded it. Like the basket weaver Bính does not go home. As Grice in *Negotiating Identities* states, home is an ideologically charged site. In Bính’s father’s house, patriarchy reigns and heterosexuality prevails, excluding homosexuality. The death of the father would not guarantee the eradication of these ideologies. This is not to say that in Paris, the Vietnamese cook manages to live independently from them. In “Transnational Sexualities: South Asian (Trans)nation(alism)s and Queer Diaspora,” Jasbir Puar argues that queer diasporic discourses often resituate nationalist centering of the West as the site of sexual liberation, freedom, and visibility” (406). Yet, Paris appears to be adamant with homosexuality, Truong makes sure to underscore that class and race modify the picture. If the relationship between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas is a source of fascination for intellectuals and the like, it stirs mockery and scorn among the farmers in Bilignin. Furthermore, homosexuality might be acceptable if the homosexuals are white; same sex relationships in people of another race do not epitomize liberation from sexual norms but fall into animalistic behavior. Is it possible then that Paris offers a counter-ideology that allows Bính to choose it over Vietnam? Before moving to a more detailed discussion of what this city represents for Bính, I would like to point out that by deciding to remain in Paris, Bính disrupts the ideology of return. In many diasporic recountings, immigrants work to return to their homeland, that they have always considered as their only possible home.

Is Paris home? What does staying at the center of imperialism mean for a subaltern, diasporic subject? Bính and the man on the bridge agree that Paris makes them feel “a poor relation, tolerated but not necessarily welcomed” (93). As I mentioned earlier, Bính is but an “Asiatique” to the Parisians who do not bother to inquire if he comes from Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos. His national identity is erased, and, by being called Asian, his cultural identity is assimilated to the idea the Parisians have of Asia, which is different from what the farmers in Bilignin think of the colonized. The Parisians have certain expectations of what an Asiatique is and what he can be. In the countryside (Bilignin) as opposed to in the city (Paris), Bính’s nationality is acknowledged. The farmers want to hear how French sounds when spoken by a Vietnamese and they are curious about Bính’s mother tongue. They ask questions such as, “Did you know how to use a fork and a knife before coming to France?” and “Will you marry three or four asiatique wives?” (153). In Paris, his presence is taken for granted; while here, he is treated like a novelty. He is constructed as a primitive and because of that he cannot associate himself with a French woman. He might be an inferior being, but he cannot go against nature. The people in the country can only hint at his homosexuality; yet, in the end, he, too, must obey to the law of heterosexuality. If the Steins are the “only circus act in town, [he is] the sideshow freak” (142). In Bilignin, his homosexuality is dismissed and his nationality though not ignored is quickly absorbed into ethnicity – “Asiatique.” As a result, his self-esteem reaches such a low bottom that he spends his free time drinking. “Really, Madame, what was I supposed to do in Bilignin? It was never part of our original bargain. I spend months there and never, never see a face that looks like mine, except for the one that grows gaunt in the mirror. In Paris, Gertrude Stein, the constant traffic of people at least includes my fellow asiatiques” (141). In *Racial Castration*, Eng stresses how important social validation is for the subject in order to construct his identity.

Without it, “the concomitant mapping of bodily ego and imago that produces a feeling of self-sameness cannot be sustained. Psychic ‘presence’ is forfeited; jubilant identification is impossible; and the subject is left with a profound sense of fragmentation, disunity, and loss” (Eng, *Racial* 115). Thus, in Paris, Bính can identify himself in other fellow Asians. Does this process entail that he is silencing his Vietnamese self? In his essay “Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora,” Radhakrishnan asks a propos Indian migration in the United States: “What if identity is exclusively ethnic and not national at all? Could such an identity survive (during these days of bloody ‘ethnic cleansing’) and be legitimate, or would society construe this as a non-viable ‘difference,’ that is, experimentally authentic but non-deserving hegemony?” (120). Is an ethnic identity what Truong is advocating in *The Book of Salt*?

### 2.2.5 *Defying the Ideology of Nationalism*

It is a ruptured and dismembered Bính that meets the man on the bridge, who happens to be Nguyễn Ái Quốc, one of the many names of Ho Chi Minh. Both Nguyễn Ái Quốc and Bính are diasporers. They both worked as cooks on a steamship. They are Vietnamese and feel unwelcome in Paris. In the space of one night, the man on the bridge becomes the scholar-prince about whom Bính’s mother always talked, an educated man, a philosopher, “who was first and foremost wise and kind,” and who would come and sweep off her feet the peasant girl or the servant girl, only in Bính’s version, the “she” was undoubtedly a “he” (81). Bính falls in love with Ho Chi Minh, and when he remembers the latter’s curiosity as to why Bính doesn’t go back home, Bính answers “Your question, your desire to know my answer, keeps me” (261). If identifying with other Asians allows Bính to begin “the concomitant mapping of bodily ego and imago,” the meeting with Nguyễn Ái Quốc fosters this process. Before Nguyễn Ái Quốc stepped

into the scene, Bính's Asianess jeopardized his nationality by swallowing it like a crocodile would gulp down a child. The encounter with the man on the bridge restores the balance between ethnicity and nationality.

Since the man on the bridge is a Vietnamese, whose name means "Nguyễn The Patriot," and who will lead Vietnam to independence from the colonizers, is Truong re-claiming nationalism or is she challenging the concept of nation and thus suggesting we should do away with nation-states? In her article "Teaching Transnationally: Queer Studies and Imperialist Legacies in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*," Cohler argues that Bính's purchase of Ho Chi Minh's photo in place of Lattimore's represents a choice "which subjugates Bính's commitment to cosmopolitan homosexuality (his gay internationalism) to that of his expatriate Vietnamese nationalism" (29). Cohler proposes a plausible interpretation given the crucial role Ho Chi Minh plays in Bính's life. Yet, the examination of the following scene leads to a different conclusion. The man on the bridge takes Bính to dinner at a place owned by a man he knows from an American town. Naïve Bính understands he is going to an American restaurant, only to change his mind when Nguyễn Ái Quốc places his order. He is convinced he is going to be served Chinese food, but he soon learns the food is not Chinese either. In Ho Chi Minh's words "First of all, my friend, the chef here is Vietnamese. He, like me, thought that he would be a writer or a scholar someday, but after he traveled the world, life gave him something more practical to do. He now cooks here on the rue Descartes, but he will always be a traveler. He will always cook from all the places where he has been. It is his way of remembering the world" (99). With this scene Truong defies the ideology of nationalism in two ways. First, the place of origin is just one way to define oneself. An individual's identity is also determined by the places where he or she has lived. More importantly, the countries that one has experienced, even if only temporarily, are

not bastardized; rather, they represent a viable alternative to the fatherland. However, *The Book of Salt* does not challenge the ideology of arrival. Paris is a destination, not a place of transition. Ending the book with the protagonist moving to another country would have meant celebrating the figure of the Wandering Jew. Second, for a nationalist, “one’s own ethnic and national tradition is especially valuable and needs to be defended at almost any cost” (Hastings 4). Regardless of who Nguyễn Ái Quốc later became, in this scene he is not privileging the Vietnamese experience. On the contrary, he proposes one’s identity should encompass different cultures, traditions, and ethnicities, thus disrupting the ideology of the nation-state, which “proclaim[s] that political boundaries should be coterminous with cultural boundaries” (Eriksen 108). The identity advocated by the man on the bridge is in direct contrast with the notion of identity demanded by the nation-state. As Max Weber said, even though the ethnic sentiment does not suffice to form a nation, nor does a nation have to include only one ethnicity, the nation requires a certain homogeneity (Gerth and Mills 174). I interpret this homogeneity as being either cultural, sexual, religious, or class-related, or constituted by any combination of the aforementioned modalities. What Nguyễn Ái Quốc suggests that Bính embraces resists cultural homogeneity. Truong also dislodges the sexual homogeneity by creating a breach in Ho Chi Minh’s sexuality. Homosexuals, transgenders, transsexuals, and bisexuals cannot subscribe to the ideology of the nation-state, because the nation-state is founded on heterosexual relationships which will produce other heterosexuals, who in turn will keep this ideology alive.

To answer the question why Bính remains in Paris despite the racist and classist attitudes of the French, one needs to revisit the fairy-tale Bính’s mother used to tell relentlessly. The protagonists varied slightly; “‘home’ though, was always the same, the teak pavilion and the

scholar-prince, a man who was first and foremost wise and kind” (81). Paris is the place where Bính met his scholar-prince. Although Bính decides to pay for the photograph of Ho Chi Minh rather than for one of Lattimore, Bính does not stay in France because he wants to find the Man on the Bridge. When at the end of the book Bính remembers his encounter with the future leader of Vietnam, it is not the man himself that he longs for but what the man represents: the possibility that a scholar-prince might actually exist outside the fairy tale world and where the scholar-prince is, there is home. “Queers, like Asian Americans, harbor yearnings for the kind of contained boundaries enjoyed by mainstream society. Hence, despite frequent and trenchant queer dismissals of home and its discontents, it would be a mistake to underestimate enduring queer affiliations with this concept” (Eng, *Racial* 206). Even though Bính opts not to return to Vietnam, he still longs for a home. As Eng asserts, it is a home that deconstructs the heterosexual norms (*Racial* 206). The teak pavilion becomes Paris and home becomes “the lived experience of a locality” (Brah 192).

### 2.3 Conclusion

As scholars, we cannot treat diasporic individuals as a homogeneous category, not only because they might have different destinations, even if they come from the same place, but also because each experiences religion, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and age in ways that might be completely dissimilar. Furthermore, these modalities interact with one another and their interaction affects diasporers differently. In this chapter, I examined the power relations that originate from the encounter between sexuality and ethnicity in *Cebu* and in *The Book of Salt*. While in Bacho’s novel sexuality forces Ben Lucero to examine why he is marked as a Filipino,

when he, in fact, wants to be accepted as an American, in Truong's work, ethnicity and sexuality double mark an individual who resists, but at the same time longs to be identified as *something*.

In *Cebu* sexuality causes an ethnic crisis in the protagonist. Simultaneously, ethnicity functions as the door through which Ben Lucero walks into the realm of sexuality as defined at the beginning of this chapter. Ellen, a Filipina, whose father is American, seduces the innocent priest. At a first reading, the reader wonders if Ellen reincarnates the myth of the Caucasian mestiza, but he then realizes that Bacho skillfully reinterprets this myth in his own terms. Nonetheless, Ellen plays a fundamental role in Ben's life. Even though she is not able to bring Ben closer to his ethnic background, she does manage to trigger a deep ethnic crisis in him. Having sex surely compromises his morality, but for the protagonist of *Cebu* sleeping with a Filipina confirms his worst nightmare: he de facto incarnates the stereotypes non-Filipino Americans and Filipino Americans have of the Filipinos. This new revelation destroys his hopes of one day being identified as an American by American society. If he cannot be an American and is determined not to be a Filipino, who is he? Can Ben, or any other human being, live without belonging to a particular ethnicity? Ben dies before he can solve this existential dilemma. On one side, in baffling the reader, who is waiting for an elucidation, this ending falls into the literary conventions of modern and postmodern literature. No solution is provided. The reader will have to figure it out on his own. On the other side, though, I believe Bacho purposely refuses to elaborate, so as to protect himself. If he had declared that one can live without being categorized ethnically, then his position as an ethnic writer would be compromised. Yet, if he had answered negatively, he would demonstrate lack of perception, for debates around ethnicity flock in his field.

In Vietnam as well as in Paris sexuality and ethnicity disempower Binh, yet, at the same time, they “witness” him and assign him a subject position that helps him *exist* as a human being. Although Binh longs to live unmarked, he cannot *be* without identifying with others similar to him and at the same time differentiating from others unlike him. Both Binh and Lattimore use their sexuality to deal with their ethnic background only with opposite purposes. Binh wants to dissolve the difference in ethnicity between him and his African American lover, while the latter sells his sexuality to ensure others “witness” him as a Caucasian American.

Truong doesn't go as far as to state we should do away with ethnicity; however, she does resist the ideology of nationalism. According to David Little, nationalism is both “homogenizing and [...] differentiating” (290). A nation needs homogeneity, be it cultural, sexual, or ethnic, to sustain itself. Through its peculiar homogeneity, the nation can now differentiate itself from other nations. In *The Book of Salt*, Nguyễn Ái Quốc introduces Binh to a more multicultural and multiethnic vision of identity. A person's cultural and ethnic identity is not only determined by the country of birth but also by all the places he experiences. Truong manages to defy the sexual homogeneity of the nation-state as well by insinuating Ho Chi Minh has an affair with Binh. Despite the fact that Truong disrupts the foundations of the nation-state, her main character still desires a home, only home does not coincide with the country of birth but with the place where one can still hope.

Although Truong and Bacho arrive at different conclusions about the future of the concept of ethnicity, both Bacho and Truong defy the heterosexist ideology adopted by scholars in analyzing the foundation and perpetuation of community and of nation, in that Bacho chooses a Catholic priest as the main character of his novel, while Truong's protagonist is homosexual.



### 3 NO AMERICANNESSE GRANTED: THE CONFLICTUAL INTERSECTION BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND RELIGION

Usually, we tend to think that religion helps immigrants remain closer to their ethnic identity. *Cebu* and *Mona in the Promised Land*<sup>xviii</sup> are two cases that prove this assumption wrong. In the first half of this chapter, I examine the relationship between religion and colonization and how this relationship affects ethnicity in *Cebu*. In the second half, religion clashes with ethnicity in *Promised Land* also, but not with the tragic results that occur in *Cebu*. In Peter Bacho's work, religion contributes to Ben's ethnic crisis, as it has two functions. On one side, it nourishes Ben's Filipinoness but, on the other, it is a mask behind which Ben has avoided questioning his ethnicity. In Gish Jen's novel, a religion, which is typically associated with whiteness in the United States, emphasizes instead the protagonist's Chineseness. Though Ben and Mona are hybrids, hybridity does not grant them agency. On the contrary, it denies them the main right they were asking of America.

#### 3.1 A Look at Crucifixions: Anthropological Explanations

Before scrutinizing the interplay between colonization, religion, and ethnicity, I am going to first present the interpretations of the rites of crucifixion in the Philippines given by anthropologists, a few well-known and a few less-established. Their opinions will help me analyze the crucifixion of Carlito and the selling of the picture of Carlito's crucified body. These scenes deserve thorough consideration because they contribute to Ben's ethnic crisis. In the essay, "Image Transmissions," Peter J. Bräunlein<sup>xix</sup> claims that Filipinos crucify themselves so as to be as close to God as possible. Bräunlein states that "imitating Christ ... aims at the assimilation of the irritating other and, equally, at participating in its presumed power" ("Image Transmission" 33). Who is this "irritating other"? Filipinos have a long history of counteracting

imperial power. In his book, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*, Vicente Rafael claims Filipinos did not surrender passively to the Spanish invasion of the island, rather they actively engaged in tactics to resist the colonizer. “For the Tagalogs, translation was a process less of internalizing colonial-Christian conventions than of evading their totalizing grip by repeatedly marking the differences between their language and interests and those of the Spaniards” (Rafael 211). Thus, in translating religious texts from Spanish, Tagalogs did not dutifully and unquestioningly translate word by word. However, one must also take into account, as Rafael himself observes, that the mere fact that the Spaniards had to learn the native dialects of the conquered to be able to convey their superiority undermines said superiority. The very nature of translation “tended to cast intentions adrift, now laying, now subverting the ideological grounds of colonial hegemony” (21). I am not remarking on the character of translation to lessen the efforts of the Filipinos in counteracting the conquistadores, but rather to remind the reader that Filipinos did not stage a revolution; their resistance was more covert. They were able to incorporate their own interests while translating from the language of the conqueror.

Soon after the Spanish conquered the Philippines, self-flagellation became popular both as an act of piety and as “a means of obtaining power in a basically unequal, nevertheless reciprocal system of a patron-client relationship” (Bräunlein, “Image Transmission” 23). In the nineteenth century (some historians argue in the eighteenth), *sinakulo* began to be performed. *Sinakulo* is a play performed during the holy week that usually recounts the events leading to Christ’s resurrection. It is based on the long poem in Tagalog *Pasyon*. Some *sinakulo* follow the first version of the *Pasyon*, written in the early seventeenth century by Gaspar Aquino de Belen, who dramatizes the last week in the life of Christ. Other *sinakulo* adhere to the *Pilapil* or

*Casaysayan*, better known as the *Pasyon Henesis* (Genesis Passion).<sup>xx</sup> This version “is not a translation of the biblical story in a philological sense, but rather a peculiar interpretation, which expands the spatial and temporal frames of a reworked passion story” (Bräunlein, “Image Transmission” 20). As the name suggests, *Pasyon Henesis* opens with the book of Genesis. However, Peterson reports that some *sinakulo*, based on the *Pasyon Henesis*, incorporates the Last Judgment as well. These time frame extensions clearly demonstrate how Filipinos re-elaborated the teachings of the Church in their own terms.

According to Bräunlein, crucifixions are the ultimate strategy with which Filipinos resist colonial power. The first crucifixion occurred in 1961, late, if we considered that *sinakulo* existed since the nineteenth century. Why this century-long time lapse? In her essay, Diamond asserts that after the independence from the United States there were not many theatrical productions; yet, Filipino theatre was resurrected in the 1960s along with a reborn nationalist sentiment. Plays were performed in Tagalog instead of English, as had been the rule under American dominion. I believe that since crucifixions are performances, even if rudimentary, the resurgence of Filipino theater is strongly connected with the appearance of crucifixions. Not coincidentally, “in his study of *pasyon*, Ileta noted that the rise of actual crucifixions of penitents in Holy Week, which accompanied the social and fiscal injustice of the Marcos regime, served as protest for inequities” (Peterson 325). Ferdinand Marcos was president from 1965 to 1986.

A possible second explanation why crucifixions did not happen until the 1960s lies in the motive of the crucifixion. None of the crucified impersonates Christ to beg for forgiveness for his or her sins. Some make a *panata*, a religious vow, in the hope that God will help them save a dear one from a dying illness or assist them in managing family responsibilities. Others claim to have been possessed and have received the message to be crucified in exchange for healing

powers. On the one hand, a panata is the reason that leads scholars, such as Rafael, Peterson, and Wiegele to believe that crucifixions are rooted in the precolonial notion of “utang na loob,” literally translated as “debt of the inside” or reciprocal debt. An “utang na loob” may never be fully repaid and it could be passed on for generations. The relationship between debtor and creditor is reciprocal because both of the parties know that the debtor could ask for more help, but when the creditor is in need, the debtor will return the favor. The imitators of Christ believe that crucifying themselves is the least they can do to reduce the debt with God. On the other hand, crucifixions instigated by possessions point scholars such as Bräunlein to believe the imitators are mystics. Nonetheless, Bräunlein insists on crucifixions being modern phenomena, not the re-elaboration of some medieval practice. “Actively sought is not mystical union or inexpressible experience of oneness with God as a lifelong personal project. Unlike European mystics of the late medieval ages, ... the Philippine mystics do not teach or preach the unspeakable, nor are they intentionally longing for such unification. Instead, God is viewed as the active party using a chosen person as his instrument” (Bräunlein, “Negotiating” 904). The crucified claims to have been “visited” by a superior being and to have followed His instructions. They are instruments, but they are not to be judged as victims. Being nailed to a cross will earn them healing powers. As Bräunlein states, this is a process of empowerment (“Negotiating” 904).

Though in Peter Bacho’s novel, Carlito admits he wants to save his niece from leukemia, he also claims to have been possessed, but unlike the Filipino Lenten impersonators, he is determined to die on the cross. The word “imitation” doesn’t exist in Carlito’s vocabulary. Imitation is for dilettants. If those who ask to be nailed to a cross are looking for a way to participate in the power of the “irritating other,” of becoming his instrument, and thus automatically placing themselves in an inferior position, Carlito ranks himself equal to God as he

believes he owns the power of death, which according to Roman Catholics only God can have. It is important to stress that Carlito chooses to be nailed to a cross on the way to Toledo, where other people were “possessed,” but more crucially, where Japanese soldiers had murdered Filipino women and children by impaling them. The narrator of *Cebu* adds that the foul odor of the dead bodies could be smelled especially in March and April – the months when Easter is usually celebrated. By not simply imitating Christ but by dying as the impaled Filipinos had died and by being crucified exactly where Filipinos were executed, Carlito becomes these murdered bodies and absorbs their powers. Despite the fact that they might at first appear only as victims, the impaled Filipinos contributed to the inflamed hatred against the Japanese and, therefore, participated in the Filipinos’ fight against one of the many colonizers. These corpses became political, fighting entities, and so does Carlito’s lifeless body. However, Carlito’s enemy is more subtle; it did not invade the country militarily, but financially. One of the minor characters in the novel tells of his decision to move to Cebu, “where Chinese banks and money, a mild climate, and a prosperous population promise[s] a different life” (64). Like the imitators of Christ, Carlito too tries to deal with the (neo)-colonizer in his own way. “Surely God, Who created the Chinese and blessed their business acumen, could accept [his] deal,” his life for the life of his niece, who was diagnosed with leukemia by Chinese doctors (66).

Even though Carlito doesn’t stop at imitating Christ’s suffering – he imitates his death too - Carlito’s decision to die where Filipinos were brutally impaled is nonetheless a component of performance. As Bräunlein claims in his essay, the success of self-crucifixions, in terms of how realistic is the representation of Christ’s death, rests on the impersonator’s abilities as well as on the audience’s reaction (“Image Transmission” 26). The practice of self-crucifixion, then, serves two purposes. One allows the self-crucified to participate in God’s power; the other

“invite[s] and allow[s] viewers to create a story, both mentally and/or by mimetic action” (“Image Transmission” 30). The audience also participates in this power-exchange between God and the person on the cross. They too are empowered to an extent.

As I mentioned earlier some of the crucified are believed to be new mystics. This is not, however, the place for me to examine the nature of New Mysticism;<sup>xxi</sup> suffice it to say that a strong individualism and a determination to be in communion with God are cornerstones of this religion.<sup>xxii</sup> For the followers of New Mysticism, priests and other church officials are less important than is their leader. Likewise, attending the Lenten rituals has more value than confessions (Tiatco 96). According to Bräunlein, even though their leader can claim direct access to God’s power, the new mystics long for the approval of the church, and therefore, “New Mysticism is more of a potential or undercover critique” (“Negotiating” 907). In his book *Anthropology of Christianity*, the anthropologist Fenella Cannell expresses a different opinion.

[...E]ven where particular Christian churches have, at given times and places, adopted certain theological positions as orthodox and policed them as such, the unorthodox position remains hanging in the air, readable between the lines in Scripture, and implied as the logical opposite of what is most insisted upon authorities. Hence, the heretical is constantly reoccurring and being reinvented in new forms. (7)

Ironically, the ones who imitate Christ for a panata as well as those who perform the ritual because they have been “visited” deem themselves devoted Catholics. Perhaps, it is this (allegedly) heretical facet that triggers such a spasmodic reaction in Ben Lucero. Or is it the individualism of the crucified that bothers him the most?

Before discussing in details Ben's stance on Carlito's crucifixion, I would like to examine the reaction of some of Cebu's citizens in the novel. Away from Ben's eyes and ears, the reader learns that the citizens treat Carlito's death as something that doesn't concern them, as a fictional episode. One woman says, "It's like the movies, you know, like Ben Hur" (69). Another man makes fun of the event and hints that Carlito might not be completely sane. In front of Ben, Clara, Ben's mother's best friend, dismisses the sacrificial act as a practice of religious extremists.<sup>xxiii</sup> These responses negate the evidence to avoid answering the questions the Lenten rituals arouse. Answering would lead to interrogating the status quo. Let us not forget that the two friends who nail Carlito to the cross abandon Carlito. Carlito didn't want to die of asphyxiation, so he had asked them to kill him with a spear, but they leave before fulfilling their promise. In light of these reactions, Carlito's sacrifice appears to the critic even more significant in the context of the fight against the colonizers, be they Catholic, Japanese, or Chinese<sup>xxiv</sup>. Unfortunately, not all Filipinos are ready to be empowered.

### 3.1.1 *Ben's Reaction to Carlito's Crucifixion*

In this section, I argue that Carlito's crucifixion and the selling of the picture of Carlito's crucified body destroy Ben's image of Catholicism as a unified religion, i.e. a religion that offers only one interpretation of the events in the Bible. In Lyotardian terms, Ben is looking for consensus in a place where there is none. The lack of consensus brings him to question his position within the Church and within society.

Ben, the protagonist of *Cebu*, angrily dismisses Carlito's crucifixion by arguing "This is not Catholicism," and he immediately appeals to authority, in this case the Bishop of Cebu. To his surprise, the bishop approves of these practices. In real life, the media cover the Lenten

rituals minute by minute, while the Catholic Church, according to Bräunlein, doesn't condemn them. Yet, other scholars, such as Tiatco and Peterson, report the Church opposes the extreme Easter performances. What strikes me is that the church might speak against the crucifixions, but it doesn't invest much energy in stopping these crucifixions from happening because it understands the instrumental significance of those performances. By participating in the crucifixion not only does the audience validate the sacrificial act, but it also perpetuates the values embedded in it. At the same time, "Filipino Catholicism is not a passively embodied dogmatic tradition" (Tiatco 101). The reason why scholars disagree on the degree of Filipinos' defiance of Catholicism lies in the complexity of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, a complexity that ultimately Ben Lucero fails to understand.

What is it that Ben cannot fathom about the rituals of the Holy Week? Would he agree with Cannell that the crucified and their followers are heretics? Is it the strong individualism behind Carlito's choice that he cannot digest? Or is he outraged at the fact that Filipinos dare to deal with Catholicism in their own terms? Heresy doesn't sufficiently account for the depth of Ben's emotional and physical response. Ben is haunted by the crucifixion. "He could see it and even smell it" (85). He cannot accept that Filipinos reinterpret Catholicism because the act of reinterpreting is seen as an act of betrayal against the system. It is pure defiance against the church. It is an action that undermines a system that Ben has always held to be unified, or, in Jean-François Lyotard's terms, Ben has always relied on consensus. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard argues that after WWII we cannot trust grand narratives such as "we continue to progress" or "we are bound to know everything one day." We cannot resort to these metanarratives to know what is truth, since knowledge has lost its use-value with the advancements in technology. Researchers do not investigate for the sake of



knowing. Knowledge is now produced to be sold and consumed to produce more. Therefore, “the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, professions, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction” (Lyotard 14). Since in a postmodern world knowledge needs to be transparent, the state will appear as factious and it will lose its status as producer of knowledge. What solution does Lyotard offer to this problem? “It is necessary to posit the existence of a power that destabilizes the capacity for explanation, manifested in the promulgation of new norms for understanding. ... [This process] is not without rules ... but it is always *locally determined*. ... In terms of the idea of transparency, it is a factor that *generates blind spots and defers consensus*” (61) (emphasis added). In place of the grand narratives, the postmodern world relies on the *petits récits*, little narratives. Undoubtedly, these have their own rules, but they differ from local narrative to local narrative. Consequently, “it is now dissension that must be emphasized. Consensus is a horizon that is never reached” (Lyotard 61). An example of *petits récits* from the field this dissertation covers is the literatures of Asian American, African American, Native American, Chicano, etc., that subvert the totalitarian interpretation of the American experience bestowed by Caucasian American literature. In Ben Lucero’s world, little narratives and dissent are two concepts that will never exist. The protagonist of *Cebu* cannot embrace multiplicity as he can only accept unity. He cannot even begin to understand the role of the impersonators of Christ and their supporters. Given that most of them avow complete devotion to Catholicism, their destabilization of the authoritarian power (the Church) is unconscious, but still enough effective to affect Ben’s understanding of Catholicism. The Church seems to have a different opinion.

The function of the differential ... activity of the current pragmatics of science  
[substitute New Religious Movements for science] is to point out these

metaprescriptives (science's presuppositions) [read interpretations of Christianity given by the Church in place of metaprescriptives] and to petition the players [the Church] to accept different ones. The only legitimation that can make this kind of request admissible is that it will generate ideas, in other words, new statements.

(Lyotard 65)

The last sentence explains why the Church has not seriously engaged in stopping people from nailing themselves to a cross. Even if the Filipino Lenten rites are indigenized practices, they still perpetuate Catholic values. Yet, for Ben, there is only one correct version of Catholicism; the version imparted by the Church. Ben is longing for consensus, but the mystics' reinterpretation of *his* religion shakes his hopes.

Consensus would reassure him of his duties within the system. His position in society is further questioned when Ben witnesses the selling of the photographic reinterpretation of Carlito's crucifixion. As it happened before the crucifixion, when Ben sees Carlito for sale, he reacts physically. His body somatizes what his mind cannot accept. "His stomach churned.... He tried to vomit, but nothing came forward. The best he got was a growl from his guts and throat" (88). Without applying Freudian tricks, how can one account for the effect Rey's<sup>xxv</sup> transaction has on the protagonist of *Cebu*? Even though the reader does not have access to what Ben is thinking at this precise moment, Ben, the priest, is probably wondering why Carlito is celebrated rather than being condemned since he committed suicide. Besides, negotiating a price for Carlito's picture entails ascribing importance to Carlito's action. On a moral level, Ben might be trying to understand what kind of person would sell the picture of a dead man, taken several hours after an atrocious death, why, and what would the buyer do with the gruesome relic.

Through death Carlito acquires sanctity. His photo most likely resembles the Renaissance paintings of a suffering Sebastian. Yet, while for the Church the pictures of saints are mere representations, for Filipinos they acquire a value of their own. In his essay “Reading as Gift and Writing as Theft,” Cannell reports that in the early seventeenth century Bicolanos wore pendants with the images of the saints as amulets (148). The saints were thus deities with supernatural powers. In contemporary Bicol, a region of the Philippines, Cannell has observed the cult of the Ama or dead Christ, as the statue resembles Christ after he was taken down from the cross. Ama “was found as a shapeless piece of wood by a childless woman.... She took care of the image, which began to assume a recognizable human shape, and gradually grew from child to adult. The miracles took a new turn when the ama began to walk about in the area, recruiting pilgrims and devotees” (Cannell, *Anthropology* 379). The statue has an origin of its own and does not merely represent Christ but is a divinity in itself capable of prodigious healings. In his study of the districts of Cutud and Apalit, Tiatco has come to similar conclusions about the statues of the divine. Granted that Cutud and Apalit are all in the region of Luzon, while Cebu belongs to the Central Visayas, what Tiatco and Cannell describe and the way Carlito’s image is received share something in common. In Bacho’s novel, there is no mentioning of Carlito’s image having supernatural faculties, but given the cult for the Ama in Bicol and for other statues in other parts of Luzon, it is safe to conclude that the picture of Carlito’s crucified body is indeed endowed with powers. The fact that it is being sold and people are willing to pay for it confirms my assumption that the image might have more value than a regular picture of a dead person- one of the deceased in a coffin. Moreover, one cannot help but noticing that, through death, Carlito has ceased to be a human being and has become a commodity. He has acquired exchange value.

This is a sign of the intricate relationship between religion and late capitalism in a postcolonial context.

Since many scholars have already explored this connection, I merely want to touch on its effect on Ben. If Carlito is deemed a saint and saints are real presences of the divine, Ben must wonder how he, as priest, functions in this country. If saints' powers can be purchased for money, does it mean he too can be sold and eventually disposed of? These questions must be tormenting the already frantic Ben. The selling of the picture of Carlito's martyred body confirms Ben's fears that non-Catholic, perhaps in Ben's mind—pagan, believers in the Philippines have taken over. The church's immediate servants – priests – have lost power. “With you dying and Mahogany Jesus –hell, that's not religion. If it is, than I am not...,” he tells his mother in a nightmare following a visit to a Catholic church in which he sees people adoring the Ama (124). Both Rey's action and the crucifixion lead the protagonist of *Cebu* to perceive that he could be dispensed of his subject position.

### 3.1.2 *The Complex Interplay of Religion and Ethnicity: Religious or Ethnical Surrender?*

In the following pages, I will prove that Ben's religious crisis is undeniably contingent upon his refusal to accept his ethnic heritage. I also contend that religion has a dual function in Ben's life: it feeds his Filipinoness but, at the same time, it is a refuge from ethnical claims. Finally, I will claim that Ben's surrender to God is more ethnic than religious.

If he abandons his subject position temporarily because of the affair with Ellen, Ben reassumes it when assisting a Filipino at the protest against the Americans, only to be pronounced an impostor. When Ben attempts to administer the last rites to a dying man, the man, who suspects that Ben has been having an affair with Ellen, says, “A real priest, Benny, ... ‘Get

me a real priest.” By being judged worthless as a priest in front of the American embassy, Ben is also denounced as a fake bearer of freedom- a double impostor. Though Bacho doesn’t provide a temporal context to clarify why Filipinos are protesting against the Americans, from several clues he scatters in the novel, it is not too difficult to assess that the protest occurs in the 1980s. When Ben enters the seminary in 1964, he is between twelve and fourteen years old. While he is still studying to become a priest, Ben progressively loses contact with his best friend, Teddy, who is roughly the same age as Ben, until one day his mother announces to him that Teddy has left for Vietnam. That would put Teddy around eighteen. Ben won’t see him for over a decade. The narrator also mentions that their reunion happened three years earlier, thus situating Ben’s visit to the Philippines in the 1980s. Consequently, the injured Filipinos Ben tries to assist are demonstrating against the American support of the Marcos regime. On a second thought, Ben is a triple fraud for the Filipinos. He doesn’t belong there, in front of the embassy, helping them, because in their eyes, no matter how Filipino he might look, he is still an American. In fact, on several occasions, both Aunt Clara and Ellen remind him he doesn’t understand Filipino culture.

What happened in front of the American embassy is of particular importance. Since his arrival in the Philippines, his position within the church and within society has been increasingly questioned and this has caused his faith to progressively weaken. Ben’s “remembering” in front of the American embassy that he is a priest cannot be simply cast as fortuitous. It is his ethnicity - or better what *he* considers his ethnicity - that revives his religious position. It is his Americanness that informs his faith. Likewise, the denial of Ben’s priesthood on the part of the suffering Filipino in a symbolically charged context is highly significant. If in the previous episodes, he is circumstantially tested, in the sense that Filipino Catholic practices interrogate the role of priesthood in general, here, Bacho’s protagonist is directly, personally attacked. In the

Philippines, Ben's priesthood is disallowed. Thus, in this scene, religion bows to ethnicity. Ethnicity invalidates religion. Are we then to understand that ethnicity cannot co-exist with religion? Can Bacho be positing such an absolute? Or is he claiming religion depends on ethnicity? Undeniably, religion clashes with ethnicity in this novel, but arguing that religion and ethnicity are mutually exclusive might be a thesis too audacious even for such an enterprising author as Bacho. Nonetheless, ethnicity seems to feed religion rather than the other way around.

Back in Seattle, Ben feels he has completely recovered his faith and his training. "In Manila he'd come close to losing it, but back home, the reason he had become a priest was again unmistakably clear" (146). Ironically though, the first religious function Ben celebrates is the funeral of a Filipino American, which foreshadows Ben's own death. Ben is summoned first as a Filipino and then as a priest. His ethnicity is more important to society than his role within the Church. Nonetheless, Ben is ready to commit. He "want[s] to reimmerge himself in the routine of parish life –masses, baptisms, and the like- the staples of priesthood" (147). No singing of the Pasyon, no men carrying heavy wooden crosses, and no crucifixions. Indeed, no rites far from the ordinary; no rites that would make Ben appear as an abject immigrant. However, despite his willingness to perform his duties, Ben has another crisis while confessing Arsenio, the supposed murderer of Artie, the son of Ben's mother's friend. "Suddenly, Ben was seized by a powerful, black revulsion. Arsenio's salvation lay in a timely apology –'Sorry. Sorry. Goodbye.' that Ben was part of" (152). Ben cannot accept that Arsenio will enter Heaven through him, because Arsenio is, in Ben's opinion, an "immigrant greaseball" (152). Ben feels superior to Arsenio. He feels the need to distance himself from him and the other recent Filipino immigrants, after all the sacrifices he has endured to prove he is not Filipino. But *Cebu's* protagonist is fighting a lost battle as an episode of barkada marks the return of his old ghosts. As a result, he becomes

desperate to comprehend why second generation Filipinos behave as does the first generation in pledging alliance to barkada.

Loosely translated, it meant a person's peer group, his point of reference that commanded and received loyalty, often blind loyalty. In the Philippines, geography's curse was a territory split into seven thousand islands, overwhelming its people with isolation and a pervasive sense of vulnerability. There barkada made sense. One alone could hardly survive, indeed, wasn't expected to. So Filipinos banded together on the basis of common traits, real and imagined.

(Bacho 150)

Ben doesn't seem to be aware that not all immigrants who move to the United States, especially those who were forced to leave their countries, want to assimilate. Relying on barkada relationships is their way to resist being sucked into the vortex that is America while, for second generation Filipinos, barkada represents a tool for claiming that they have not forgotten their origins, (although Ben does not accept or is not aware of this reasoning). If, on the one hand, this might persuade Americans to confirm their stereotyped vision of Filipinos, on the other hand, it allows second generation immigrants to show the new arrivals they are in charge because they understand both the American and the Filipino ways.

Ben does not understand the relationship between second generation and recently arrived immigrants, and he also fails to recognize that he subconsciously admitted to himself that he is Filipino when he entered the seminar. One must not forget that Ben became a priest because of a pact between Remedios and God. When the Americans defeated the Japanese, thus ending the atrocities she had been suffering, Remedios swore to God her first son would be put at His service. As the son of a Filipina, Ben cannot disrespect his mother and above all he cannot refuse

to comply with the rules of the “utang na lob.” “Religion shouldn’t be the product of fear. But he still wondered on occasion if he would have chosen the priesthood without it” (161). He had to take on his shoulders the debt of gratitude that bound him to his mother; otherwise, his whole family would have suffered as there are serious consequences when one breaks the circle of “utang na lob.” His Filipino ethnicity is the catalyst and primary reason for Ben to become a priest.

On another occasion, Ben claims his Filipino ethnicity. Towards the end of the novel, a young man from the Philippines, who speaks little English, asks to be confessed. The boy is surprised to hear that Ben doesn’t understand Tagalog. “‘I, I thought you was Pilipino,’ he said clearly, his accent substituting a ‘P’ for an ‘F.’ ‘I am,’ Ben said, then paused before adding in Cebuano, ‘Pero natawo 'ko sa Amerika’” (162). Even though he perfectly knows speakers of Tagalog don’t understand Cebuano, Ben explains in his mother’s language that he was born and raised in America, thus claiming Filipinoness and, at the same time, distancing himself from the recently immigrated Filipino sinner. With conviction, some readers would claim that Ben admits being Filipino only when his legacy is questioned by another Filipino, but Ben was far from acknowledging his ethnicity when in the Philippines. Rather the contrary occurred: his feeling of belonging to America strengthened. In reality, Ben seems to be attached to an idyllic Philippines. However, it is not the same idyllic image some first-generation individuals nurture of their father land. They choose to remember only the positive aspects, such as that their country of origin has the best food and the friendliest people, while the negative aspects, which are the reasons for expatriating in the first place, fade as the years go by. Thus, the country they once knew ceases to exist and is supplanted by an ideal one. The main character in *Cebu* was fed with stories from this ideal country.



For him, she [his mother] painted vivid pictures –friends, relatives, places - and Ben imagined the people and places Remedios held dear. And because he loved her, Cebu became his home as well.... His fantasy was also fed by Remedios's letters from relatives and by stacks of Philippine magazines and newspapers, all written in English. The latter he unbundled to read and re-read, so much so that he knew, before he reached age ten, the star personalities in the gossipy world of the Philippine journalism, a world of politics and movies, boxers and beauty queens.

(5)

Ben Lucero's Filipinoness is informed by his mother's perception of Cebu and by a child's understanding of Filipino magazines. Hence, it is twice constructed, and the Cebu he was familiar with was twice removed from the real Cebu. It is not surprising then that he has such an ethnic shock, once he is confronted with Filipino reality.

The incident with the Filipino young man also marks Ben's second concrete failure as a priest – the first one being the affair with Ellen. The Filipino boy leaves without confessing his sins, and more importantly, this experience re-ignites Ben's desire to write to the Bishop to ask for a transfer. Ben is therefore incapable of forming a community, one of the most imperative duties of a religious man. A few weeks later, Ben has a second chance to prove he is truly a priest, when another young Filipino, or Ilocano as he defines himself, confesses to having committed a murder. One could argue that, in the strictest sense, *Cebu's* protagonist is a successful priest because he refuses to grant absolution unless the sinner is genuinely repentant. However, once again Ben fails to see the bigger picture. Despite the fact that in his conscience he might cause a breach in the sacrament of penitence, Ben should forgive the nineteen-year old Ilocano, not simply to save his life, but to act in order to stop the cycle of violence. As a religious

man, his duty is to help the new immigrants understand American citizens and viceversa, so as to eventually create a space, as conceptualized by Brah.

Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are contested....[D]iaspora space as a conceptual category is ‘inhabited,’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of diaspora space (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put.’ The diaspora space is the site where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native. (208-09)

Unfortunately, Ben Lucero will not facilitate the birth of such a space where the notion of origins is interrogated for two reasons: he chooses to die and, even if he had not died, to create what Brah describes would have required a change of character, of which Ben would be incapable.

When the young Ilocano points his gun at Ben demanding absolution, Ben exclaims “Let God decide,” thus condemning himself to death (201). As I pointed out in the previous chapter, Bacho’s priest is a meek, indecisive, and cowardly character, who, in any context, rather than taking action, waits passively for something to happen or for someone to act in his place. But this time, not reacting is fatal in many ways. His failure as a priest leads to his death and in turn to his failure as a second generation immigrant. More precisely, by not fulfilling his religious duties, he negates the image of the prototypical immigrant who fights to overcome all the obstacles fate throws on his path in order to demonstrate he is worthy of living in the United States, and eventually to emerge as a successful human being.

Yet, Ben Lucero erases the possibility of becoming a successful priest because he chooses death and he prefers to die rather than admitting he is part Filipino. It seems as if religion has always played a dual function in his life. On one side, religion reinforces his Filipinoness since, as I pointed out earlier, Ben cannot but become a Catholic priest, for he is bound to his mother by an “utang na loob” and his mother in turn has a debt of gratitude with God. On the other side, religion serves as a mask beyond which he can avoid dealing with his ethnicity. For example, he discourages a Filipino from confessing because the latter doesn’t speak English; he asks to be transferred to a different parish because, he argues, he doesn’t “understand” the new Filipino immigrants. Finally, he dies because he believes he has to preserve the sanctity of the sacrament of confession. Indisputably, Bacho’s priest has formed a profound attachment to this sacrament after Ellen aborted his baby. “He had come to love the sacrament of penance....He knew that by listening to [his parishoners’] ‘sins,’ many of which weren’t, and in dispensing God’s mercy, he was touching them in a way no other human could. It satisfied him deeply to do so; few of his other duties and sacramental powers so moved him” (195). Nonetheless, his surrender to God is more ethnic than religious.

### 3.1.3 *The Defeat of the Hybrid*

I would like to dedicate this section to examining this ethnic surrender in more detail. Given the nature of my dissertation, it is impossible not to analyze Ben Lucero as a hybrid. In contrast to Bhabha’s claim that the process of splitting in the colonized leads to agency, Ben’s hybridity doesn’t empower him. Quite the opposite, it condemns him to death. Ben fails as a hybrid because, in an American context, ethnicity overpowers the other modalities of sexuality, religion, gender, age, and economic background.

Ben's violent death hardly pays homage to the pathologies of schizophrenia and fragmentation that Frederick Jameson describes in *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Indeed, Bacho has no intention of celebrating the fragmented subject as many postmodernist writers and critics have done, though we may concede that Ben Lucero is a product of "splitting." Bhabha defines splitting as the strategy elaborated when "two contradictory and independent attitudes inhabit the same place[.] One takes account of reality, the other is under the influence of instincts which detach the ego from reality. This results in the production of multiple and contradictory belief. The enunciatory moment of multiple belief is both a defence against the anxiety of difference, and itself productive of differentiations" (188). From this "enunciatory moment," from this interstitial space, as the theorist labels it elsewhere in *The Location of Culture*, the hybrid is born; the "neither the one nor the other" emerges. Yet, as Bhabha clarifies in his interview with W. J. T. Mitchell, "even the oppressor is being constituted through splitting. The split doesn't fall at the same point in colonized and colonizer, it doesn't bear the same political weight or constitute the same effect, but both are dealing with that process." For this reason, "the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (*Location*, 153). The colonized re-elaborates in his own terms the rules, the regulations, the discourse implemented by the colonizer; he then "force[s] a re-cognition of the immediacy and articulacy of authority – a disturbing effect that is familiar in the repeated hesitancy afflicting the colonialist discourse when it contemplates its discriminated subjects: the inscrutability of the Chinese, the unspeakable rites of the Indians," and, one could add, the inexplicable violence of the Filipinos (160).

America knows this “disturbing effect” very well and counterattacks with an ambivalent policy of assimilation. It wants its immigrants and ex-colonized to assimilate, but eighteenth-century French man Crèvecoeur asks, “What then is the American? He is either a European, or descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country...He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the rank he holds” (303). Although Crèvecoeur wrote *Letters from an American Farmer* in the 1780s, his words still ring true today, especially when the president of the United States has to disclose his full birth certificate to disprove the accusation that he is not an American citizen. *Cebu*’s protagonist abhors his parents’ fellowmen’s customs, and being born in the United States, he takes for granted he is American. Nonetheless, in the eyes of Caucasian Americans, he fails to be American a priori. “There are many ways in which America tells you you don’t belong. The eyes that slide around to find another face behind you. The smiles that appear only after you have almost passed them, intended for someone else” (Lim 199). It doesn’t matter if Ben was born here; his features betray him as a non-American. All his life, he has fought against this accreditation based on physical appearance, but the fact of being assigned to St. Mary because of his ethnicity and his visit to Cebu and Manila weaken his conviction that he could “make it” one day – become an American eventually. The two boys who come specifically to him to confess their sins because they were told he is Filipino represent the final straw that broke the camel’s back.

Bacho’s priest chooses to die instead of reacting, thus, disproving Bhabha’s theory. Both the authority and the subaltern undergo the process of splitting. According to Bhabha, this splitting “often destroys the calculations of the empowered, and allows the disempowered to

calculate the strategies by which they are oppressed and to use that knowledge in structuring resistance” and to gain social agency (“Translator”). Yet, Ben is not empowered in this process. On the contrary, all his life, he is complacent and passive, and ironically, when he resolves to act, gives up. Critics have argued that only individuals belonging to privileged classes may be successful hybrids. The Lucero family is not wealthy, but neither are they poor; in spite of that, Ben utterly malfunctions as a hybrid. The causes of this failure reside in the American dream. I do not want to imply that if he had not believed in the American dream, he would have been magically empowered and resisted assimilation, nor do I deny that America is populated by victorious hybrids; however, what we find in *Cebu* is not a simple cause-effect relationship. The American dream requires the immigrant to temporarily place his or her ethnicity sous rature. The United States recognizes the non-Caucasian immigrant as an ethnic subject, but it doesn’t want to deal with the baggage with which the immigrant comes. For example, Americans don’t want to be reminded that they were/are racist in considering Filipinos their brown brothers. If they could, they would write ~~Filipino~~ on immigrant papers. Once the subject has achieved the American dream following the appropriate channels, the subject is then bestowed the label of good American alien. In complying with the rules, something went wrong for Ben Lucero. The trip to Cebu and Manila disrupted the path to which he was adhering ever so diligently. Something happened that prevents him from continuing this sous rature process. The power of the petit récits traumatizes him and he cannot share their social agency because he is too imbued in the assimilationist ideology reigning in the United States. He realizes Americans see him as other Carlitos, that his ethnicity will never be eradicated, as he hoped it would be. In more sophisticated terms, in the course of achieving the American dream, ethnicity might be re-

worked in order to be more easily tamed, but it will always mark the immigrant as “ethnic.” Ben realizes he cannot escape ethnicity, not in an American context.

### 3.2 Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land*: A Celebration of Hybridity and a Move towards a Postethnic America?

Most scholars have praised Gish Jen’s characters’ hybridity and capacity to move fluidly between one ethnic identity and another. Some even say that in *Mona in the Promised Land*, the author is espousing a postethnic America.<sup>xxvi</sup> In a postethnic society, culture is not “an ethno-racial phenomenon” and people are able to disaffiliate from their descent ethnicity and affiliate with an ethnicity of their choice (Hollinger 120). For example, a person whose father is African American and the mother Japanese might decide to choose her Japaneseness over her African Americaness. For Hollinger, affiliation is the key term to revolutionize how Americans think about and see race. Identity is

more psychological than social, and it can hide the extent to which the achievement of identity is a social process by which a person becomes affiliated with one or more acculturating cohorts. ... Moreover, the word identity implies fixity and givenness, while the word affiliation suggests a greater measure of flexibility...Affiliation is more performative, while identity suggests something that simply is. To be sure, one can construe the achievement of identity as an action, but ‘affiliation’ calls attention to the social dynamic of this action.

(Hollinger 6-7)

I can see why scholars believe Jen is promoting postethnicity. Mona, a second-generation thirteen-year-old Chinese American, and her friends Barbara and Seth, both third-

generation Jewish American, experiment with the concept of affiliation. Mona converts to Judaism, Barbara switches between being Jewish and WASP, and Seth toys with the idea of being first Chinese and then African, but ultimately resolving to be a WASP. The three friends are certainly breathing the atmosphere of the years they live in, the 1960s, when they decide to help their African American friend Alfred to find a place to stay. Barbara Gugelstein's garage becomes Alfred's home. Mona and Seth visit him often, but soon Alfred feels comfortable enough to invite his African American friends over, Luther the Race Man, Big Benson, Ray, and Professor Estimator. Thus, Camp Gugelstein is born. All together Mona and her friends and Alfred and his friends listen to African beats, practice yoga, and discuss the current political situation. Despite their efforts, the camp fails. I contend that through Camp Gugelstein's fiasco Jen claims that self-affiliation doesn't necessarily mean society will perceive the individual as he or she wishes to be perceived. If one's ethnicity lies in the eye of the beholder, concepts such as ethnic authenticity, naturalness, and wholeness lose validity (section 3.2.2 and 3.2.3). In section 3.2.4, I will return to the notion of perception to argue that rather than championing postethnicity, Jen's second novel underscores how racial essentialism is still deeply rooted in American society.

According to Chen, the camp's lack of success is to ascribe to division, which is deeply rooted in human nature, but Partridge would claim that division is too simple an explanation and he argues instead that, "while Chinese Americans, Jewish Americans, and African Americans may share a common position as minorities in a hegemonic political and social environment, their minority status is not equally conceived" (105). Even though Asian immigrants were seen as inscrutable and untrustworthy, African Americans were barely considered human beings. Ten pages before the description of the dissolution of the Camp, Alfred and his friends walk out on



Seth, Mona, and Barbara when the latter accuses the five African Americans of stealing a precious vase. Partridge claims that Barbara, Mona, and Seth think Alfred and his friends had all the right to leave the camp in response to their racist accusations. “This patronizing representation of the black man as a simple ‘victim’ widens the gap between the black and non-black characters...” (Partridge 110). Indeed, they are patronizing. When Charlene, Alfred’s girlfriend, kicks him out of her apartment, the three teenagers decide that they need to save him. He can’t go stay with his friends; he needs to stay at Barbara’s house, save putting him in the garage, so the neighbors will not complain. “Later Luther will proclaim it to be no wonder blacks don’t believe in liberals anymore, look at Seth –your typical paternalistic motherfucker who cannot stand blacks talking for themselves, much less acting in their own self-defense” (202). Professor Estimator would say that Seth, the one that most scholars praise for his ability to mutate, suffers from the white’s man burden. While a patronizing attitude certainly contributes to the camp’s failure, Mona and her friends’ experiment of living in a house without walls fails also because, as Partridge points out, both Mona and Seth make individual choices that might not work when they interact with others. Partridge doesn’t explain why, but Mona clarifies, “If people lived in a house with no walls between the rooms, there would have to be a lot of rules. I don’t think you [Seth] would like it. You can’t have no walls and also have everyone in touch with their feelings. People would have to have manners” (208). In an ideal world, it would be possible to affiliate to an ethnicity other than one’s own, but in homo homini lupus society, one in which human beings’ interactions are built through intricate power relations, not everybody is ready for ethnic crossings; some still need clear boundaries. Caucasians might find it easier to embrace postethnicity, but individuals whose legal and/or economic status depends on their ethnicity might want to hold on to those boundaries.

Scholars have provided several explanations as to why Seth's experiment of the camp doesn't succeed, but they have been so busy proving how Jen espouses hybridity that they did not stop to ask what the failure actually means. Could Jen be arguing that auto-identification doesn't necessarily lead to recognition? "Recognition, then, stretches or revalues social boundaries but does not transgress them" (Nederveen Pieterse 219). Hollinger embellishes Nederveen Pieterse's statement when he states that postethnicity fights to stretch the limits of the ethnicities we know now (111). Jen does in fact "displac[e] notions of ethnic essence and cultural stasis[,]" but the failure of the camp does not mean Jen is not turning boundaries into fetishes, although Nederveen Pieterse<sup>xxvii</sup> would certainly argue the contrary (Partridge 111). She is reminding her readers that self-identification does not entail society will accept the ethnicity an individual has chosen to become.

### 3.2.1 *Is Ethnic Authenticity Still Possible in a Postmodern World?*

The kinds of ethnic affiliations we witness in *Promised Land* beg the question: How natural are they? In this section, I contend that terms such as naturalness and authenticity are not helpful in ethnic studies and that how one is perceived is what we need to consider instead. Commenting on Mona and Seth's daughter, Chen explains, "Io suggests the culmination of performative identity because being Io is doing without performance—namely, she is acting out a difference 'naturally.' Io moves beyond performing differences to simply being a difference, from cultural hybridity to racial hybridity" (377). Through these words, the author boldly assumes racial hybridity is superior to cultural hybridity. He believes there is more naturalness in being racially hybrid than in being culturally hybrid. The problem, that Jen highlights in Io, rests with assigning race more value than culture, race as the main signifier for a person's identity. Io

is not only a natural performer, but she also is “a pure difference with completeness” (384). What puzzles me is the adjective “pure.” Following Chen’s reasoning, we should adopt Hitler’s notion of purity, so we will burn all the non-pure hybrids. One cannot but recall Seth’s statement “I am afraid I am an authentic inauthentic Jew . . . more ethnic than religious. However, in the process of becoming an inauthentic inauthentic Jew” (112). It’s interesting to point out how Seth, a third generation Jewish American, defines himself inauthentic while attempting to perform Chineseness and Blackness. Yet, “how significant, after all, is ‘authenticity’? How does it really matter?” (Simal 231). It matters to some first-generation immigrants who are struggling against this vortex that is America. These immigrants are trying to preserve what they can of their identity as they feel American assimilationist policy is literally slowly eating away pieces of their Selves. Inevitably though, most first-generation immigrants will make adjustments in order to fit in because they also want to belong; they want to have a saying and participate in the political life. When Helen and Ralph’s daughter Callie, Mona’s sister, comes home from Harvard where she has been learning Mandarin, she complains that her parents have an accent and that they are speaking too fast. Ralph sarcastically explains that their Chinese is not the authentic Chinese. Helen intervenes and clarifies that “Shanghai people [where the Changs are from] are just as good as Peking people.’ ‘That’s not how they thinking at Harvard,’ says Ralph. ‘You are so-called native speaker, but do they ask you go teach there? The answer is no. Because how we speak, that way is not so standard. You want to know how the correct way sound? You ask Callie. She can give us lessons” (128-29). Toward the end of the novel,

by Ralph’s own admission, Julio and Moses [who have been recently hired] are people he probably would have overlooked ten years ago; they take some getting used to, it is his explanation for the change. ‘Before I was not used to it.’ (*Used to*

it still being a big phrase in his thinking, maybe even bigger than make sure.) Of course, relying on blacks is not the only thing Ralph's learned. He's also learned to keep the Chinese help in the back. Dining room is about make the customers happy, he shrugs. (300).

In the first scene, for Callie, her parents' Chinese is not The Chinese, or at least not the Chinese they are teaching at Harvard, while for her parents their Chinese is as authentic as the Chinese Beijing people supposedly speak. Jen acutely emphasizes the relativity of authenticity. In the second scene, the reader should be wary of Ralph's change. Neither Ralph nor Helen ever really have an opinion of their own regarding black people. When a woman approaches Helen to give her the news of a clinic that distributes contraceptive pills for free for 'you people,' Helen takes offense. As Partridge acknowledges, Helen doesn't want to be identified with another minority, one who is especially not fairing so well with white people. Yes, she might be racist, but we also need to consider that Helen and Ralph want to abide by American laws and rules, written or hinted, because they want Americans to know they are true Americans too. For this reason, they are willing to be called racist, if that's what an American is.

By pointing out that authenticity and naturalness might play a role for first generation immigrants in adjusting to their new home, I don't mean to say that a Chinese born and raised in China is more authentic than a second generation Chinese American. In a world in which the meaning of a word depends on the next one, its meaning always deferred, the concepts of naturalness and authenticity have no validity. No individual could claim to be authentic if the recognition of his or her identity depends on another individual. I argue that it's a question of perception instead. A second or third generation Chinese American inevitably interprets his Chineseness through his American eyes. His Chineseness is mediated by his Americanness. Does

this make his Chineseness less authentic, less natural? No, but what he perceives to be Chinese might actually be Chinese American. By the same token, how those that surround him perceive him will also help shape his identity. For instance, would an African American who decides to auto-identify herself as a Chinese be accepted as a Chinese? Probably not.

### 3.2.2 *Mona's Conversion to Judaism: A Question of Wholeness or a Struggle with Racial Essentialism and Family Expectations?*

Both Chen and Byers believe Mona embraces Judaism because she is lacking something. In Chen's words, "these shifts help the characters avoid confronting the fact that as humans, we are all fundamentally split subjects, divided, inconsistent, incomplete, and alienated from ourselves, with no possibility of wholeness" (384). If one claims that there is no wholeness, one posits the existence of wholeness. But if nobody can ever be whole, what is wholeness made of? Isn't this condemning human beings to be forever incomplete? More importantly, the argument of lack of wholeness has been shrewdly adopted by the dominant society in order to establish its superiority and subjugate minorities. It is not my intention to criticize poststructuralist psychoanalysis, yet, in this section, I refute the notion of ethnic wholeness as an explanation for Mona's decision to become Jewish because it reinforces racist and exotic discourses and I argue that through her conversion Mona is trying to fight against racial essentialism and family expectations.

Is a second generation Chinese American less whole than a Caucasian American whose great-great-grandfathers were German and English? The racist ideology, one that still runs rampant today, wants us to believe so. Considering the wholeness myth from another angle: Is a second generation Chinese American who disregards the traditions of his parents and ancestors

less whole than a Chinese American who does? On one hand, when a Scottish-Polish immigrant decides to renew his connection with his grandfathers, some Americans deem it a fine move. On the other hand, they tend to see a second, third, and so on, generation non-Caucasian immigrant who embraces his ancestors' culture as an even more complete, more rounded human being. Americans use the adjective "cool" while self-righteously nodding to their interlocutor. Thanks to the politics of identity endorsed by multiculturalism, they have learned that immigrants should celebrate where they are from. Nonetheless, in a postmodern world, where ethnicity is seen as a commodity, this stance –considering an Asian American in touch with her roots more whole than a Scottish- Polish who is adopting the same attitude – perpetuates the exotic image of Asians. This also holds for Africans and any other ethnicity that is not Caucasian. My point is that we should avoid discourses of wholeness when we analyze texts in which the characters interrogate their own ethnicity so as not to encourage racism and exoticism. Moreover, lack of wholeness is not an acceptable explanation for Mona's choice to become Jewish.

Partridge asserts that Mona converts to Judaism because this "move ... brings her one step closer to Whiteness" (107). Indeed, some Jewish people are considered white, but I think it is worth exploring first why Mona doesn't decide to become white. "How can I turn black? That's a race, not a religion[.]" Mona tells her mother when the latter, upset due to Mona's conversion, accuses Mona of wanting to be black(49). It is interesting that none of the three characters, who are non-white but choose to auto-define themselves, i.e. Mona, Callie, and Naomi, decides to become white. At the same time, Seth, the third generation Jewish American, can perform as Native American, as Chinese, and as Black. The author seems to contend that white people have the liberty to perform other races but the same privilege is not granted to non-white individuals. As Alfred explains, "nobody is calling us Wasp, man, and nobody is forgetting

we're a minority, and if we don't mind our manners, we're like as not to end up doing time in a concrete hotel. We're black, see. We're Negroes" (137). Although scholars have accused Alfred of condensing race and ethnicity and of being incapable of joining his friends in their ethnic crossings, I believe he simply states things as they are and doesn't sugarcoat them.

Why does Mona convert to Judaism? Because all of her friends are Jewish could be a simple answer. She is the only Chinese American girl in her class, and she is treated as if she were an expert on Chinese customs. It's understandable that she wants to fit in. Furman asserts that "Jen's characters cling to whatever cultural identity might distance themselves from the increasingly nebulous, and toothless 'mainstream'" (215). For Furman, Mona converts to Judaism and Callie decides to learn more about being Chinese in order to escape the assimilation policy to which their parents subscribe (214). However, both of these answers are not very satisfactory. Nor do I believe that "what makes Mona's conversion acceptable (to her and eventually to her parents) is the perception that she is moving forward, from what in the 1960s was not yet considered a 'model minority' to what was at least considered a 'better' minority" (Partridge 106-07). Rather, Mona converts to try to have people judge her for her religion instead of for her race. Her conversion is an invitation to stop judging human beings on the basis of their race. She tries hard too. When Mona and her friends learn Alfred lost a place to stay, Barbara asks "'Where to go from here?' Mona doesn't see why they should have to go anywhere, but then she recalls that she is Jewish. So that when Barbara says, 'There must be something we can do,' Mona does not say, as Helen [Mona's mother] would, to do nothing is better than to overdo" (141). For Mona to be an American means to be able to decide for oneself who one wants to be. "American means being whatever you want, and I happen to pick being Jewish" (49). In an interview for PBS, Jen argued, "In my experience, if you claim America, no one will dispute

your claim. No one's gonna hand it to you but if you say, 'Well, this is mine,' no one is gonna stop you, either. And that's been very empowering for me." It is very empowering for Mona, too, and she urges Alfred to fight for his rights. However, Mona understands that this empowerment will only come if one buys into the system.

Mona has never thought of herself as colored before, though she knew herself not to be white. Yellow, says Naomi now. You are yellow. A yellow person, a yellow girl. It takes some getting used to, this idea, especially since Mona's summertime color is most definitely brown, and the rest of the year she is not exactly a textbook primary. But then Naomi is not black either; she claims to be closer in color to a paper bag.....But as she is only a person, she is called black, just as Mona and Callie are called yellow. And as yellow is a color, they are colored....

(170)

Mona realizes that the demands of black people are also her own so much so that she struggles to comprehend why her parents are not marching together with those fighting for civil rights. While she calls her parents racists, she also tries to explain to Seth what Helen made clear to her. Her parents have no desire to join the protests, as they were not minorities in China, and they did not come to America to be minorities. Nonetheless Mona is growing up in the sixties, and thus it is hard for her not to completely be dedicated to the civil rights cause, often forgetting where her parents are coming from. When Helen confronts Mona about helping Alfred settle down at Barbara's house without the Gugelsteins knowing,

Mona replies that at least she didn't sleep with Alfred. Helen says she would kill herself if she ever did such a thing. Mona, "But Mom, that's so racist." "Racist!"  
 ....'Only an American girl would think about her mother killing herself and say



oh, that's racist. A Chinese girl would think whether she should kill herself too. Because that is how much she thinks about her poor mother who worked so hard and suffered so much. She wants to do everything to make her mother happy.'

(220)

As Beyers claims, because of the materiality of her body, Mona has to fight hard to be accepted as Jewish by those outside the family (108). Yet, acceptance from her mother is no small task, either. She needs to define herself within her family as an American, because no matter how strongly the parents wanted their children to be American, they raised them as Chinese. Many times Helen reminds her child how Chinese daughters don't do certain things. Helen and Ralph seem to believe that by not teaching their children how to speak Chinese, the children will magically become American. The parents seem to be conflicted and contradictory in the education of their children. On one side, they want them to be American; on the other side, they demand they behave according to Chinese principles. When Callie's first boyfriend dares to ask for water after he learns the beer Ralph served him is ten years old, Helen complains "Typical American no manners!" (131). In Gish Jen's first novel, *Typical American*, the phrase, "typical American," stands for "no Chinese would do such a thing." Helen expects better from her daughter Callie. In Helen's mind, Callie is supposed to behave as a Chinese daughter would do, thus picking a Chinese boyfriend. In another scene, Mona yells, "Everywhere else is America, but in this house it's China!" and Helen responds "That's right! No America here! In this house, children listen to parents!" (250). She has to clash with her mother's expectations, not just as a daughter, but as a Chinese daughter, one who obeys. Disobeying is a way of distancing herself from being Chinese and asserting Americanness. "The whole key to Judaism is to ask, ask, instead of obey, obey," Mona explains to Alfred (138). In spite of her rebellion, Mona does want

her mother to approve her choice. As a Chinese teenager, Mona wishes she could be taller like her friend Barbara. “That night Mona dreams Helen is having a new baby, a boy, which is also the baby that Mona is having, except that Helen doesn’t realize it until she notices how long the baby’s legs are. Then, she shouts, ‘This baby is Jewish! Throw it in the garbage!’ and will not be appeased until Mona throws herself in the garbage instead” (77). Although in this dream one immediately notices Mona’s fears of miscegenation, it is also clear how crucial it is for Mona that her mother understands her desire to distinguish herself from her Chinese parents and claim America.

### 3.2.3 *A Battle Lost: No Americanness Granted*

Is Mona successful in fighting against racial essentialism? And how do we interpret Callie’s choice to stress her Chineseness? In this section, I propose that, despite all their efforts, Mona and her sister are not perceived as Americans. This failure proves that Jen does not endorse hybridity or postethnicity; on the contrary, she emphasizes how racial essentialism is still ingrained in American society.

As many scholars point out, Rabbi Horowitz is right when he tells Mona “the more Jewish you become, the more Chinese you’ll be” (190). Byers argues that “Becoming a Jew allows Mona to connect to her Chineseness” and that Mona’s body “although fully able to perform Jewishness, cannot fully reject (dissent from) her Chineseness” (107). I would go even further. Mona’s Jewishness highlights her Chineseness, not just because of her physical features, but also because people have certain expectations of Chineseness as well as of Jewishness. People imagine Jewish to be white, slightly Middle Eastern looking, smart and good at business transactions. Chinese people are expected to be Buddhist or Taoist, certainly not Jewish,

obedient and submissive. Moreover, I am not sure Mona is accepted by her friends as Jewish. I believe they treat her like a sort of a trophy. They always remark how great it is that she is a Chinese Jewish. They even give her a nickname, “Changowitz,” but all they do is turn her Chinese last name into something that sounds Jewish. They don’t confer a Jewish name upon her.

Like Mona, Callie is trying to negotiate her position within her family and society. It is quite significant that Callie “[doesn]’t understand what it mean[s] to be Chinese until she [meets] Naomi” (167). It is as if Callie were looking for authenticity, since she can’t really perform as an American, as her body gives her away. She thinks she is not sufficiently Chinese because she doesn’t speak the language, at home they don’t eat what her parents used to eat in China, and because she wears American clothes. As a result, she obsesses over everything Chinese so much so that she forces herself to behave like a perfect Chinese daughter. She is a straight A student in high school and manages to go to Harvard. When she confesses to her parents that she doesn’t want to become a doctor, Ralph and Helen expose how the son of some Chinese friends is taking good care of his parents now that they are old, because, as Callie knows, “You cannot trust anyone” outside the family (234). Callie is easily convinced that she needs to stay in medical school. At the end of the book, through Mona’s thoughts, we learn that Callie often says, “It would have killed Mom if we’d both been like you” (302). Ironically though, her Chineseness is rejected by her parents, not only because by claiming herself Chinese she reinforces the fact that she is not American, but also because to them it seems fake. Callie “has turned more Chinese than Seth – so Chinese that Ralph and Helen think there is something wrong with her. Why does she wear those Chinese padded jackets, for example? .... And cloth shoes. Even in China, they never wore cloth shoes, they always had nice imported leather” (301). For her parents, Callie is

no longer the obedient Chinese daughter, while American society mocks Callie's ethnic endeavors in that it categorizes people like Callie and Mona under the racial term Asian American. The United States can only digest their presence if Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, and Indians are reduced to a single race: Asian. Thus, Callie's Chineseness is incorporated into her Asianness.

About the title of her first book, *Typical American*, Jen remarks:

I wanted to challenge ideas of what a 'typical American' looks like, to put forward the idea that the Changs are not any less American than anyone else.

There are people who, when they choose to read ethnic writing, want comfortably exotic stuff that makes them feel like they're traveling in some foreign country.

The Changs, though, are not a foreign country. They wonder about their identity: they ask themselves who they are, who they're becoming. And therefore, they are American. (Matsukawa 115)

Jen's characters are indeed up for the challenge, but both Mona and Callie fail to be accepted as Americans. No matter how hard non-Caucasian immigrants and their offspring work to claim America, America will always judge them on the basis of their ethnic background. Therefore, in *Promised Land*, Jen is not espousing hybridity or promoting ethnicity without boundaries; on the contrary, she is emphasizing how racial essentialism is still deeply rooted in America.

### 3.3 Conclusion

Ben Lucero has tried relentlessly to comply with the assimilationist policy of the United States, which demands that immigrants place their ethnicity sous rature. Unfortunately, what he experiences in the Philippines puts this journey on hold because, once in the Philippines, Ben

begins to question his religion and his ethnicity. Carlito's crucifixion and the selling of his martyred body are seen by Ben as pagan reinterpretations of Catholicism, which he cannot tolerate mainly because he believes in a religion that offers only one interpretation of the Bible, or in Lyotard terms, Ben is looking for consensus in a world, in which consensus is not possible anymore. Consensus would reassure him of his subject position within society. Back in Seattle, Ben attempts to retake the route to Americanness, but he fails. When a desperate Filipino, who cannot accept Ben's refusal to absolve him, points a gun at him, Ben surrenders to God and asks Him to decide. His surrender is, however, more ethnic than religious, as he prefers to die rather than to admit that he is part Filipino. Thus, Ben disproves Bhabha's claim that hybridity leads to empowerment.

This could also be said of Mona in *Promised Land*. Although scholars have praised Jen's characters for their attempt to dislodge ethnic boundaries, the failure of Camp Gugelstein disappoints hybridity supporters. For Jen, auto-identifying oneself with an ethnicity different than one's own does not entail that society will bestow recognition upon the ethnicity one chooses. One cannot help but question the authenticity and the naturalness of these affiliations. However, even though authenticity might be a tool for first-generation immigrants to prevent from being eaten by Moby Dick, aka America, I claim that such notions as authenticity and naturalness have no validity in a world ruled by deferral. Likewise, the discourse of ethnic wholeness should be rejected by ethnic studies because it reinforces racism and exoticism. I also argue that claiming Mona lacks wholeness is not sufficient to explain her conversion to Judaism. Mona decides to become Jewish to avoid being judged by her ethnicity. In declaring herself Jewish, Mona is convinced she is demonstrating what an American is – someone able to choose who he or she wants to be. She fights resolutely against racism and family expectations, but in

the end, even if her family is able to respect her claim to Americanness, America is not. As for her sister, Callie, whose efforts to be an “authentic” Chinese are rejected by her parents, America does not have a different answer. Both Callie and Mona can be Chinese American or Asian American, but their ethnicity will always precede their nationality.

#### 4 DISEMPOWERING RESISTANCE

The seed for this dissertation was planted a long time ago, when I first read an excerpt from Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, in which she poses the famous question "Can the subaltern speak?" In the following years, I ardently read through many other theoretical and fictional texts that discussed that same subject. Given my status as an immigrant from a working class family, I deeply identified with the subaltern, and, in the beginning, I naively thought I could give a voice to him or her, forgetting, or perhaps, in my eagerness to succeed, ignoring Spivak's warning "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (*Critique* 284). By trying to find a way to allow the subaltern to speak, I was participating in the action of subalterning. Maybe, I am still perpetuating the inferiority of the colonized, but I like to think that I am, at least, exposing some of the weaknesses of postcolonial studies and possibly pointing toward a new direction by analyzing the interaction between language and colonization and language and class, the topic of this chapter. In *Critique*, Spivak exhorts the subaltern to get involved in the hegemonic power, but by analyzing Monique Truong's *Book of Salt* and Linh Dinh's "'!'" and "Prisoner with a Dictionary," I will demonstrate that this invitation might not automatically lead to an improvement in the lives of subalterns

##### 4.1 The Subaltern Can Only Murmur

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that "The colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (153). If only unconsciously, Bính realizes that the bond between colonizer and colonized is not simply "antagonistic" but is also "agonistic" (Bhabha 153). Colonial power is forever fluctuating as the subaltern mimics, scorns, and in this process, defies

authority. In the interstices of this agonistic relationship, Bính finds room for resistance as is shown by the following quotation. Blériot

placed great trust in the power of his language to elevate him from the fray, to keep his nose clean even when he was rooting in the dirt of someone else's land.... He assumed, and he was right, that they [the Vietnamese farmers at the marker where he and Bính shopped together] could not understand a French word that he was saying. He failed to comprehend, though, that the tonalities of sex are, like those of desperation, easily recognizable and instantly understood, no matter the language, no matter the age. (123)

Bính is aware that Blériot cannot and will never publicly recognize him as his lover; nonetheless, Bính sleeps with him driven by his own agenda. Both of Bính's lovers, Chef Blériot and Lattimore, inhabit more powerful subject positions than does the Vietnamese. The first one is not only a white man; he is Bính's supervisor. Though the second one confesses to Bính that he is of mixed-race, his white father paid for his education and for his travels. Yet, Bính does not passively endure either man's power. He tells his father in a monologue "[You had] no faith in me whatsoever, if you thought that I was naïve enough to look at Blériot and see salvation in his arms. He is a French man, after all" (195). He knows, as Bhabha says, that the colonizer feels repulsed but at the same time attracted by the colonized, and he uses his lovers to feed his own sexual appetites while searching for his scholar-prince.

I don't intend to paint the protagonist of Truong's book as a hero, as I agree with Ong when he claims "the diasporan subject is now vested with the agency formerly sought in the working class and more recently in the subaltern subject" (15). As responsible scholars, we must acknowledge Bính's fight against the forces of colonization, but at the same time, we need to



admit that Bính has little control over his lover's intentions, let alone revolutionize the relationship between colonizer and colonized. Ultimately, when language meets class, Bính's subalternity is reinforced. In Bhabha's interstices, the subaltern is able to murmur; his voice so feeble he is not empowered. In the end, his agency is limited, as I will prove in this section.

While Bính's brother, Anh Minh, embraces the system by studying even the "nuances, wordplay, and double-entendres" of French, Bính resists colonization by refusing to learn to speak the language of the colonizer well (Truong 13). Bính is unconsciously aware that the "most important area of domination [for the colonizer] is the mental universe of the colonized" (Thiong'O 16). Anh Minh instead "believed absolutely and passionately that the French language would save us, would welcome us into the fold, would reward us with kisses on both cheeks" (Truong 14). Anh Minh is convinced that learning the language of the colonizer would allow the subaltern to speak, which for him means improving his class. When the Governor-General acknowledges how well Anh Minh can speak French, he will promote Anh Minh to Chef. Needless to say, a French man is hired as Chef, but Anh Minh continues to live in his delusion. Contrary to what his step-father taught him, Bính believes that to be a good employee for a foreign employer is not determined by how well one can speak the other language but by how well one can swallow it (Truong 13). When the governor and his wife reprimand their employees, they speak pure French not a mixture of French and Vietnamese as they normally address them. Even though the employers know they appear ridiculous when they speak a mixture of the two languages because of their inability to use tones, they nevertheless use it to make themselves understood. But when they scold the servants, the employers' goal is not to communicate but to re-establish hierarchy. The pure version of French, "reserved for ... obtuse Indochinese servants," is used to reinforce the superiority of the employer and to remind the

employees that they are not allowed to protest, not only because they are servants, but because they can't speak the language (Truong 13). Additionally, the use of a pure version of French in reprimanding the employees reinforces the bond between the conqueror and the conquered. Yet, the employers are so naïve and “so enamored of their differences [and] their language” that they do not realize their employees are actually challenging their authority by refusing to speak French well (Truong13). By not knowing “the subtleties, the winged eloquence” of French, the employees perform a double-resistance (Truong 13). What they do not understand cannot hurt them, cannot shove them down the class hierarchy, except for Anh Minh, who feels deceived because he thought his almost flawless French would spare him his employers' reproach. Bính learns enough that he can get by but not enough that would transform him into a French man.

Bính's empowerment is, however, conditioned by the geographical and political context. Had it been possible for him to remain in Vietnam, Bính might have been able to build a better life for himself under the care of his brother, but in France Bính's poor French is an arduous obstacle to overcome. It might be considered ironic that Truong's protagonist dreams of being fluent in French delivering his father's eulogy, but Bính has always associated his father with the empire. The Old Man taught his children that French will enable them, thus perpetuating the ideology of the colonizer. The supposed death of the father foreshadows the meeting with Nguyễn Ái Quốc, which in turn forecasts the end of the empire. Only when the empire is defeated can Bính speak French flawlessly, or so the novel seems to imply. Due to his lack of French vocabulary, Bính cannot explain to his employers what he has been doing since he worked for the Governor-General, and so he appears not reliable to the interviewers. Some hire him for a brief period but soon have to let him go. Bính doesn't explain why he loses these jobs, and one could argue he is fired because he drinks, but certainly his poor French renders him even

more inscrutable to the Caucasian employer. His limited knowledge of French doesn't allow him to eavesdrop on conversations on the street, least of all to jump in an on-going dialogue (Truong 18). This isolates him and reduces his chances of forming himself as a subject in a foreign country. He cannot interact with other people so other people do not know about him, about his story. He is nonexistent to others, thus he does not exist. "No longer able to trust my own voice, I carry a small speckled mirror that shows me my face, my hands, and assures me that I am still here" (Truong 19). As I explain in more detail in chapter two, he resorts to cutting himself to feel alive.

Not to speak well the language of the colonizer might at times impede the satisfaction of sexual needs, as Bính has learned enough words "to fuel [his] desires" but not enough "to feed them" (Truong 11). Other times not sharing the same language intensifies carnal desires or so Bính believes. "Words I will grant you, are convenient, a handy shortcut to meaning. But too often, words limit and deny" (Truong 117). Bính is partially right here. Because he can't say "Bính," Lattimore calls his lover "Bee." "Bee" allows the Vietnamese cook to be a different person. But what kind of person is this Bee, if not a romantic fool who believes words are not necessary in love and does not want to see that it is exactly by way of not pronouncing his name correctly that Lattimore diminishes him? In the relationship with Lattimore, language reinforces Bính's already subaltern position. Moreover, Sweet Sunday Man, as Chef Blériot, cannot stand Bính speaking in Vietnamese. If language is the repository of culture, Lattimore is not interested in Bính's culture, least of all in Bính as a person, but merely as a means to steal from Gertrude Stein. Bính's Vietnamese "trapped as it is inside [his] mouth, has taken on the pallor of the dying, the faded colors of the abandoned" (Truong 117). If one's own native tongue is a "set of eyeglasses through which [people] come to view themselves and their place in the universe,"

then Bính seems to have lost his place in the world (Thiong'o 18). He is so engrossed in his lover that he has forgotten who he is and is ignoring that educated African American men passing as white will never run away, let alone legitimize a relationship with a simple cook.

Once Lattimore abandons him, Bính is left with only Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, who are about to move to America. Scholars such as Eng ("End(s)") and Xu have pointed out that Truong's protagonist cannot join Stein's circle of friends because he belongs to a different social class. Neither of them, however, mentioned how language is as much responsible for Bính's exclusion as is class. Gertrude Stein calls her employee "Thin Bin." Apart from mispronouncing his name, she doesn't tell him what it means and merely suggests that it describes his "most distinctive feature," thus silencing him and treating him as a mentally challenged person (Truong 32). His position of an inferior being is also emphasized by Bính's interiorized father's voice that claims the meaning of "thin" is stupid. Bính is partially conscious of his subalternity, since every time Gertrude Stein mispronounces his name, he repeats it in the correct way. "Hearing it said correctly, if only in my head, is a desire that I cannot shake" (Truong 32). Stein scorns Bính also for his lack of French vocabulary. "Already, my Madame was amusing herself with my French. She was wrapping my words around her tongue, saving them for later, more careful study of their mutations" (Truong 35). Bính becomes objectified, treated as a lab mouse whose only worthiness consists in serving the scientist. Stein tests Bính's ability to understand French in that she makes a list of things in English, translates it into French, draws pictures next to the French words, and finally tortures Bính with her list. She reinforces her superior position not only through her native tongue but also through French; thus, her American persona is conflated with the image of the French colonizer. Xu confirms my theory

by asserting that “the Steins, both real and fictional, comfortably identify with the French in their attitudes toward the ‘Indochinese’” (141).

When his father’s voice doesn’t interfere with his own, Bính speculates what “Thin” might mean. As Bão, his friend on the *Niobe*, advised him to do, Bính invents new meanings for the English words he doesn’t know, thus re-conquering language as a tool of empowerment. “Language is a house with a host of doors, and I am too often uninvited and without the keys. But when I infiltrate their words, take the stab at their meanings, I create the trapdoors that will allow me in when the night outside is too cold and dark” (Truong 155). This temporary attempt to self-affirmation is threatened when Bính discovers Stein has been writing about him. So devastated he is, he feels as if he were drowning. Each time he sees his name misspelled on paper, his real self, or better the self that he knows, is disavowed. Seeing his name alongside so many words he doesn’t understand overwhelms him rather than challenging him, thus Bão’s trick backfires and prevents him from challenging what Stein wrote about him. Moreover, through language she appropriates Bính’s story, the only thing left to him. “I am here to feed you, not to serve as your fodder. I demand more money for such services, Madame. You pay me only for my time. My story, Madame, is mine. I alone am qualified to tell it, to embellish, or to withhold” (Truong 215). The American writer violates Bính’s own self and robs him of it. This betrayal via language can certainly be placed among the other reasons I explored in chapter two as to why the Vietnamese cook doesn’t accompany Stein and Toklas to America. Even though by choosing to remain in Paris and to hope for a scholar prince, Bính severs his submission from his Mesdames and continues to fight to affirm his identity, *The Book of Salt* ends as a Jane Austen novel. Readers know that Binh hopes to find someone to love, but they don’t have access to the

struggles and the defeats he is bound to meet given his identity as a subaltern. Although he attempts to create room to speak up, these interstices are not enough to empower him.

#### 4.2 A Fake Attempt to Resist Colonization

The United States army is not currently deployed in Vietnam, (though the navy has been present in the South China Sea for over sixty years), but America maintains its neocolonial relations with the Southeast Asian country through financial investments (the United States are the most important foreign investor) and through American ideological state apparatuses, such as schools and the media. “All ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation” (Althusser 1994). Abroad, American ISAs have a double goal. They spread and reinforce positive ideas about the United States such as America as the land of opportunity and freedom and America as the defender of peace; they work with financial institutions and private investors to consolidate American economic dominance. In an interview for *The Brooklyn Rail*, fiction writer Linh Dinh expresses his concerns about the relationship between Vietnam and the United States. “Vietnam has become a blind statement about the United States.... Not technically, but in the way they try to adjust to American standards, so to speak. They are becoming a satellite of the United States. There are many negative aspects to this, but one of them is that Americans tend to view a foreigner as an imperfect American” (“Linh Dinh”). American movies, songs, TV-programs, websites interpellate Vietnamese as Americans, but then America doesn’t identify them as Americans. The Vietnamese see the happy life depicted in American shows and movies (those that are permitted to circulate) and believe that America is a paradise (Dinh, “Linh Dinh”).

The United States sell the Vietnamese a hyperreality. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard states that after WWII reality

collapse[s] into hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography.

Through the reproduction from one medium into another the real becomes volatile, it becomes the allegory of death, but it also draws strength from its own destruction, becoming the real for its own sake, a fetishism of the lost object which is no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denegation and its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal. (72)

If in a remote time there was an equal relationship between an object and the word designated to name it, between the thing signified and the sign, in a consumer society, signs have gained control. Through advertising and other media, the market creates the need for something before that something is produced. In other words, the image of that something that we are “forced” to want exists before the product. Baudrillard calls this phenomenon simulacrum- a copy without origin. In a Vietnamese context, American media invent the image of the Vietnamese that speaks English and enjoys all the advantages Americans have before that Vietnamese even exists; thus, America creates the need for the Vietnamese to learn English. “People do this [learn English] willingly too because they are seduc[ed by] it” (Dinh, Interview). In Dinh’s “‘!’” and “Prisoner with a Dictionary,” respectively, what are Ho Muoi’s and the prisoner’s chances of resisting this socio-historical scenario? None, according to the stories. In this section, I will prove that although creating a fake language may be interpreted as an act of resistance, in the end, both Ho Muoi’s and the prisoner’s creations do not empower Vietnamese because the language is still based on the idiom of the colonizer.

“!” is set in Vietnam, and it spans 1952 – the year when Ho Muoi, the protagonist of the story, was born- and 2000. Ho Muoi has a mission in life: to learn a foreign language. The opportunity comes when an American soldier is wounded. Ho Muoi sits by his side and patiently records everything the soldier says in a delirium. The notes the Vietnamese takes become the foundation for what he thinks is English but, in reality, is a false language. Years later, Ho Muoi is arrested for teaching this false English. In “Prisoner with a Dictionary,” as well, we have a fake foreign language. A naïve narrator tells of a nameless man, identified only as “the prisoner,” who finds a foreign dictionary in his cell and starts to study it. Even though he doesn’t know the meaning of the words, he is convinced he is learning the foreign language, but as he builds a new vocabulary, he forgets his own native tongue. The story ends with the narrator pitying the prisoner because the latter never realized that what he had learned was a language that never existed but for him. It is significant that the main character of this short story has no identification other than his social status as a prisoner. Dinh’s choice in this allows the reader to see the prisoner as any (neo)colonized people and the foreign language to represent the culture of the (neo)colonizer, but it also underlines that the colonized is powerless. Moreover, this powerlessness is further emphasized by the fact that the reader doesn’t know what crime the prisoner has committed or for how long he will be in jail. For the sake of this discussion, though, the reader should assume that the prisoner is Vietnamese.

Ho Muoi buys into the hyperreality created by the Americans, which we can see from the episode of the three foreigners. When he is twelve, Ho Muoi has an altercation with one of the foreigners who are entertaining the village crowd. The foreigner says something to Ho Muoi in his (the foreigner’s) native tongue, and the people at first wait for the Vietnamese boy to reply, but then they start to laugh at him. Ho Muoi is so angered at the foreigner that he shouts “!,”



which the boy has learnt from his teacher and which everybody believes to be a foreign word (Dinh, *Blood* 12). The foreigner remains speechless, while the crowd is pleased that a twelve-year-old boy had the courage to stand up to the foreigners in their own language. In this scene, Ho Muoi as well as the people from the village believe power comes from somebody who is not Vietnamese, somebody from another reality. “In his mind, foreign words became equated with a terrible power” (Dinh, *Blood* 12). Ho Muoi is overwhelmed by the power he thinks “!” carries and even considers it magic. Ironic of course is the fact that “!” is not a word. Linh Dinh does not intend to expose Vietnamese simple-mindedness; rather, through irony, he underlines the trust Vietnamese people have in foreigners (Americans) and simultaneously the lack of confidence they show in their own government.

The language Ho Muoi invents is a Cubist painting. For example, in a Cubist painting where the nose is not realistically placed, Ho Muoi pairs the meaning of “wife” to the sound “basin.” Like Cubists who were fascinated by the possibility of a fourth dimension, Ho Muoi attempts to create a new dimension. His language works as a mediator between himself and a hostile world. It is interesting how the language stems from an American soldier’s delirium. For Johann Gottfried Herder, language originates from pain. “All violent sensations of his body, and the most violent of the violent, the painful ones, and all strong passions of his soul immediately express themselves in cries, in sounds, in unarticulated noises” (qtd. in Ferber 210). One may argue that “cries,” “sounds,” screams, and other “unarticulated noises” cannot be considered language. Indeed, Herder himself clarifies that these sounds have no linguistic meaning (211). As Ferber questions, he could have named the product of this stage as pre-linguistic, but he persists in calling it language. “The source of this insistence lies in Herder’s conception of language as a developing entity, one that has an inner movement that drives it forward” (Ferber 211). The

process of generating a language does not start from naming an external object but from an unmediated externalization of pain. The words that the suffering soldier pronounces are like the sounds and screams of the primitives for Ho Muoi. They might have linguistic meaning for another English-speaker but not for the Vietnamese young man. To continue the development of his language, Ho Muoi assigns linguistic meaning to the sounds he hears by matching each sound with the facial expression(s) the soldier makes. “Each portrait was meant as a visual clue to the words swarming around it. Ho Muoi’s skills as an artist were so poor, however, that the face depicted always appeared the same, that of a young man, any man really, who has lost all touch with the world” (Dinh, *Blood* 14). In creating a new language, Ho Muoi disrupts the binary relationship between sound and object since the same facial expression corresponds to more than one sound/word. He is so confident in his matching ability that he believes he can make sense of chaos, which we can interpret as the chaos caused by years of colonization and war. “Everything seems so chaotic at first, but nothing is chaotic. One can read anything: ants crawling on the ground; pimples on a face; trees in a forest...any surface can be deciphered” (Dinh, *Blood* 15). This illusion that by establishing an organizing principle one can arrive at the truth can explain what happened, seems to be Ho Muoi’s driving force.

But Ho Muoi’s English is a fake English. In his interview with Dinh, Sharpe asserts that this fake English is “a way of negating American reality.” To which, Dinh adds that Ho Muoi and his students “are also trying to negate the Vietnamese reality they are caught between. In a place like Vietnam, America is so seductive and the Vietnamese model is so appalling. People are so disappointed with their own society and they want to reinvent themselves” (“Linh Dinh”). Talking to Villanueva, Dinh mentioned that one of his favorite lines is Elias Canetti’s “She saw behind everything. Behind that, she saw nothing” (qtd. in “The Personal”). For Dinh, “you’ve

got to see beyond the so-called authenticity behind the fakeness” (“The Personal”). Behind Ho Muoi’s fake English, there’s an authentic reality, authentic at least for his students. Yet, behind it, lies no power. Ho Muoi’s followers build an imprisoning reality rather than a liberating one- a reality that only they can understand. In other words, their language reinforces their colonial condition rather than subverting it. Why is this reality not going to generate change? One could argue that Ho Muoi’s students are resisting imperialism by continuing to study his language, even though they know it’s not English. The narrator himself/herself confirms this: “A bogus English is better than no English, is better, in fact, than actual English, since it corresponds to no English or American reality” (Dinh, *Blood* 17). Do we trust the narrator? The truth is that Ho Muoi’s creation might be a bogus English but it is still English, it is still based on the language of the colonizer. Given what Dinh reveals in the interviews with various journalists, Vietnamese cannot rely on Americans or other colonizers to be empowered, to regain confidence in themselves.

In the beginning of “Prisoner with a Dictionary,” the prisoner doesn’t know what to do with the dictionary. He treats it as a stool, as a pillow, and he even rejects the idea that it might be useful for other than wiping himself. Although the narrator at first says that the prisoner approaches the dictionary “out of sheer boredom,” he later admits that he “suddenly felt challenged to learn” the foreign language (Dinh, *Blood* 1). It is as if the dictionary creates the urge in the prisoner to study what it contains. The colonizer sells the colonized this new sparkling world, even before the colonized realizes he needs it. As in “!,” the prisoner assigns meaning to a sound/written word deliberately. He would be Saussure’s perfect pupil. If the story ended here, postcolonialists would be tempted to praise the prisoner for twisting and bending, for reinterpreting the colonizer’s language in his own terms. However, the prisoner begins to forget

the names of body parts in his original tongue. His body is still intact but is becoming a foreigner. The prisoner is estranging from his own country. How is he more equipped to fight (neo)colonialism? Nonetheless, the colonized is made to feel “victorious” because “through a heroic act of will he has remade the universe,” a new world for himself, albeit an illusion (Dinh, *Blood* 4). The colonizer’s power is so insidious that it even lets the colonized believe that he embraced, or substituted, as in the case of the prisoner, the culture of the colonizer for the culture of the colonized out of his own will. By the end of the story, the prisoner’s situation has worsened. He is a prisoner twice. He is physically still imprisoned, and he is mentally and culturally enslaved to the colonizer.

#### 4.3 Conclusion

The protagonist of *The Book of Salt* realizes early in his life how to fight against the power of the colonizer. Yet, if learning enough French to get by might be sufficient in Vietnam, Binh’s act of resistance fails miserably on several levels, when he accepts Spivak’s challenge to participate in the hegemony of the empire. Moreover, in France, he falls victim of an even more astute colonizer. If French is Binh’s constant reminder of his subject position, English robs him of his experiences, of his memories, of the Self he had built in France. When the Steins leave, Binh needs to start from the beginning literally and metaphorically. He has to find a new job and create a new Self to fight colonialism. Will he be able to “generat[e] new sites of power rather than simply forms of resistance”? (Grewal and Kaplan 671) Interestingly, the reader doesn’t know if Binh succeeds, and this might be read as Binh’s ultimate failure to improve his destiny.

Both “!“” and “Prisoner with a Dictionary” are stories about how not to rely on foreign power to improve the lot of one’s own country. Is Dinh suggesting that no contact should exist

between Vietnam and American culture? Is Dinh a purist? Besides being illusionary and unpractical, if Dinh had wanted to espouse such an extremist position such as cultural purism, the events should have had a more realistic flair. The events are instead surreal, and the protagonists are fools, first because they believe in the absurdity of their mission, and second because they never realize “the truth.” In the second story, the prisoner never realizes he has not learned the language of the dictionary; in the first one, Ho Muoi is shown his English is a false English, and yet he cannot accept this revelation. An inexperienced reader would probably conclude that Dinh is ridiculing the Vietnamese, but a more knowledgeable audience knows that the trick lies in the approach Dinh chose to tell the stories. Dinh’s narrators remind us western readers of the persona adopted by Swift in “A Modest Proposal” and of the narrator of Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” and we feel sorry for Dinh’s narrators for believing that such events might be true. Dinh is not ridiculing the Vietnamese but criticizing and cautioning them not to rely too extensively on foreign power to rebuild their nation. They need to stop seeing their own country as “America’s last frontier” (Pelaud 38). The risk involves perpetuating submission to the colonizer and contributing to the creation of an American Vietnamese hyperreality.

## CONCLUSION

Bending towards exile- I have lost the  
 Home that housed my childhood and bitterly  
 Looking inside, wanting to touch your walls  
 Defiled by the robber devaki told me about  
 I do not remember  
 Fragments of glass pieced along bricks to bleed  
 Any trespasser into my memory

.....

It is as if you were mine and I need  
 to possess the bittersweet delhi days  
 gone since the trauma of plane  
 placed us tow, three, four continents away  
 schizophrenia still has not left me  
 No other house has made me its own since

.....

Disposed, my language  
 Means nothing, as if you put me into  
 Exile, from owning the deepest parts  
 Of myself.

.....

Fragments define me now. (Banerji 44-45)

As I am writing the conclusion of my study, tears come to my eyes. You, reader, might wonder if this is not an attempt to manipulate my advisors; no, I assure you it is not. Maybe you think that my tears are cathartic, in that I have met the goal I set for myself long ago. And yet, you would be only partially right. I realize that, despite the advice of one of my advisors, writing this dissertation has been a very personal experience. I suffered not just for but with “my” characters, especially Bính and Ben, as if they were real people. When I asked Troung why she decided Binh should stay in France rather than migrate to the United States, she replied she wanted to leave him stateless (“Personal Interview”). When she pronounced the word “stateless,” my heart dropped in my hands. Although it is extremely obvious that the Vietnamese cook belongs to no country, I had never thought of Bính in those terms. I had always considered him Vietnamese, that is, he belonged to a nation. The adjective Troung used shocked me also because I suddenly grasped I too was stateless. Recently, my father told me that the municipal authorities have kindly suggested to him that I should register with the *anagrafe degli Italiani residenti all'estero* (A.I.R.E.), (Registry of Italians Abroad), so that I can do my duty when elections are held. I told my dad that it was simply a political maneuver, but in reality I do not want to participate in the Italian political life because I feel my country has failed me. It didn't give me the same opportunities as did America, and I could not possibly go back now and expect to do the job for which I trained for ten years. And so I am stateless, but I do not feel less Italian than when I left Italy.

Scholars such as Safran and Clifford believe that this feeling will eventually subside, since immigrants are destined to assimilate. Yet, I know many Italians who have been in American for longer than I and who go home every chance they have. As the speaker of Banerji's poem, more and more immigrants and diasporans “bend towards exile.” For them too,

“no other house has made [them their] own since” (Banerji 44). Skype, internet, and other technologies make it easier not to sever one’s ties with the home country. At the same time, those who cannot keep in contact with their families, with their country/nation, due to personal, economic, or political reasons cannot simply be categorized as assimilated. Despite the assimilationist policy that reigns in America, they might still feel, even after years of living abroad, schizophrenic, fragmented, and torn when called to choose between allegiance to the country they had to abandon and the country that is giving them the possibility to rebuild their lives. Individuals might feel schizophrenic not simply because their country of origin “own[s] [their] deepest parts,” but also because they might have taken refuge in other countries on their way to their possible “final” destination. In other words, when we, as scholars, attempt to investigate the experiences of immigrants and diasporans, we cannot only consider the binary opposition home/host country, but we must take into account how other countries have shaped the diasporan on his journey. Diaspora and immigration are not static concepts; they are processes.

To better understand these processes, I accepted the challenge posed by Brah when she writes that diasporic lives are experienced “through multiple modalities: modalities, for example, of gender, race, class, religion, language and generation” (184). The approach that I suggest for investigating the concepts of diaspora and immigration may help advance the scholarship in Asian American studies. While I disagree with Chuh’s subjectless discourse for reasons I have already discussed, I acknowledge that by condemning Bính to statelessness and by not identifying his protagonist in “Prisoner with a Dictionary,” Truong and Dinh are trying to move away from merely identifying individuals based on merely their ethnicity and/or nationality.



None the less, scholars such as Wong hold on to these categories because real life constantly proves how much ethnicity and nationality still shape minority discourse and politics.

To prove that we cannot abandon categories of ethnicity and nationality to define individuals and, at the same time, to show that we need to take into account sexuality, religion, and language as well, I decided to examine the interaction between these aspects of identity. In chapter two, I argue that ethnic crises can be instigated by modalities other than ethnicity. In *Cebu*, it is only after a sexual encounter, albeit with a Filipina, that Ben begins to intentionally consider whether he is American or Filipino. It doesn't help that in the United States he is seen as a "dirty," "trouble-making," "untrustworthy" Filipino, while in his mother's country, in the eyes of Filipinos, he can only be an American. It is his sexual drive that leads the protagonist to ask himself if he can exist without ethnicity. In *The Book of Salt*, sexuality allies with ethnicity to further subject Binh to the forces of imperialism. Sexuality is also what determines his nationality, or better his lack thereof. In both *Cebu* and *Mona in the Promised Land*, the protagonists hide behind their religion rather than facing the ethnic questions that living in America inevitably raises. Religion reinforces Mona's ethnic background rather than granting her Americanness. The study of the interaction between religion and ethnicity also reveals that Ben is a failed hybrid because ethnicity overcomes the other modalities. Thus, I contend that we need to re-evaluate scholars' uncritical praise of the concept of hybridity. In my last chapter, language is pitted against colonization. If at first, language seems the ultimate solution that will allow the subaltern to speak, it soon reveals itself to be an accomplice of colonialism. Refusing to learn to speak the language of the conqueror or creating a new idiom based on the language of the colonizer might be interpreted as acts of resistance, but in reality they do not empower the colonized.

Engaging with such topics as ethnicity, diaspora, nationality, and so on has helped me to understand the argument of Lim et al. “‘Asian American’ is ...above all a literary sign and an abstract signifier whose signified contents are so shiftable, provisional, and undecidable that attempts to contain them will always result in incomplete narratives” (4). Examining the interaction between identity modalities is not a way to “contain” but rather to expand the meaning of Asian American.

## NOTES

## Introduction

<sup>i</sup> For a more lengthy discussion of the *pasi3n* see chapter three.

## Chapter 1

<sup>ii</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the verb *diaspeir3*, see Dufoix, Vertovec, Sheffer, and Braziel and Mannur.

<sup>iii</sup> Vertovec claims that “*galut*” refers to the period from the defeat of the Judeans on the part of the Romans 70 AD to now. Consequently, he states, scholars have started to distinguish between “*diaspora*,” which came to indicate voluntary migration, and “*galut*,” which has been used to refer to involuntary migration (130).

<sup>iv</sup> See Table 1.1. in Robin Cohen’s. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 1997. 26.

<sup>v</sup> In 2003, Sheffer published a whole study dedicated to ethno-national diasporas.

<sup>vi</sup> Goh does not refer to these scholars in particular, but I thought the quote was nonetheless appropriate.

<sup>vii</sup> See Clifford’s article and *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* by Calder3n and Sald3var.

<sup>viii</sup> See Safran’s definition of diasporas on page 36.

<sup>ix</sup> See David Leiwei Li and James Clifford.

<sup>x</sup> This discussion of course mirrors the flexibility/instability of the terms diasporic, transnational, and immigrant. See section 1.2

<sup>xi</sup> Jern reports that A.O. Scott, a journalist for *The New York Times*, praised how Chang-rae Lee’s novel *Aloft*, in which there is barely one Asian American character, is not about “ethnic tribalism,” meaning it is not about race.

## Chapter 2

<sup>xii</sup> For a more substantial discussion of the term “*diaspora*” see chapter 1.

<sup>xiii</sup> In a broader sense he is persecuted; by his parents’ past, by his ethnicity, by his religion.

<sup>xiv</sup> I will discuss the topic of the “*bad subject*” later in this chapter.

<sup>xv</sup> The ending is one of the elements that differentiates Bacho’s book from other Asian American novels. See Introduction for a discussion of this particular element.

<sup>xvi</sup> Jos3 Rival was a famous Filipino writer and nationalist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>xvii</sup> For a full discussion on the role of religion in Cebu see chapter four.

## Chapter 3

<sup>xviii</sup> From now on, *Promised Land*

<sup>xix</sup> Bräunlein acknowledges Fritz Kramer’s study *The Red Fez* contributed to the development of his ideas about Filipino flagellants and people who crucify themselves.

<sup>xx</sup> For more detailed information on *sikulo* see Anril P. Tiaco’s “*Libad nang Apung Iru and Pamamaku king Krus: Performances of Ambivalence in Kapampangan Cultural Spectacles*” and “*Quest for the Elusive Self: The Role of Contemporary Philippine Theatre in the Formation of Cultural Identity*” by Catherine Diamond.

<sup>xxi</sup> For more information about New Mysticism, please see Barker, Eileen. *New Religious Movements: Perspectives for Understanding Society*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982.

<sup>xxii</sup> Some scholars do not consider New Mysticim a religion, but a phenomenon as part of the New Religious Movements.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Clara is trying to shield sensitive Ben from his own stereotypes about Filipino customs.

<sup>xxiv</sup> I am aware that each of these colonizers oppresses/oppresed the colonized in different ways, but in the scene of Carlito's death they are conflated into one, due to the place Carlito chooses and the way by which he decides to die.

<sup>xxv</sup> Rey is Ben's aunt's driver and the one who sells Carlito's picture.

<sup>xxvi</sup> See Pirjo Ahokas, Fu-Jen Chen, Amy Ling, and Jeffrey F.L. Partridge.

<sup>xxvii</sup> In his article, "Hybridity, So What? The Anti-hybridity Backlash and the Riddles of Recognition," Nederveen Pieterse argues that the fact that the concept of hybridity has received so much criticism does not lie in the essence of hybridity but in the fetishism of boundaries.

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