Narrating Other Minds: Alterity and Empathy in Post-1945 Asian American Literature

Dissertation

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Abstract

My dissertation project interrogates how Asian American authors since 1945 have deployed the stereotype of inscrutability--that is, the inscrutability of the minds of Asian and Asian Americans--in order to reframe/reexamine/debunk the stereotype in various ways. In my examinations of Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*, Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt*, Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings*, Hisaye Yamamoto’s “Seventeen Syllables” and “Wilshire Bus,” and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, I investigate what narrative theorists have regarded as one of the most extraordinary aspects of fiction: its ability to give (or else deny) readers a remarkably detailed knowledge of the inner lives of their characters. In addition, I turn to the tools offered by rhetorical narratology as well as research in the cognitive and neurosciences. My dissertation ultimately reveals the link between narrative form and larger cultural issues associated with the representation of Asian American minds, and how a nuanced investigation of narrative form can yield insights into the sociocultural embeddedness of Asian American literature under my case studies—insights that would not be available if such formal questions were by passed. The various ways in which inscrutability is formed and operated in different texts for different purposes indicate that the Asian American inscrutability in fact can be used for author’s advantage as a critical and creative literary tool, challenging and complicating that exact stereotype.
Dedication

Dedicated to my mom, dad, and Sarath
Acknowledgment

Writing of this dissertation would not have been possible without my advisors and professors, Frederick Luis Aldama, David Herman, and James Phelan. Their generous support and guidance motivated me to initiate and complete this dissertation project. I have learned so much from them, and I am regretful and afraid that my work here does not represent accurately the depth and width of teaching that they provided to me for all my years of learning, thinking, researching, and writing. I am deeply indebted to my advisors. I wish to sincerely thank them. Additionally, I would also like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Sue J. Kim at University of Massachusetts Lowell. Dr. Kim generously provided to me feedback and suggestions throughout the dissertation process. Her deep knowledge in Asian American literature and literary studies was invaluable in my writing.
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Introduction:

People of color have materially suffered from ideologically driven biological determinist racism--that is, racist assumptions that their physiologically different or othered minds are always already inferior, uncivilized, savage, or incapable of American/European assimilation. It was not uncommon for such phrases as “the mind of the Oriental/Celestial/Chinese” or “the mind of the Negro/African” to be tossed around in pseudo-scientific journals assessing their inferior or conniving intelligence, as well as their degree of docility or proneness to assimilation. D R Millard, an army surgeon sent to Korea to help reconstruct war-damaged body, for instance, includes images that compare and contrast different features of “Oriental” and Western faces in his 1955 essay, “Oriental Peregrinations.” Millard talks about his “slant-eyed” Korean interpreter who wanted to be made into a “round-eye.” The interpreter was planning to eventually immigrate to America, and he was worried that “Americans could not tell what he was thinking and consequently did not trust him” (331). Millard writes, “As this was partially true, I consented to do what I could” (331). Millard’s essay shows two photos of this Korean interpreter, one before the surgery with his slant eyes and the other after the surgery with his new round eyes. These photos capture not only the changes in the shape of his eyes, but more importantly, the changes in overall tone and affect of his face. Whereas the interpreter before the surgery appears to be enigmatic, expressionless, and inscrutable, this same interpreter presents a broad smile after the surgery with his new
“Western” face that is filled with welcoming expressions and feelings—the big Western eyes signaling striking physiognomic improvement after the surgery. The message that Millard’s essay and the two photos convey is clear. Oriental face needs to have some Western somatic components (round eyes, for instance) to be able to display a variety of emotions and mental states that are readable, recognizable, and trustworthy.

The groundbreaking texts in the formation of an Asian American literary tradition since 1945 attempted to wrest out of that dominant force of Asian American misrepresentation an autonomous ethnic self. But in order to retire racist stereotypes, one is obliged to first evoke them; in order to construct ethnicity, one must first critique what is falsely reported as one’s ethnic identity. Accordingly, the central goal of my project is to provide the link between narrative form and larger cultural issues associated with the representation of Asian American minds, in fictional as well as nonfictional contexts. My project thus interrogates how Asian American authors since 1945 have deployed the stereotype of inscrutability—that is, the inscrutability of the minds of Asian and Asian Americans—in order to reframe/reexamine/debunk the stereotype in various ways: from the loud and yet cryptic Chinese mother in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) to the pensive and inarticulate Vietnamese protagonist in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* (2004) to the aloof and sullen Japanese American anti-hero in Adriane Tomine’s *Shortcomings* (2010), to mention just some of the examples my dissertation discusses. These texts showcase how Asian American authors have
challenged preexisting stereotypes about Asian American inscrutability by variously constructing the fictional minds of Asian American characters--and also, in contexts such as memoir, nonfictional Asian American minds. The central interest of my dissertation is to explore deeply and systematically the specific ways Asian American narratives attribute inscrutable minds to Asian American characters, situating them at various points along a spectrum stretching between alterity and empathy--with this spectrum being a way of describing audiences’ responses to these texts’ mind-representing techniques.

My dissertation is concerned with how Asian American authors since 1945 have variously constructed inscrutable minds in order to engage their audiences in specific ways. In my study of post-1945 Asian American novels, comics, short stories, and fictionalized memoir, I investigate what narrative theorists have regarded as one of the most extraordinary aspects of fiction: its ability to give (or else deny) readers a remarkably detailed knowledge of the inner lives of their characters. Thus the wide range of genres included in my project is required to give full scope to the diverse methods and effects of mind representation in the texts I examine. Further, by including different genres in my dissertation, I aim to capture the power and reach of the Asian American stereotype--together with Asian American authors’ different ways of engaging it--across the many narrative forms, modes, and techniques actively deployed by the authors.

My dissertation examines two kinds of inscrutability in the texts I discuss: inscrutability in the character-character relations (characters have trouble reading each
other’s mental states) and in the author-narrator-audience relations (we get greater or lesser access to character’s mental states). The variety and range of each kind of inscrutability across my corpus, as well as the various tools writers draw on in their constructions of the two kinds, will help me identify the nature and scope of the stereotype about Asian American minds. I am also interested in exploring the relationship between these two kinds of inscrutability within individual narratives. Sometimes a narrative will depict both kinds of inscrutability; in other cases, a text will depict partial inscrutability of one or both kinds. The dynamics between these two kinds have significant consequences in terms of how we position ourselves in narratives and respond to fictional characters. For instance, in Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (starting ironically, “People know me here”) the inscrutability of Franklin’s mind to readers adds a powerful affective dimension to the way he presents himself as scrutable to the other characters. We are led to think more deeply of the contextual elements of the novel that make necessary Franklin’s construction of the scrutable, representable self in his world. On the other hand, in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt*, Binh’s inscrutability to the other characters is more poignant due to his scrutability to readers. We take a more responsible and affective position toward Binh as we witness him turning into a ghostly figure in his relationships with the other characters—we are urged to find a way to empower him and extends his visibility, to which only readers have access.
My goal is to comment on how the narratives are participating in broader cultural discourses about Asian Americans and their minds; in my dissertation, I connect my findings about the relevant modes of inscrutability, along with their impact on readers, to the political and cultural implications of the narratives. The readability and unreadability of a character or even a text sometimes depends on the author and the audience, and what their interpretive communities and cultural contexts are, revealing something important about larger writerly and readerly assumptions and conventions. Authors use different formal (narrative techniques and forms) and contextual (history and culture) conventions of storytelling in various ways in order to allow for different construal systems yielding different kinds of affordances that determine how audiences access and engage with the inner lives of fictional or real characters in contexts such as memoir. Further, by examining how the different methods of mind construction can differently inflect readers’ encounters with the Asian American texts, depending on readers’ own background or group-identifications as well as the context within which the fictional mind is embedded, I aim to contribute to post-Cartesian accounts of the mind as inextricably situated in contexts for action and interaction (see Herman).

As a first step in better understanding the variety and range of inscrutable Asian American minds in post-1945 Asian American fiction, I turn to the tools offered by rhetorical narratology—an approach to narrative concerned with “the multilayered communications that authors of narrative offer their audiences, communications that
invite or even require their audiences to engage with them cognitively, psychically, emotionally, and ethically” (Phelan, Living 5). The rhetorical model developed by Booth and Phelan functions as the umbrella to the project. The concepts and knowledge offered by the mind/brain sciences work under this umbrella to enrich my understanding of the multilayered communication that takes place between author (via various resources at his/her disposal, including narrator(s), characters, and occasions) and audience (actual and authorial). I take seriously Phelan’s insight in Living to Tell About It that the fictional encounter not only invites but even necessitates that the audience engages with narrative fictions “cognitively, psychically, emotionally, and ethically” (5). I take seriously, too, Frederick Aldama’s statement in A User’s Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderland Fiction: “the elucidation of the cognitive and neural mechanisms underlying neuro-emotional behavior generally has great potential to deepen our understanding of why and how of fiction” (46 emphasis mine). With the tools of rhetorical narratology and insights yielded by the mind/brain sciences, I hope to understand better how Asian American authors create narrative fictions depicting more or less inscrutable Asian American minds, thereby engaging in a myriad of ways the cognitive, emotive, and ethical systems of their audiences.

Importantly, this project keeps in mind the author, the text, and the audience that inform the construction and interpretation of inscrutable minds in the texts under examination. However, within this tripartite model, I use the useful further distinction of
the implied author (James Phelan explains it as a streamlined version of the real author that plays an active role in the construction of the particular text) and the authorial audience (Peter Rabinowitz explains it as the author’s ideal addressees who understand the implied author’s communication, including, in fictional narrative, the message that the characters and events are invented). I am centrally interested in understanding better how the author, through his/her implied author agent, attempts to communicate with the actual audience with an interest in following an author’s lead.

This is also where a range of concepts developed under the auspices of cognitive narratology, broadly speaking, can be useful. Relevant concepts include the intermental mind (Alan Palmer’s understanding of the fictional minds of the characters as embedded within the whole narrative of the novel, revealing joint or shared emotions, dispositions, and action), research on empathy (our capacity to stand in the place of another), our Theory of Mind capacity (our ability to interpret behavior in terms of underlying thoughts, feelings, desires and intentions), the rules of the storyworld construction and reception (David Herman’s approach to a synthesis of the concepts of story and discourse that better captures what might be called the “ecology” of narrative interpretation), and mirror neurons (a neural mirror system that demonstrates an internal correlation between the representations of perceptual and motor functionalities). To enrich our understanding of how the implied author and the authorial audience function in making and consuming of the range of inscrutable minds in post-1945 Asian American fictions and narrative
fiction more generally, I intend to draw, in each chapter of my dissertation, on pertinent strands of narrative theory and as well as relevant ideas from the mind/brain sciences.

The historical, cultural, and political contexts specific to the Asian American experience must also be considered, in order to situate Asian American inscrutability historically—as a particular historical and racialized construction of minds and mind-reading practices. Moreover, the cultural and historical contexts of Asian America inflect the formal attributes of inscrutable Asian American minds, shaping how we access the fictional world at different formal and contextual levels. Even when universal literary forms (point of view, character narration, and narrative speed or duration, for instance) and emotions are used to invite a wide range of audiences as the authorial audience, these forms in Asian American literature frequently intersect with Asian American specificities (culture, history, and language) to challenge an immediate access to interpretation—a more specified and informed group of audience is called for as the author’s most ideal audience at this moment of intersection and complication. Some texts build in more information and others less contextual information to provide different degrees of access to fictional minds. This sort of variation has important consequences in terms of identification of in-group/out-group authorial audiences. For instance, Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* (1976) fictionalizes aspects of Chinese culture and history, in ways that might be missed by a “mainstream” authorial audience with less knowledge about the actual Chinese history and culture.
In my first chapter, “Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* and Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt*: Affective, Ethical, and Thematic Dimensions of Inscrutability,” I put together Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* and Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* to introduce the two central questions that I raise in my project: how form and context intersect to complicate the construction of inscrutable minds for Asian American characters and how this intersection directs our cognitive, emotive, and ethical responses in specific ways. I argue that the ethical and affective dimensions of our access to fictional minds are both shaped by and shape our understanding of the particular spatiotemporal and cultural locations of the fictional work. I also examine how in both texts our ethical and empathetic responses to the central characters are closely related to the intricate functioning of our cognition and emotion.

The second chapter, “Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings*: Representing Asian American Inscrutability in the Graphic Narrative,” serves as a good transition both in form and context. Whereas the first chapter focuses on the novel form and on the relatively more historicized and specified Asian American contexts (Japanese occupation of Korea, French occupation of Vietnam, and colonialism), *Shortcomings* uses the medium of comics to illustrate urban lives led in San Francisco and New York by people of diverse backgrounds and identities. In this chapter, by drawing on the conventions of the visual narrative and the advances made in the mind/brain sciences, I examine how Tomine constructs the mind of the central character and engages us within the constraints
and affordances of the graphic novel medium in specific ways. In *Shortcomings* Ben’s mind is depicted as shallow and closed to the other characters. On the other hand, we have various degrees of access to Ben’s mind—he is made both scrutable and inscrutable to us depending on the specific formal elements and emotive and cognitive cues that the author deploys. In a way that dovetails with the historical and cultural specificities of the protagonist’s background and current experiences, the text creates a constant oscillation of emotion and mood, while also using visual ambiguity to complicate our process of engaging with Ben’s state of mind. I explore Tomine’s graphic storytelling devices and the mind/brain sciences in order to better understand how, despite Ben’s overt anti-heroic characterization and the self-othering tendency, we are guided to feel for Ben and further empathize with him (directed specifically by the functioning of the graphic medium, not only do we as Tomine’s authorial audience understand Binh’s emotional state, but we also further imagine ourselves in his situation to empathize with him).

The third chapter, “Hisaye Yamamoto’s Short Stories: Silence as Formal, Thematic, and Rhetorical Strategies in the Character-Character and Author-Narrator-Reader Relations,” studies Yamamoto’s two short stories, “Seventeen Syllables” (1949) and “Wilshire Bus” (1950) to test and examine Yamamoto’s engagement with the genre in her attempt to reframe the stereotype of Asian American inscrutability—to see how the author invites her readers quickly into the plot, and allows them to explore complexities of Asian American characters’ consciousnesses within the short form of the short story. I
investigate the link between Yamamoto’s method of narration and silence, Asian American inscrutability in a linguistic form. In my discussion of the first story, “Seventeen Syllables,” I use tools such as narrative progression, delayed disclosure, and theory of mind in order to show that silence exists both in character-character and author-narrator-reader relations. This silence, I posit, works as an effective communicative and thematic strategy between the author and readers, and discloses the poignancy of repressed emotions and desires among different generations. Especially by using silence that is interpersonal and situated in family relationship (daughter-mother relationship), Yamamoto in “Seventeen Syllables” effectively questions issues of generation gap and feminist criticism, among others. In “Wilshire Bus,” I examine ethical implications of silence through the Japanese American Esther’s act of turning away -- turning away from the historical and cultural reality of postwar America. Silence in “Wilshire Bus” differs, since silence in this story has to do with Esther’s failure to speak up in a public place among people that she does not know. This kind of silence in the story allows for the study of in-group and out-group categorizations, and how they complicate both Esther’s empathetic feelings for her fellow Chinese American and the reader’s ethical evaluation of Esther’s actions and silence. Esther’s non-verbal activity and her interior monologue suggest not only the depth of her inner life, but more importantly, the politics and ethics of silence laden with the irony of self-deception and ignorance.
In the final fourth chapter, “The Critique of Inscrutability in Memoir: Fictionalization as Counter-narration in Kingston’s The Woman Warrior,” I argue that Kingston’s retelling of her mother’s ancient stories in her memoir is in part her effort to reclaim her place in the family and its Chinese tradition. I explore the mode of storytelling and writing in The Woman Warrior through a rhetorical theory of narrative (“somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened”). I believe that rhetorical approach to The Woman Warrior sheds light on the dynamics between the author and readers that makes possible writing and reading of a nonfictional memoir that is simultaneously fiction, myth, and imagination. I posit that Kingston’s underlying authorial purposes (thematic, aesthetic, and affective) give a specific shape to her memoir, allowing Kingston to become a purposive orchestrator and designer of her memoir, and a legitimately, strategically, and empathetically deficient (or “fallible”) narrator. Kingston’s “deficient” and “fallible” storytelling in her memoir seeks to reflect not the historical truths and facts, but rather authorial and rhetorical concerns that make The Woman Warrior more unique, creative, and compelling. Kingston’s innovative use of thought report, free indirect discourse, and other textual and contextual strategies reshape seemingly inscrutable Asian American traditions and practices--traditions and practices associated with the unknown and mysterious oriental--and help readers establish necessary bond and trust with the author. Through the cooperation between author and readers, and through readers’ willingness to
understand that “the search and struggle for a sense of [ethnic] identity is a (re-)invention and a discovery of a vision” (Fischer 196), *The Woman Warrior* demonstrates how the art of storytelling gives birth to compelling and innovative ways of representing one's life.
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Chapter 1: Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* and Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt*: Affective, Ethical, and Thematic Dimensions of Inscrutability

Franklin Hata, the elderly Japanese American protagonist of Chang-rae Lee’s 1999 novel, *A Gesture Life*, treasures “the small but unequaled pleasure that comes with being a familiar sight to the eyes” (1). In Franklin's case, “everyone knows perfectly who [he is]” (1). This sense of welcoming recognition might not have been the case in the social and historical landscape of 1920s America when the National Origins Act of 1924 and the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 consolidated anti-Asian sentiment. In an Immigration Commission report entitled *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* (1911), for instance, the Commission notes that “immigrants’ bodies were actually being transformed the longer they stayed in America” (qtd. in Palumbo-Liu, 85). The Commission then proposes that “Orientals” must be excluded from this report, since they are not “susceptible to such [bodily] transformation in American soil.” In a case of the “Orient,” “both the physiognomic and the psychic gaps to be crossed were too great” (qtd. in Palumbo-Liu, 86).

Physical differences of the Asians/Asian Americans, identified by the Commission as a hindrance to assimilation, have led to a series of stereotypes, including the stereotype of inscrutable Chinese. In his 1928 essay “Human Migration and the Marginal Man,” Robert E. Park remarks that “present differences between the Orient and
the Occident are largely concerned with what the Chinese call ‘face’” (244). For Park, the physical difference of the Chinese face marks a further distinction between the psychological lives of the Orient and the Occident, distinguishing not only the way Asians/Asian Americans look, but also how they think and behave: “the former are more conscious, more conventional, in their behavior than we […] That is the reason why the Chinese go to such elaborate length to save their face” (250). This conclusion further allows Park to suggest that “Orients live more completely behind the mask than the rest of us. Naturally enough we misinterpret them, and attribute to disingenuousness and craft what is actually conformity to an ingrained convention” (emphasis mine 250).

Whereas Park treats the Oriental face as a phenomenon directly associated with Asian culture and tradition, which reflects Asian conformity and convention, Erving Goffman in *Interaction Ritual* (1967) provides a new insight about face as “an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (5). Construction of such a face is both social and universal, as "every person lives in a world of social encounters" that requires one to act out "face," a term defined as "the positive social values a person effectively claims for himself” (emphasis mine, 5). Goffman emphasizes the fluidity and flexibility of one’s face, as face is not “lodged in or on his body, but rather something that is diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter" (6-7). Goffman’s understanding of face as everyone wears “in the flow of events in the encounter” makes a stark contrast with Park's treatment of the Chinese face as a static cultural marker that
divides the Orient and the Occident. Moreover, the abstraction and conventionalization of
the Oriental face as a “mask” in Park’s statement is an analogy that lends itself to the
sense that Asians/Asian Americans are unreal, insincere, and inscrutable, eminently
lacking individuality and interiority. The real danger of the stereotype of the Asian
American inscrutability, then, lies in the correlation of the exterior and interior. Park
points to something much deeper and foundational: the erasure of the depth and
individuality of Asians/Asian Americans and their complex consciousness historically.

Writers of Asian American literature have variously attempted to reclaim the
psychological complexity and individuality of Asian Americans in fiction. They have
done so by paradoxically embracing the very inscrutability of Asian American characters
as a way to reframe, reexamine, and debunk the stereotype itself. In this chapter, I
examine the various ways in which two Asian American writers, Chang-rae Lee and
Monique Truong, manipulate concepts of inscrutability at different levels of narrative—to
test the nature, scope, and consequences of this key stereotype associated with Asian
Americans. My discussion of the novels centers on two kinds of inscrutability at the level
of the story (content plane of narrative) and at the level of the discourse (expression plane
of narrative). Despite the distinction between story and discourse, however, it is
important to note the asymmetrical nature of their relationship. Readers often acquire an
access to the events of the story through the textual cues and patterns constituting the
discourse. Therefore, I explore the intriguing ways in which different forms and degrees
of inscrutability intersect, interchange, and traverse in both character-character
(characters have trouble reading each other’s mental states) and author-narrator-reader
relations (we get more or less access to character’s mental states depending on the
author’s specific use of forms and techniques). I posit that different kinds of inscrutability
and their intersections at different levels of narrative significantly influence readers’
ethical and affective responses to the characters.

Formation and Operation of Inscrutability in *A Gesture Life* and *The Book of Salt*

Before discussing each text, let me first briefly introduce how inscrutability and
scrutability form and operate in Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999) and Monique
Truong’s *The Book of Salt* (2004). Both Lee and Truong provide a highly innovative
reading of Asian American interiors by introducing Asian American protagonists whose
inscrutability represents psychological, physiological, social, cultural, political, and
historical complexities of human life. These writers’ use of Asian American inscrutability
is in part accounted for by the relative positions they occupy in Asian/American history.
Situated within the contingencies of 20th- and 21st-century American culture, Lee and
Truong are allowed and even required to articulate and experiment with the stereotype in
compelling ways. Chang-rae Lee's protagonist, Franklin, for instance, voluntarily deploys
the face of a scrutable immigrant in order to meet his desires for recognition and
assimilation in 1990s America. Being in face, Franklin at the level of the story is
transparent, friendly, and easily accessible to his townspeople and succeeds to meet their
effect expectation towards him as a venerable model minority. Franklin’s face in this regards
exemplifies the notion of Goffman’s face as "the positive social values a person
effectively claims for himself” in the flow of social interactions and encounters.

Lee further complicates Franklin's face, the scrutable exterior, by making
inscrutable his consciousness at the level of the discourse. Franklin in author-narrator-
reader relation is an inscrutable narrator whose mind readers have hard time to access.
Franklin’s telling contradicts his actions as a character, and his narration is obscure,
ambiguous, and even seemingly unreliable. Franklin’s inscrutability, however, is a way
for Lee to depict more accurately the complexities and poignancy Franklin’s inner life
and his painful struggles to turn away from his past self and memories in WWII Asia--his
traumatic encounter with K, a Korean comfort woman, and her tragic death. Franklin’s
inscrutability as a narrator also allows the author to trigger in the mind of readers an
effect similar to what James Phelan calls “bonding unreliability.” That is, even when
readers notice that Franklin as a narrator fails to capture accurately and precisely what
really happened to him and K during the war, Franklin’s inscrutable mind draws readers’
attention to his difficultly of coming to terms with his past and how his memories still
influence his present consciousness. Franklin might be unreliable, but instead of
estranging readers, the ambiguity and inscrutability of his narration urge readers to bond
and empathize with him.
Monique Truong also sees the paradox of Asian American “face” and innovatively engages with it to unravel the stereotype. The use of inscrutability as a cultural and racial stereotype associated with Asian Americans is less foregrounded in Truong's novel. For one thing, Truong's novel takes place in 1920s France, and the protagonist, Binh, is a Vietnamese domestic laborer working for American expatriates in Paris. Nevertheless, Truong situates Binh’s subjectivity within the restrictions of socioeconomic, political, and linguistic contexts of 1920s France and effectively highlights the constructed nature of Binh's inscrutable face in character-character relation. As a Vietnamese domestic servant in 1920s Paris, Binh’s subject formation reflects his colonial and imperial bearings. Binh is unable to speak English and French, the languages of his employers and colonizers, and his presence at the level of the story is valid only as a submissive and silent foreign servant who fails to be recognized as an independent human being. Binh’s socioeconomic position as a servant and his limited interactions with others deprive him of opportunities to become scrutable to other characters in the novel. Binh is made inscrutable because his social position and linguistic incompetency disables him to expose himself to others.

In the author-narrator-reader relation, however, Truong invites her readers to imaginatively enter the psyche of her protagonist at the level of the discourse by rendering Binh’s consciousness scrutable through her innovative use of narrative techniques, such as autonomous interior monologue (a technique for representing
interiority of self-address in a first-person context) and some aspects of redundant telling (narrator’s report of information to a narratee that the narratee already knows), among others. Once readers are situated within Binh’s mind and explore the active working of his inner life, readers discover how Binh, through and within his consciousness, transcends the hierarchies of power relations in his character-character relation.

Figure 1: Narrative function (rhetorical, affective, and ethical) of inscrutability in Lee's and Truong's texts

Interpretive difficulty, ethical complexity, and affective inscrutability in Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*

People know me here. It wasn’t always so. But living thirty odd years in the same place begins to show on a man. In the course of such time, without even realizing it, one takes on the characteristics of the locality, the color and stamp of the prevailing dress and gait and even speech--those gentle bells of the sidewalk passerby, their *How are yous* and *Good days* and *Hellos*.

--Franklin Hata, *A Gesture Life*
This quiet opening line of Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* introduces Franklin Hata as an intimate and transparent character narrator of the novel. A Japanese American retiree in his 60s, who used to run a medical supply store in an affluent suburban town of New York state, Bedly Run, Franklin is a model minority, a success case of immigration and assimilation: “There’s no longer a lingering or vacant stare […] everyone here knows perfectly who I am” (1). The pleasure that comes with this unmistakable scrutability, however, leads Franklin to a series of paradoxes and painful self-consciousness. To become scrutable and familiar (“everyone here knows perfectly who I am”), Franklin must first become invisible (“There’s no longer a lingering or vacant stare”). To fit in and assimilate, Franklin must first maintain and reinforce the stereotypical quality of “Oriental veneration as an elder” and remain conscious of how his Japanese name has been “both odd and delightful to people, as well as somehow town-affirming” (2). Franklin’s self-consciousness about how his face must function turns to a self-disguise. Readers discover well into the narrative that Franklin, despite his self-introduction as a Japanese American, is in fact Korean by birth. The more readers listen to Franklin, the more they start noticing traces of self-contradiction and deception that complicate his carefully self-constructed scrutability in his character-character relation.

Critics have widely welcomed Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* since its publication in 1999, focusing primarily on the themes of immigration (1990s America), transnationalism (WWII Asia), and politics of comfort women as the shaping forces of
the narrative. Hamilton Carroll, for instance, notes in Lee’s novel “a shift in perspective from a nationally oriented, patriarchally centered narrative of immigration and cultural assimilation to a fragmented, transnational narrative” (Carroll, “Traumatic” 593).

Although I acknowledge thematic significances of the novel, my reading of the novel is an attempt to understand better the affective, interpretive, and ethical dimensions of Franklin’s scrutability and inscrutability in the character-character and author-narrator-reader relations. I complicate reading of Franklin's scrutable face in his character-character relation and re-evaluate its deceptive and misleading nature by closely examining his inscrutability in author-narrator-reader relation, the ways in which Franklin’s narration about himself and his past renders his mind ambiguous, obscure, and inscrutable to readers. Of central important to me here, then, are the ethics, affect, and politics involved in Lee’s representation of Franklin’s mind, Franklin’s narration of his memories, and the reader’s reading of Franklin’s mind as they relate to the literary representations of history generally and comfort women specifically.

Contextualizing Franklin’s Scrutability

In order to understand better the nature and scope of Franklin’s scrutability at the level of the story, we need to first think of the specific purpose it serves to Franklin in the broader social landscape of 1990s America, within which the story is set and Franklin’s scrutability is constructed in the first place. Franklin’s scrutability has a high degree of
performativity—it enables Franklin to act as a transparent elderly immigrant in his
interactions with his townspeople. No one in Bedly Run questions Franklin’s sincerity
and his successful assimilation into the community as one of the venerable citizens in
town. Franklin’s scrutability, the specific “mask” he wears in Bedly Run, in other words,
makes Franklin’s presence and social position more valid and acceptable. When Franklin
as a narrator reflects on himself and his relationships with other characters, however,
readers discover that Franklin’s inner life is vexed with paradoxes and contradictions that
his scrutability as a means of recognition and acceptance causes to him: “I must say I
appreciated the feeling. There is something exemplary to the sensation of near-perfect
lightness, of being in a place and not being there, which seems of course a chronic
condition of my life […] Such is the cast of my belonging, molding to whatever is at
hand” (289-90).

Franklin through his retrospective narration admits how his identity as a scrutable
Franklin Hata both validated and invalidated his presence (“being in a place and not
being there”), “a chronic condition of [his] life.” Belonging in Franklin's case was more a
matter of whether he could shape himself into the given structure ("molding to whatever
is at hand"), rather than his ability to occupy a position of his choice with self-
determination and independence. Nevertheless, Franklin ironically claims that he still
“appreciated” the feeling of “near-perfect lightness," the transparency and scrutability he
adopted in his character-character relations. Through Franklin's self-contradicting,
ambiguous, and retrospective character narration, Lee at the level of the discourse complicates Franklin’s scrutable face and draws readers’ attention to the complex working of Franklin’s inner world. Careful attention to Franklin's tendency to belatedly comment on his actions/conversations, on the other hand, discloses a significant discrepancy between Franklin’s experiencing I and narrating I. This discrepancy that Franklin’s own narration reveals influences readers’ ethical and affective evaluations of Franklin’s role as a character narrator.

In his conversation with Mrs. Hickey, who now runs Franklin’s Sunny Medical Supply with her husband, Franklin is unexpectedly reminded of a little girl, Sunny, in the pictures Mrs. Hickey found in the storeroom. Franklin in his dialogue with Mrs. Hickey introduces Sunny as his relative: “‘She came from Japan,’” I said, “many years ago, and stayed for some schooling. She went back’” (13). Franklin’s conversation with Mrs. Hickey ends abruptly, and as Franklin the narrator starts reflecting on the scene, readers learn belatedly that Franklin was in fact lying about Sunny to Mrs. Hickey: “As I climbed the gentle rise of the old road, I wished that I hadn’t spoken inaccurately about Sunny to Mrs. Hickey, but the moment, like so many others, passed too swiftly, as I didn’t feel I could explain things without further complication and embarrassment” (14). Rather than further elaborating on who Sunny really is and what “further complication” he is referring to, Franklin instead proceeds to talk about the house he bought nearly thirty years ago and the room where Sunny once lived and left in a hurry. Franklin at this
narrative moment recalls how he worked on the room, “patching and repainting the ceiling and walls” after Sunny’s departure: “There were larger pocks, into which I found it easy enough to spade the filler. But it was the smaller ones, particularly the tack holes, which seemed to number in the hundreds, that took the great part of my time” (15).

Franklin’s narration here makes it extremely difficult for readers to interpret and evaluate his actions as a character and his narration as a narrator. Readers learn through Franklin’s own narration that he was in fact lying to Mrs. Hickey. Although this might lead readers to believe that Franklin quite bluntly is a lair, Franklin’s remorseful, regretful, and confessional tone and self-correction right after his dishonest conversation with Mrs. Hickey have an effect to draw readers closer to Franklin and urge them to interrogate more generously and affectively deeper motivations behind Franklin’s “lie.” Readers’ initial response of betrayal upon learning of Franklin’s lies thus decreases and the expectation to learn more about the underlying thoughts and feelings behind Franklin’s dishonesty and disguise increases.

Although Franklin at the level of the discourse does speak more accurately about Sunny, readers’ curiosity and confusion are left astray and unresolved, since Franklin’s account of Sunny is still strictly limited without additional details. Equally, Franklin's emotions are largely repressed without any further elaboration on how he feels or what he thinks. Franklin abruptly and ambiguously turns to his house in order to turn away from his responsibility as a narrator, to tell more about Sunny that he lied about to Mrs.
Franklin’s inscrutability in author-narrator-reader relation allows Franklin to become a particular kind of “unreliable” character narrator whose incomplete and ambiguous narration leads readers not to distance themselves from him, but to more actively and affectively interrogate and participate in the narrative with an attempt to understand larger picture and context of his unreliability. Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) writes that a narrator is reliable “when he speaks or acts in accord with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not” (158). Ansgar Nünning, for his part, attempts to further complicate Booth’s text-immanent model of unreliability through his cognitively oriented theories of reading.
Nünning especially insists on the importance of understanding more precisely how readers interpret and determine narrator's unreliability through their cognitive processing of narrative inflected by their own experiences, dispositions, and cultural backgrounds. See, for instance, Greta Olson’s explication of Nünning’s cognitive model of unreliability in “Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators”:

To begin with, the reader notes textually evident discrepancies between the narrator’s actions or telling of events and other versions of the narration or of the narrator. The reader then relates these discrepancies to other frames of experience […] They impose their expectations about how texts should work and how people tell stories onto the text in order to make sense of it. A part of this process of fitting the text into one’s worldview is identifying the narrator and deciding what sort of person that narrator is on the basis of one’s referential frames. (98)

The deceptive nature of Franklin’s scrutability and his ambiguous character narration that leads to a series of turning away and increasing inscrutability at the level of the discourse lessen readers’ ability to identify “what sort of person” Franklin really is. Once this basic level of cognitive processing is preempted, readers cannot readily test their expectations and predispositions about “how texts should work and how people tell stories.” That is, by refusing to fully disclose underlying emotions, intentions, and purposes behind Franklin’s action through his increasing inscrutability at the level of the discourse, Lee temporarily delays readers’ judgment about who Franklin is and what he is doing, and if Franklin is “unreliable” in a conventional sense of unreliability. Lee’s audiences instead explore more patiently and generously larger patterns, conditions, and contexts of the narrative that shape Franklin’s deceptive scrutability at the level of the
story and ambiguous character narration at the level of the discourse. When guided this way, readers participate in the narrative more actively and attempt to complete for Franklin his incomplete character narration, understanding better his undisclosed states of mind.

In this regard, we might think more carefully of the seemingly irrelevant and yet highly poetic description of the “larger pocks” in Sunny’s room and attribute states of mind not only to Franklin, but also to the author himself—what message does Lee aim to convey by adding a seemingly irrelevant passage about the holes in Sunny’s room? Lee through this passage asks his readers to actively and affectively “fill in the gaps” in Franklin’s actions and narration, just as Franklin himself had to fill in the holes in Sunny’s room after she abandoned the room. When readers discover pages later that Sunny in fact is Franklin’s adopted daughter who ran away years ago, readers can better situate underlying intentions and motivations behind Franklin’s (deceptive) scrutability within the larger narrative of successful immigration and assimilation. Revealing his failed fatherhood to Mrs. Hicky would have “embarrassed” Franklin with “further complication” and damaged the picture of himself as a venerable Japanese American elder, the “town-affirming” image Franklin has so carefully constructed and maintained living in Bedly Run for decades. Readers are reminded of the years of effort Franklin would have invested in establishing his current status as a scrutable and venerable “Japanese American” in the town. Once reaching this new understanding, readers
empathize with Franklin’s larger circumstances that inevitably lead him to lie to Mrs. Hickey.

Rhetorical Functions of Franklin’s Inscrutability

Readerly tension towards Franklin's deceptive scrutability in his character-character relations resolves once readers contextualize sociological and psychological complexities of Franklin’s action within his spatiotemporal location of 1990s America and his position as an immigrant figure of Bedly Run. Franklin's inscrutability in author-narrator-reader relation, on the other hand, is a marker that affectively and actively draws readers’ attention to the depth of Franklin’s interiority, the anxieties and conflicts that he experiences as a result of his self-conscious attempt to maintain face of a model minority. As the narrative progresses, however, Lee uses a series of flashbacks in order to shift the novel to 1950s WWII Asia and add another layer of complication to Franklin’s mind. Franklin's decision to wear the mask of a scrutable face relates closely to his another self-conscious attempt to forget his past self in 1950s Asia and his memories of WWII. Franklin's inscrutability at the level of the discourse, then, represents the pains and anxieties that come from his forced forgetfulness. Readers have to think more carefully of the interconnectedness between Franklin's present consciousness and past memories, and how their link inflects Lee's representations of Franklin's mind and narration significantly.
Franklin’s fraught relationship to the past, laden with shame and guilt, influences his consciousness and narration. Franklin’s narration is frequently interrupted by a series of flashbacks. When his past memories intrude his consciousness, Franklin’s narration becomes highly ambiguous, obscure, and fragmented to the reader. Franklin’s ambiguous representation of memories has consequently guided many critics to focus on interpretive limits of Franklin’s narration. Hamilton Carroll in “Traumatic Patriarchy: Reading Gendered Nationalisms in Chang-rae Lee’s A Gesture Life,” for instance, posits that Franklin’s narration is “riddled with internal contradictions” (592). Carroll adds that Franklin’s narrative of successful immigration gradually becomes “the story of a profound self-deception” (592). Similarly, Belinda Kong in “Beyond K’s Specter: Chang-rae Lee’s A Gesture Life, Comfort Women Testimonies, and Asian American Transnational Aesthetics” maintains that Lee’s text traces the breakdown of identity “through the protagonist’s repeated self-disavowals rather than identity’s consolidation through an accretion of experiences” (2).

These critics’ reading of Franklin’s ambiguous narration and representation of the past sheds insightful light on Franklin’s individual psyche and present life embedded in his traumatic past of the war. My interest, on the other hand, lies in the ways in which Franklin’s ambiguous narration and inscrutable mind disclose effectively ethics and affect of memories that are related to a traumatic historical event. Franklin’s seemingly problematic narration is in fact a poignant indicator of Franklin’s painful attempt to turn
away from his unforgettable past, and invites readers to a role of an empathetic witness and interrogator of Franklin’s memories. The increasing inscrutability of Franklin’s mind in the author-narrator-reader relations, I argue, constructs an empathetic interpretive community within which Lee, Franklin, and the reader bond together.

![Diagram: Inscrutability for bonding mechanism]

Figure 3: Inscrutability for a bonding mechanism

Franklin’s traumatic encounter with Kkutaeh (called K hereafter), a Korean comfort woman Franklin falls in love with and fails to protect while serving as a medic in the Japanese army during WWII, consists of the most crucial part of Franklin’s past, intersecting with his present life and consciousness. Franklin accidentally and ambiguously reveals to readers his memory of K during his confrontation with Sunny. After escaping from a near rape by Jimmy Gizzi, a local drug dealer, Sunny vehemently tells Franklin that “Nothing like that is ever going to happen to me again. I’ll kill myself”
before it does, I swear” (150). These words from Sunny provoke fragmented memories of K in Franklin’s mind: “If I’m to reflect fully, I felt the drug of fear course through me, and with it the revisitation of a long-stored memory of another young woman who once spoke nearly the same words” (150).

Although Franklin clearly underreports (telling less than what he actually knows) K’s identity at this moment of narrative (notice here how Franklin calls K simply as “another young woman”), the ambiguous and partial representation of his mind and memories increases readers’ desire to further explore Franklin’s relationship with this “young woman” and his past. Pages later, when readers learn belatedly that it was K, a Korean comfort woman, who asked Franklin to kill her before anyone could abuse her at the “comfort” station of Japanese army during WWII, readers are quickly re-positioned within the narrative of WWII. In order to understand better the situatedness of Franklin’s underreporting, then, readers must re-contextualize the ambiguity of his narration and memories within the complexities of history (WWII Asia) and Franklin’s relationship to the historical event. As the novel progresses, for instance, Franklin’s narration further encodes the arrival of “comfort women” (war-time sex slaves) in a desolate outpost in Burma where he was stationed during the war: “And like everyone else, I suppose, I assumed [the arrival of comfort women] would be a most familiar modality, just one among the many thousand details and notices in a wartime camp” (163 emphasis added).
As Franklin’s memories unfold and more details about the wartime camp and comfort women emerge, readers are faced with an important task of gauging the affect and ethics involved in Franklin’s fragmented and inscrutable representations of his wartime memories. Franklin’s calm and plain tone of voice in recalling of his memories exhibits neither a clear sense of knowledge nor a strong emotional reaction. His present-tense locution, “I suppose,” is especially striking. Whereas it marks a shift from story to discourse (from experiencing I to narrating I), Franklin’s use of present tense shows hardly any progress in his understanding of the situation—even now, decades after the incident, Franklin as narrating I only “supposes” and is unable to fully come to terms with what he witnessed and experienced in the past, both emotively and cognitively.

The minimal emotive and cognitive distance between Franklin’s narrating I and experiencing I shows that confusion and uncertainty, which seem to have dominated Franklin’s experience in the past, still remain in his present consciousness. As Franklin continues contemplating the scene, his limited understanding of the situation becomes even more evident: “That there were only five of them seems remarkable to me now, given that there were nearly two hundred men in the encampment, but at the time I had no thoughts of what was awaiting them in the coming days and nights” (165 emphasis added). Franklin again shifts from story to discourse and reevaluates the scene, this time showing what he now sees more clearly—the harsh and cruel reality of the comfort women who had to endure the sexual abuses of the hundreds of soldiers every day.

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However, this shift in Franklin’s perspectives does more to make poignant his poor judgment and understanding of the situation in the past than to reveal the progress in his present perspective as narrator. The reader is more likely to question Franklin’s irresponsible naiveté and ignorance in his past understanding of the circumstances (how is it possible that he could not see the cruel reality of comfort women back then?) than to endorse what he finally notices now (how nice it is that he now sees the cruel reality!).

Franklin fails to demonstrate any measurable intellectual and emotional growth from his past experiencing self to the present narrating self. One can thus argue that Franklin’s narration and memories raise serious doubts about Franklin as a competent character narrator whose reading, perceiving, and reporting readers can now trust. Nevertheless, the passages show concurrently how Franklin’s ignorance is anchored in the larger structure of military’s “comfort system,” “a most familiar modality” in a wartime camp. As the term “comfort women,” rather than a more accurate term “sex slaves,” misguidedly suggests, these women were and told to be, in Franklin’s situationally motivated and misguided knowledge and memory, “the wartime women’s volunteer corps, to contribute and sacrifice as all did” (180). Lee, by situating Franklin’s reading, reporting, and evaluating of these women within the systems and structures of wartime army, establishes painful instances of what James Phelan calls “misinterpreting,” “misreporting,” and further, “misevaluating”: “a consequence of the narrator’s lack of knowledge or mistaken values” (Living 51). By highlighting how Franklin’s wartime
circumstances cause in Franklin’s narration “lack of knowledge” and “mistaken values,” and by making clear how his past memories cause pain, conflicts, and guilt in his consciousness, Lee orients his readers more to the affect of Franklin’s unresolved confusion than to the accuracy or inaccuracy of his interpretation, report, and evaluation. Franklin’s past still haunts his present self and makes him an inscrutable character narrator whose incompetency readers have to empathize with.

Importantly, too, Franklin’s inscrutability as a response to his own memories of a war and comfort women serves larger thematic and rhetorical purposes for the author and reflects the difficulty Lee experiences in his attempt for a literary representation of the comfort women. The comfort women issue first emerged in 1991, after former comfort woman Kim Hak-sun stepped forward as the first public witness in a class-action suit against the Japanese government. Shortly thereafter, historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki in Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II (2002) disclosed archival documents that incriminated the Japanese wartime government for sanctioning, and the imperial army for establishing and operating, comfort stations. The experiences of suffering and abuse presented in various historical documents and testimonies of surviving comfort women are strikingly vivid and emotionally poignant. Critics such as Kandice Chuh in “Discomforting Knowledge, or Korean 'comfort women' and Asian Americanist critical practice” thus asserts that one needs to think more carefully about literary representations of and critical investments in comfort women,
since our “affective responses are so strong that they may overshadow the need and ability to pose critical questions” (6). Rey Chow echoes Chuh’s concern when she introduces and cautions the notion of “self-subalternation” in Writing Diaspora (1993) as a process and danger of a critic’s identification with a subaltern position of powerlessness.

Chang-rae Lee, then, avoids the pitfalls of “self-subalternation” by foregrounding inscrutability in his designing of Franklin’s mind and thereby increasing and demonstrating significant interpretive difficulty in his novel. By making reading of the novel a challenging process, Lee is able to maintain the critical distance required to capture more precisely complexities of representing experiences of the comfort women. Lee’s interpretive, affective, and ethical dilemmas in his novelistic use of comfort women are reflected in Franklin’s fragmented and incomplete narration of the past. Franklin’s narration in turn significantly affects readers’ cognitive, affective, ethical and critical responses to both Franklin and the author. The highly enigmatic and poetic description of Franklin’s raping of K, for instance, demonstrates the intricate interpretive, ethical, and affective dimensions of Franklin’s memories that shape and challenge Lee’s writing, Franklin’s (re)telling, and readers reading of the past:

But beneath me, K was falling away, the line of her mouth softening […] And it was so that I finally began to touch her. I put my hand on the point of her hip and could feel all at once the pliancy of it and the meagerness and the newness, too. I felt bewildered and innocent and strangely renewed, as though a surge of some great living being were coursing up my arm and spreading through my unknown body […] And when I was done I felt the enveloping warmth of a fever, its
languorous cocoon, though when I gazed at her shoulder and back there was nothing but stillness, her posture unchanged, her skin too cool and colorless, and she lay as if she were the sculpture of a recumbent girl and not a real girl at all. I said then, I love you, and she didn’t answer (259-60 emphasis original).

Franklin in this passage calmly recalls the excitement, thrill, and nervousness in the face of his first sexual encounter with K. The specific body position (K is beneath Franklin) and movement (“I put my hand on the point of her hip and could feel all at once the pliancy of it and the meagerness and the newness, too”) captured in this passage first direct readers to an immediate interpretation of emotions embodied in Franklin’s body. By putting together Franklin’s body and emotion, readers are able to read Franklin better--Franklin’s scrutability increases and the sense of his presence is clear in the scene. On the other hand, closer reading of the passage also reveals to readers that Franklin’s seemingly conscious movement is restricted within his “unknown body” that fails to meet any sense of recognition, which Franklin fails to notice. Even before Franklin’s initial action upon K (“I finally began to touch her”), the dreamlike quality of the passage (“K was falling away, the line of her mouth softening”) blurs the distinction between real and unreal in Franklin’s experience. Although Franklin reports that he felt “as though a surge of some great living being were coursing up [his] arm and spreading through his [unknown] body,” what readers notice instead is that there was no living being other than Franklin himself in Franklin’s sexual intercourse. K, as Franklin also notice and yet cannot properly interpret and evaluate, in fact “lay as if she were the sculpture of recumbent girl, and not a real girl at all.”
Here, readers witness interesting discrepancy between Franklin’s report and his reading and evaluating of the event that he reports. Although Franklin claims that he felt “the enveloping warmth of a fever, its languorous cocoon,” Franklin has to also admit that when he gazed at her shoulder and back, “there was nothing but stillness.” Franklin, according to his narration, is having what he thinks is a transparent sexual experience, and K is barely tolerating it, making herself as still and unresponsive as possible. Whereas Franklin remembers and reports this moment as a moment of romantic confession to K (“I love you”), K resists Franklin’s “love” and his existence through her absolute sense of non-existence and de-personification, by becoming “the sculpture of a recumbent girl.” Interestingly, too, not only does Franklin fail to read K’s mind (she becomes completely inscrutable), Franklin also fails to capture more precisely his own mind embedded within his first sexual encounter with K. Although Franklin attempts to move and act, his action is constrained within his “unknown body,” and he feels “bewildered,” “innocent,” and “strangely renewed.” Although what he did is clear to readers—not a romantic sexual encounter, but a rape—the ironies and abstraction of the event and Franklin’s inability to process the reality of the event and his own feelings makes it increasingly difficult for readers to evaluate Franklin’s narration as a whole.

More problematically, soon after recalling this ambiguous rape scene, Franklin shifts his position from experiencing I to narrating I. Franklin attempts to recall, interpret and evaluate what really happened and how he felt about K using the present tense: “I
loved her, *though I cannot say how that love was or if it was true or worthy in any sense, having never in my life been sure how such a thing should be*” (261 emphasis added).

Here again there is a shift in Franklin’s perspective--from the past time-frame of the story to the present time-frame of the discourse. As Franklin the narrator using the present tense reflects on his past experience, readers discover that Franklin is still as bewildered as before and is unable to come to terms with his memories and feelings. Instead of providing a more enlightened view of the past, Franklin as a narrator further increases his confusion and complicates his past experience by contradicting and questioning his own evaluation and reading of his past self and the feelings.

The ambiguous nature of Franklin’s experience and his confusion as a narrator pose a great obstacle to readers’ evaluation and interpretation of Franklin’s underlying thoughts and feelings, both in the past and present. As Franklin the narrator questions his past self’s comprehension of the event and contradicts his own reading of the past (“I loved her, *though I cannot say how that love was or if it was true or worthy in any sense*”), Franklin’s mind becomes inscrutable and his narration unreliable--he did not and does not have the knowledge to accurately interpret and evaluate the circumstances and his own feelings embedded in these circumstances. Nevertheless, Franklin’s claim of his love for K, ironically coupled with his painful inability to reflect on the past and failure to qualify the kind of love he claims to have felt, in fact increases affective dimension of his unreliability. The present-continuous tense (“having never in my life been sure”) at the
end of the passage also shows how painfully Franklin’s mental condition and psychological lives are trapped within this unresolved past encounter with K. Readers’ empathy for Franklin significantly increases here. Lee’s making inscrutable Franklin’s perceiving and evaluating of his own experience and interiority challenges readers’ ability to hypothesize and simulate Franklin’s mental state, since readers have to use “both their theory of mind and their ability to simulate the mentation of others” in order to understand the whole narrative (Palmer, *Fictional* 145). Being unable hypothesize more fully Franklin’s mental states in relation to his experiences, then, readers have to move beyond the given cognitive frame of the event and see more closely how and where Lee guides his reader through his rhetorical designs.

Let me elaborate on my point here. If one uses the hierarchy between Franklin as a Japanese medic in the army and K as a Korean comfort woman as an interpretive frame to decipher the event, the above passage indicates a violent act of rape within a power structure of the war. However, affective and psychological dimensions of Franklin’s memory ambiguously embedded in this passage (the unanswered and unresolved feeling of love, confusion, and regret, for instance) further complicate ethical reading of Franklin’s experience and his retelling of the past. Franklin’s inscrutability foregrounded in the passage and represented through his “unknown body” suggests that readers participate in the narrative inside-out, rather than outside-in, and engage with Franklin’s complicated mental states more affectively, considering Franklin both as “a young man in
the blush of his first sexual love” (263) and as an elderly man with unresolved past who painfully holds K “in memory in every way that [he is] able, and to the last of [his] days” (261). The more difficult it is for Franklin to come to terms with his past, the more poignant his experience and the ambiguous recalling of that experience become to the reader. To put the same point another way, the emotional complexities of Franklin’s past become more vivid through the interpretive, affective, and ethical difficulties readers are asked to experience with Franklin through his increasing inscrutability. Through what is left unreadable in Franklin’s ambiguous perceiving and evaluating of his past event, Lee successfully captures the challenges involved in the literary representations of history and memories.

Franklin’s Telling: “Come almost home”

Questions still remain--what does Franklin gain by attempting to unfold and narrate the memories he fails to confront? To whom and for what purposes does Franklin tell his story despite the pain and confusion his memories provoke? Franklin’s inability to face, remember, and tell his past reaches its height at the passage where he confronts (and fails to confront) K’s severed body parts after the brutal abuses by the fellow Japanese soldiers in the camp--a tragic consequence of Franklin’s refusal to kill K despite her desperate appeal:

I walked the rest of the way to the cleaning […] yet I could not smell or hear or see as I did my medic’s work. I could not feel my hands as they gathered, nor
could I feel the weight of such remains. And I could not see the other, tiny, elfin form I eventually discovered, miraculously whole, I could not see the figured legs and feet, the utter, blessed digitations of the hands. Nor could I see the face, the perfected cheek and brow. Its pristine sleep still unbroken, undisturbed. And I could not know what I was doing or remember any part. (305)

This passage is filled with paradoxes and what seem like self-hypnotic, semi-conscious denials of Franklin's own culpability in K's death. At the level of the story, even while Franklin is doing his “medic’s work,” he is at once undoing it by failing to “smell or hear or see” K’s body parts and her unborn baby. The repetition of similar sentence structure (“I could not …”) adds lyricality and rhythm to the passage, increasing its dreamlike quality. This quality obscures and makes it more difficult for readers to comprehend what is actually happening in the scene and later in Franklin’s reconstruction of the scene via his retrospective narration. At the level of the discourse, too, Franklin as narrator puts together what he could not see and do by paradoxically recalling what he actually saw and did. Even as narrating I, while using the experiencing I’s perspective as his focal point, Franklin does not show any intellectual or emotional growth from his past experience--like in the previous rape scene, Franklin fails to interpret and evaluate what he was really doing. Franklin’s narration shows that his present state of mind is still trapped in the tragic event of the past, and points to the trauma he is still experiencing.

Readers see here through Franklin’s inscrutable mind how Franklin’s inaction and its tragic consequences still haunt Franklin in the present. Franklin remembers the event to disremember it, articulates K’s body that is already disarticulated in order to undo the
damage done to her body. Through the very paradoxes of Franklin’s simultaneous act of remembering and dis-remembering, Lee concurrently illustrates the challenge Franklin’s telling poses as a means of healing. Franklin’s past remains inscrutable to Franklin in the present and thus he is unable to face it and recalls it. The more Franklin’s telling continues and the more readers notice his inability to heal, the closer readers move toward Franklin and participate in the narrative as his sympathetic and affective therapist. Franklin’s painful act of telling and the reader’s empathetic act of reading/listening together move toward the possibility of recovering Franklin’s irreducible past.

Let us now turn to the conclusion of the novel and think more about where Franklin’s tales of pain, regret, shame, love, and memories lead Franklin and us. The novel ends as Franklin reunites with Sunny and decides to sell his house in Bedly Run and leave the town:

Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones. I will fly a flag. Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will be already on a walk someplace, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home. (356)

Although many critics have found this final passage of the novel overly abstract and frustratingly aestheticized, the passage is consistent with the ways in which Lee asks his readers to explore Franklin’s inscrutable mind through his ambiguous character narration. Franklin’s narration is mixed with action and inaction, self-assertion and self-renunciation, and readers still have hard time accessing Franklin’s interiority. Lee’s readers are unsure of what Franklin will be doing or where he will be going. This final
passage, in other words, betrays what readers would normally expect at the novel’s end--
instead of demonstrating a pragmatic sense of resolution or “real” action, the passage, as
Anne Cheng in “Passing, Natural Selection, and Love’s Failure: Ethics of Survival from
Chang-rae Lee to Jacques Lacan” has also noted, “meticulously delineates motion and
relationality rather than conclusion or anchorage” (570). Has Franklin healed at all after
reliving a series of events that he painfully and ambiguously recalls and narrates? Is
Franklin able to forgive and forget his past and move on? How do we evaluate our role as
Franklin’s empathetic therapist when what we confront at the novel’s end is Franklin’s
ability to neither leave nor arrive?

I argue that even if the novel is ambiguous and incomplete until the end, Chang-
rae Lee successfully captures the complexity of narrating historical events (WWII and
comfort women) by foregrounding inscrutability (interpretive, ethical, and affective) that
the author, narrator, and readers all share in their writing, narrating, and reading of the
novel. Lee’s careful orchestration of the novel makes possible construction of an
interpretive community within which the author, narrator, and reader bond together
through the very difficulty of writing, narrating, and reading of past and memories
charged with ethics and emotions of history. Recognizing Franklin’s final gesture of
inaction that merely brings him “almost home” means recognizing Lee’s authorial
decision to leave gaps in the narrative in order not to resolve and thus respect the ethical,
affective, and cognitive complexities bound up with any attempt to represent Franklin’s
past. This recognition in turn asks the reader to respond to Franklin with desires to assist him as he painfully remembers and dis-remembers his past event and struggles to perform as a scrutable immigrant figure at the story level for his survival in 1990s America. Although Franklin’s narration and memories might appear inscrutable and his reporting incomplete and ambiguous, Chang-rae Lee urges his readers to rethink “unreliability” of memories and narration as a critical lens through which the author, narrator, and reader “slowly” access the past.

Recognizing the Voice Untold: Silence as a Tool for Readerly Participation in *The Book of Salt*

As I have attempted to make clear in my analysis, inscrutability in *A Gesture Life* exists in author-narrator-reader relations, engaging readers via the very unreadability of the mind of the protagonist. Interpretive tension and anxiety increase for readers as Franklin’s inscrutability contradicts his scrutability in character-character relations. Through this tension, however, Lee shows that Franklin’s inscrutable mind closely relates to his present material and mental conditions in 1990s America and his fraught relationship to the past laden with guilt and shame. Readers interrogate more actively and empathetically the link between Franklin’s disguising and misleading scrutability at the
level of the story and his increasing inscrutability at the level of the discourse. Chang-rae Lee’s use of an inscrutable Asian American protagonist, then, is an effective rhetorical tool that not only engages readers more actively and affectively, but also better highlights the cognitive, affective, and ethical complexities of literary representations of history.

Inscrutability in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* (2004) has less to do with the racial stereotype about Asians/Asian Americans. Instead, Truong focuses more on the ways in which the protagonist and character narrator of the novel, Binh’s socioeconomic and sociolinguistic position as a Vietnamese live-in cook in 1920’s Paris restrict his subjectivity, performativity, and visibility. The political, economical, and linguistic contexts of the novel render Binh inscrutable to the other character in the novel. By contrast, Truong allows for readers a full access to Binh’s subjectivity at the level of the discourse by representing his inner world through various narrative techniques. There, of course, is nothing revolutionary about narrative fiction that represents and makes transparent inner lives of fictional characters. As Dorrit Cohn in her *Transparent Minds* (1978) puts it, the real world becomes fiction “only by revealing the hidden side of the human beings who inhabit it” (5). By the same token, Cohn adds, “the most real, the ‘roundest’ characters of fiction are those we know most intimately, precisely in ways we could never know people in real life” (5). It is thus no surprise that we as readers are drawn to those characters whose minds are rendered scrutable, whom we can read most intimately and closely.
What differentiates *The Book of Salt* from real life, then, is Truong’s ability to reveal the hidden side of the protagonist, to represent details of his inner life to her readers. In order to increase Binh’s scrutability in author-narrator-reader relations and better represent his interiority, Truong deploys a range of formal devices, such as “autonomous interior monologue” and what James Phelan calls “redundant telling.” Cohn in *Transparent Minds* defines autonomous interior monologue (called AIM hereafter) as a technique for representing interiority of self-address in a first-person context. I am particularly distinguishing AIM from a more common term in this context, interior monologue (the nonmediated presentation of a character’s thoughts and impressions or perceptions), to suggest that AIM is a technique that is more effective to underscore Binh’s subjectivity, performance, and freedom (although limited) as the first-person speaker and narrator of the novel. By equipping Binh with the autonomy and freedom of AIM, Truong actively constructs Binh’s interiority and shows how his consciousness frees him from external forces and circumstances. Use of AIM in *The Book of Salt* significantly shapes readers’ responses to the protagonist and evaluation of him as a character and narrator.

Interestingly, Binh’s scrutability to readers contrasts with his inscrutability to the other characters at the level of the story. Binh is a candid, transparent, and eloquent teller of his own story in his author-narrator-reader relation. At the level of the story, on the other hand, Binh is given with an inscrutable face of a Vietnamese live-in cook in 1920s
France. Binh’s French and American employers assume that Binh’s face and mind are unreadable and his inner life lacks complexity and depth. Binh becomes an illiterate, inarticulate, and submissive foreign domestic servant in his character-character relation. The dynamics between Binh’s inscrutability and scrutability has important consequences in terms of the ethical and affective dimensions of readers’ privileged access to Binh’s inner life. On the one hand, readers’ exclusive access to Binh’s interiority places readers in a position of empowering knowledge, allowing them to observe and judge narrative situation with a sense of superiority. On the other hand, when readers notice the poignancy of Binh’s sociopolitical and cultural circumstances that require him to remain silent, invisible, and subject-less in his social interactions, readers’ sense of knowledge leads them to the ethical (to validate and recognize Binh’s presence and voice) and affective (to feel for Binh’s struggle for recognition) responsibilities and sensibilities for Binh.

Figure 4: Intersection between inscrutability and scrutability for recreative power of narrative

My reading of *The Book of Salt* is an attempt to understand better the complexities of Binh’s character formation by focusing on Truong’s orchestration of the intersection
between Binh’s inscrutability (making vivid power relations and hierarchies at the level of the story) and scrutability (expressing possibilities of subjectivity and recognition at the level of the discourse). I show how Binh on the one hand succeeds to represent his consciousness (author-narrator-reader relations) and on the other hand fails to do so (character-character relations). Binh’s inscrutability and scrutability demonstrate both the possibilities and limits of recognition for Binh. I posit that different degrees of performativity and subjectivity that Binh represents at different levels of narrative derive significant affective and ethical responses from readers and powerfully mobilize their participation.

Autonomous Interior Monologue for Ontological Freedom and Recognition

Based in part on Alice B. Toklas’ Alice B. Toklas Cookbook (1954), The Book of Salt uses a series of flashbacks to portray the protagonist Binh’s hierarchical relationship with his American Mesdames, the fictionalized Gertrude Stein (whom Binh calls GertrudeStein) and Alice Toklas, and his tragic affair with his clandestine lover, Lattimore. Structurally, the novel is cyclical. It starts with GertudeStein and Toklas abandoning Binh upon their return to America, while the rest of the novel records Binh’s retrospective journey from the moment he stepped into the household of GertrudeStein and Toklas until his unemployment and loss of “home.” Larger progression of the novel with its cyclical structure is effective for Truong to situate, construct, and even trap
Binh’s individual subjectivity within the continuing oppressions and restrictions of the power dynamics between himself and other characters in the novel. Many scholars have thus focused on the constructed and limiting nature of Binh’s racial and cultural identities by theorizing the novel through imperialism and queer studies; food and colonialism; literary globalism; historicism and queer diaspora; and postcolonial and autobiographical collaboration. Although these interdisciplinary approaches are insightful, their emphasis on the racial and class signifiers has rendered Binh’s identity more “singular” and “fixed” within the confines of the political and cultural contexts of the novel. Moreover, none of these approaches pays enough attention to how Truong, in fact, challenges her own political, sociocultural, and socioeconomic contextualization of the novel by actively employing narrative techniques (such as AIM and redundant telling) that revise and challenge the novel’s contexts. By doing so, Truong produces a highly autonomous, self-conscious, and self-controlled character narrator that readers approve and recognize. Binh’s act of telling at the level of the discourse points to the possibilities of subjectivity, recognition, and freedom that are nowhere to be found in his character-character relations.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 5: Readerly knowledge and the ethics and affect of recognition
Let me first examine more closely how Truong utilizes AIM in order to assist Binh to perform as a conscious teller of his story and invites her reader to actively participate in his “silent” communicative acts. Gerald Prince in “Introduction à l’étude du narrataire” develops the idea of narratee as a person to whom the narrator addresses himself. Narratee, as Prince conceptualizes the term, is an entity separated from the reader as someone that is either in the text or “out there,” serving the role of a moderator between the narrator and reader. What is interesting about AIM as a mode of Binh’s character narration, however, is its capacity to invite the actual readers to take the position of Binh’s narratee despite the clear presence of the actual narratees inside the text as entities separated from readers. Binh’s AIM includes names of the persons spoken to. Binh, in other words, makes clear who his addressed narratees are by explicitly calling out their names in his telling--the distinction between Binh’s narratees (his addressed audiences inside the text, GertrudeStein and Lattimore) and readers (Truong’s real readers who exist outside the text) thus seems vivid at first.

Binh’s inscrutability and silence in character-character relations, however, complicate this fine distinction. Once readers realize how Binh’s narratees in his character-character relation (GertrudeStein and Lattimore) are unable to listen to and recognize Binh’s voice, thoughts, and feelings, readers are prompted to participate in Binh’s (failed) act of communications more directly and immediately not simply as an entity outside the text, but as a substitute for Binh’s narratees and a direct recipient of his
narration—Binh’s desires for communication, relationships, and recognitions. The dynamics between Binh and readers as his intimate audiences significantly affects readers’ empathetic responses to Binh. Keith Oatley in “An Emotion’s Emergence, Unfolding, and Potential for Empathy” argues that emotions can derive “from the expectations of relationships” and “affect thinking, morality, and character” (24). As Oatley further adds, readers’ emotions for fictional characters lead to specific goals and plans that readers pursue in their particular dynamics with them. Emotions, in other words, guide the reader to act with and for the characters and to participate in the narrative with real goals and purposes in mind oriented towards the characters. By establishing an intimate relationship between Binh and readers and by further allowing for readers an exclusive access to Binh’s interiority, Truong compels her audiences to respond to Binh more affectively with greater sense of intimacy, immediacy, and responsibilities. While GertrudeStein and Lattimore are left without any access to Binh’s speech, readers recognize Binh’s unheard voice and even step into the narrative in order to perform as Binh’s alternative interlocutors.

Binh’s encounter with GertrudeStein exemplifies how Binh, through his AIM, confronts and challenges GertrudeStein despite his linguistic incompetency and social position as her domestic servant. Ironically, Binh’s confrontation with GertrudeStein in his consciousness is a clear sign of Binh’s inability to interact with GertrudeStein as his narratee; given Binh’s restricted socioeconomic and linguistic status, readers’ urge to take
a position of Binh’s direct listener in the face of GertrudeStein’s absence thus increases. Indulging in Binh’s omelet in the morning, GertrudeStein asks Binh, “What is the secret of [your] omelet?” (153):

Do I look like a fool? I ask myself each time. Please, Madame, do not equate my lack of speech with a lack of thought […] If there is a “secrete,” Madame, it is this: Repetition and routine. Servitude and subservience. Beck and call. While you have been waking up to the aroma of coffee brewing, dressing to the hushed rhythm of other people’s labor, I have been in the kitchen since six and in your kitchen since six this morning. In my life as a minor domestic, a bit character in your daily dramas, I have prepared thousands of omelets. (153-154)

GertrudeStein’s question reveals her romanticized notion of Binh’s cooking. GertrudeStein as Binh’s Madame does not have to attend to cooking (as an act of labor) and can thus mystify Binh’s repetitive morning labor and its “secret” in her kitchen. Binh’s answer in AIM challenges GertrudeStein’s naïve expectations about cooking. Through AIM, Binh is able to reveal to readers what he would not possibly share with his Madame at the level of the story--the poignancy of his domestic labor without recognition and appreciation. The use of AIM thus allows Binh to freely talk back without having to face the restrictions of his hierarchical relationship with GertrudeStein. By having Binh respond to GertrudeStein through AIM, Truong also establishes an alternative relationship between Binh and her readers. The immediacy, intimacy, and exclusiveness of this relationship encourage Truong’s readers to become an empathetic listener for Binh and affectively approve his talking back to his Madame.
The real significance of Binh’s inscrutability and silence in character-character relation, then, lie in the way they contrast with the more fluid and active conversations between Binh as a scrutable and eloquent narrator and readers as his empathetic listeners in author-narrator-reader relation. For instance, Binh expresses strong emotional intensity and hope at the glimpse of human connection that he notices in GertrudeStein’s use of French. Although Binh’s excitement is never exposed in his character-character relation, Truong uses silence and lack of recognition from GertrudeStein as a strong affective tool to invite readers to the circle of communication that Binh’s AIM alternatively constructs for readers. GertrudeStein asks Binh a question not to seek an answer from him, since she already knows that Binh cannot answer the question, but as a way of thinking aloud for her own writing: “‘Thin Bin’, says GertrudeStein, “how would you define ‘love’?” (33 emphasis original). Before having to face the question, or more precisely, before confronting his inability to answer the question in French or in English for GertrudeStein, Binh first contemplates on GertrudeStein’s language and draws an interesting analogy between his and her uses of French: “It is, after all, the only language we have in common. And GertrudeSteins’s French is, believe me, common” (33).

As much as French is foreign to Binh, GertrudeStein as an American expatriate in Paris equally struggles with it. This linguistic commonality with GertrudeStein signals for Binh possibilities of intersubjectivity and human connection. Binh and GertrudeStein are closely brought together through what they share in common, the “common” French,
regardless of their respective social positions. Binh’s reflection on Gertrude Stein’s French is striking especially because French used to be a language of wrath and violence in Binh’s previous relationships with his French Monsieurs and Madames in Vietnam. It was French, a language of the colonizer, in its purest form without any foreign accent that Binh’s Monsieurs and Madames spoke to Binh in order to show their oppressive power, as if they were “wholly incapable of expressing their finely wrought rage in any other language but their own” (13). The pure French spoken by the French in Vietnam, in other words, was a sign of hierarchies that kept Binh from performing his subjectivity.

Binh’s reading of Gertrude Stein’s French expressed through his AIM is different. It is her use of French that enables Binh to connect with his Madame: “When I hear her speak it, I am filled with something close to joy. I admire its roughness. I think it a companion to my own. I think we will exchange one-word condolences and communicate the rest with eyes. I think this we have in common” (34 emphasis original). The human connection that Binh creates with Gertrude Stein through his linguistic commonality with her without her knowledge is what Truong through her active rendering of Binh’s consciousness demands her readers to notice. When readers can comprehend the strong affective needs attached to Binh’s AIM and realize that his desire for human connection never reaches Gertrude Stein, it becomes an ethical responsibility for readers to step into the narrative world and listen to and recognize Binh’s untold voice.
Redundant Telling for Intimacy and Security

Binh’s yearning for human connection and recognition further grows as he eventually takes up with one of Gertrude Stein’s admirers and winsome acolytes, Marcus Lattimore, a gentleman from the American South. Hired by Lattimore to be his Sunday cook, Binh is outsourced as Lattimore’s borrowed servant and forms a relationship with him that is romantic, hierarchical, and clandestine. Despite Binh’s increasing emotional attachment to Lattimore, hierarchical, linguistic, economic, and sexual complexities of Binh’s relationship with Lattimore challenge Binh’s ability to fully express his feelings for his lover. Truong’s use of AIM, then, is her attempt to allow Binh to make more explicit his queer desires for Lattimore without having to face any external forces that limit his romantic relationship. Although Binh is still largely inscrutable to Lattimore even at moments of intimacy (for one thing, they speak different languages), Truong captures more urgently Binh’s needs to secure and simultaneously liberate his prohibited queer desires for Lattimore by having Binh repeat and revive his feelings for Lattimore in his consciousness

Binh’s narration about his relationship with Lattimore can be better understood through what James Phelan calls “redundant telling.” James Phelan defines redundant telling as a “narrator’s apparently unmotivated report of information to a narratee that the narratee already possesses” (Living 11). Phelan further suggests a longer phrase, “redundant telling, necessary disclosure” to emphasize that the motivation for redundant
telling lies in the “author’s need to communicate information to the audience” (12).

Binh’s AIM, textually signaling Lattimore as his addressed narratee (Lattimore is referred to either as “you” or “Sweet Sunday Man”), qualifies some aspects of redundant. On the one hand, Binh’s telling is to go through with Lattimore (although Lattimore does not verbally communicate with Binh) and to repeatedly remind Lattimore of what he (Lattimore) did and where he was. On the other hand, although Binh’s report is a review of the information that Lattimore already possesses (Lattimore should know what he did and where he was), this is not just an example of a redundant telling, because Binh knows clearly that he is not really telling Lattimore anything. Moreover, Binh’s telling is always mixed with information that Lattimore is not aware of. Binh does not simply tell what Lattimore presumably knows already. Rather, Binh’s telling is inflected and motivated by his own perceptions. What Binh’s telling really emphasizes is his interpretations and remembering of the circumstances that involve both Lattimore and himself. Because Binh’s telling takes a form of AIM (even if it is addressed to Lattimore as Binh's narratee), then, it becomes clear that Binh’s “redundancy” is directed not to Lattimore, but someone else who has an access to Binh’s interiority. Truong’s readers, who are able and willing to communicate with Binh regardless of his linguistic and socioeconomic/cultural barriers, become the implicit listeners and confidants of Binh’s strategically “incomplete” redundant telling. Although Binh’s redundant telling is not really redundant, this concept nevertheless provides a useful way in and highlights
effectively the dynamics between Binh and Truong’s ideal readers who understand and appreciate Truong’s designing of Binh’s “redundancy.” I will thus apply “redundant telling” to Binh’s narration that he gets to share with Truong’s ideal readers.

Let me now examine more closely how Truong utilizes and complicates Binh’s redundant telling to guide readers’ affective reading of Binh’s mind. Truong makes explicit both the authorial and narratorial motivations for Binh’s redundant telling by illuminating both the limits and possibilities of this narrative technique. Although Binh is able to “reveal” and go through again and again the secretive moments with Lattimore through his redundant telling, Binh’s telling and the near ecstasy that his memories evoke remain in his consciousness only, the most private and securest space of his own. By showing readers how Binh’s feelings for Lattimore remain inscrutable to Lattimore, Truong first orients readers to the external forces of Binh’s circumstances (linguistic and socioeconomic) and how they restrict Binh’s ability to interact with Lattimore. Nevertheless, Binh’s narration further guides readers to the interiority of Binh’s mind within which Binh repeats and revives his intimate encounters and feelings with Lattimore. When Truong puts together both her authorial decision to confine Binh’s relationship with Lattimore within the larger context of the novel (thematic authorial motivation) and Binh’s urge to disclose his homosexual desire through his redundant telling (mimetic and affective narratorial motivation), the poignancy of Binh’s telling
becomes more vivid to the reader. Binh’s redundant telling first recalls Lattimore’s visit to the Gertrude Stein and Toklas household:

I will forget that you entered 27 ru de Fleurus as a “writer” among a sea of others who opened the studio door with a letter of introduction and a face handsome with talent and promise. You stood at the front of the studio listening to a man who had his back to me. … After years of the imposed invisibility of servitude, I am acutely aware when I am being watched … I looked up, and I saw you standing next to a mirror reflecting the image of a wiry young man with deeply set, startled eyes. I looked up, and I was seeing myself beside you. (37)

The first half of the passage demonstrates a higher degree of redundancy as it captures more objectively the knowledge Lattimore possesses already, his introduction to 27 ru de Fleurus. In the second half of the passage, however, Truong designs Binh’s telling in order to divert the focus of the narrative from Lattimore to Binh and reveal a new set of information about the intimacy and recognition that Binh felt at that narrative moment. By doing so, Truong discloses to readers what Lattimore’s consciousness is missing and what Binh desires to remember and emphasize—Binh’s own presence with Lattimore and the possibilities of recognition in the scene. By situating Binh at Lattimore’s proximity and having Binh rehearse the moment, not only does Truong make clearer the secretive intimacy Binh shared with Lattimore without Lattimore’s knowledge, but she also makes more palpable Binh’s own sense of being within the scene, thereby adding a stronger sense of subjectivity to Binh. Although Binh should “forget” (I will discuss the significance of issues of “forgetting” more fully below) and it is Binh himself, not Lattimore, who witnesses Binh next to Lattimore, Binh is able to
revisit in his consciousness and reveal to his alternative audience, readers, the rare moment of recognition. The need for recognition and intimacy is what motivates Binh’s redundant telling in his consciousness. Binh’s redundant telling positions readers more intimately within the bond of knowledge that they are invited to share with Binh. Within this bond, readers are more prone to empathize with Binh and assist him to achieve the goals and desires he expresses through his redundancy.

In order to effectively construct Binh’s redundant telling and engage readers with greater thematic, aesthetic, ethical and affective concerns, Truong deploys a range of linguistic markers and patterns. After Lattimore asks Binh to prepare for a Sunday dinner party, Binh to his delightful surprise realizes that no one except for himself was invited to the dinner. Binh’s redundant telling resumes at this moment of realization: “I will forget that no one came to dinner last night. I will forget that we celebrated Sunday by drinking wine from each other’s lips. I will forget the baptismal and the communion. Last night was freely given, I tell myself. Pleasure for pleasure is an even exchange. Lust for lust is a balanced scale” (82~83). Notice here the repetition of “I will forget.” Despite the self-assertiveness of the statement, Binh repeatedly violates his own promise by constantly recalling the night in his consciousness. The repetition and violation in Binh’s statement strategically orient readers to the tension between Binh’s desire to recall the night with Lattimore and his acute awareness of the social restrictions placed upon his homosexual relationship with Lattimore, his American male master.
Binh’s own self-contradicting repetition and violation, in other words, make more vivid the affective, ethical, and political complexities that Binh’s forbidden queer desire and its expression entail. Binh’s narration thereby deepens poignancy of the narrative situation. Moreover, Binh’s move to rehearse the moments of intimacy with Lattimore over and over in his consciousness, which only readers as Binh’s implicit listeners recognize, draws readers closer to Binh. Binh’s bold revelation of what he must forget is clear evidence of his confidence in his audiences, a position readers assume in the absence of Binh’s actual audience in character-character relation. As much as Binh takes the risk of disclosing to his audience his homosexual desire for Lattimore, readers respond to that desire more empathetically and responsibly. The increasing sense of confidence and security in Binh’s tone explicitly insists that his relationship with Lattimore challenges the notion of servitude between him as a servant and Lattimore as his master. After all, Binh claims, his night with Lattimore was an “even exchange.”

Binh’s frequent use of a second-person “you” and the historical present tense are some of the other prominent linguistic patterns in Binh’s telling. They highlight the ways in which Truong designs the narrative in order to reflect and rub up against Binh’s fraught material conditions. Truong leads readers to connect with Binh through his emotional state made scrutable in author-narrator-reader relations:

I say your name, “Ma-acus Lat-timore.” You award my effort with a kiss, one that does not end until we are on the floor […] until we are skin on skin, a prayer for the Buddha with the fire in his heart. You tell me that on Friday I was at the flower market […] that I have been sighted, You possess a memory of my body
How can I carry my body through the streets of this city in the same way again? (109-110 emphasis mine)

First, by engaging with a historical present tense, Truong allows Binh to add a stronger sense of intimacy, immediacy, and vividness to the memory he recalls in his consciousness. Binh’s use of a second person “you” to refer to Lattimore, on the other hand, is Truong’s attempt to invite readers more actively to the narrative situation. Although “you” in Binh’s narration addresses Lattimore, readers’ knowledge of Binh’s inability to actually communicate with Lattimore and call out Lattimore as “you” urges readers to collapse the distinction between you as Binh’s narrate in the text and themselves as actual readers outside the text. Moreover, Rocío Davis notes that the use of narrative “you” holds a strong implication of judgment, of moral or didactic address. As Davis further adds, the voice that says “you” is the person “par excellence of interrogation and imperative” (Asian American 176). Binh’s voice that says “you,” then, acquires a quality that is decidedly assertive, interrogating, and authoritative. Especially when the assertive quality of a second-person narration is coupled with its prominently involving quality for readers, Binh’s voice that says “you” strongly demands readers to imaginatively enter the narrative situation and participate in the scene Binh recalls. Not only do readers listen to Binh, but they also become Binh’s co-conspirators who are responsible for the secret that Binh discloses.

The use of a second-person “you” also makes possible for Binh a close intersubjective relationship with Lattimore and further enables Binh to construct his own
subjectivity. Calling Lattimore the second-person “you” in turn allows Binh to situate himself as a first-person “I” with Lattimore, although the situation is more imaginative and hopeful than real. Binh and Lattimore together consist of a first-person plural “we.” The role Lattimore plays in their relationship as the second-person addressee is worth noticing. In Binh’s recalling of the memory, Lattimore is the one who initiates the act of eroticism and leads Binh to a series of romantic and sexual performances. As Lattimore guides Binh “with a kiss,” their bodies mingle (“we are skin on skin”). Binh is now safe to perform with Lattimore and respond to Lattimore’s act of intimacy with his equaled desire. When their bodies recognize each other, their physical encounter becomes more solemn and holier than sexual (“a prayer for the Buddha with the fire in his heart”). Although it is Lattimore with a higher social position who must first award and recognize Binh’s effort to pronounce his name with a gesture of a kiss, Binh, upon Lattimore’s recognition and confirmation, succeeds to secure a space of his own through which he expresses and liberates his queer desire.

Nevertheless, Binh’s subject construction by the second-person Lattimore is problematic and limiting; it reinforces the idea of Binh’s colonial identity as given and dependent. Even if Truong demonstrates possibilities of intersubjectivity and recognition for Binh by allowing Binh to rehearse and celebrate the physical and emotional exchanges with Lattimore in his mental state, the hierarchical order between Binh and Lattimore is still important at the level of the story. Although Lattimore seems
uncommonly able to “see” Binh, Lattimore’s ability to notice Binh is incomplete, since Lattimore is able to merely “sight” Binh. Binh’s growing sense of visibility through Lattimore’s act of sighting (“I have been sighted”) only leads Binh to the limits of self-representation and subjectivity (“You possess a memory of my body… How can I carry my body through the streets of this city in the same way again?”). It is the second-person “you,” Lattimore, that possesses Binh’s colonial identity and defines Binh’s subject position.

Measuring Binh’s Authority through a Delayed Disclosure

Despite all the celebrations and signs of improvement that Binh’s redundant telling demonstrates, then, readers are left with limits of Binh’s ontological freedom, social hierarchies, and recognition. The eloquence of Binh’s voice and the “power” of Binh’s verbal act lie precisely in the irony that his addressed narratees—Gertrude Stein and Lattimore—do not notice his voice. Is The Book of Salt a tragic story of a Vietnamese domestic servant in Paris whose presence becomes merely ghostly in the face of his inscrutability in character-character relation? Binh, for instance, explains his subject position as a refugee who will forever remain lost: “Becoming more like an animal with each displaced day, I scramble to seek shelter in the kitchens of those who will take me” (19). As Y-Dang Troeung in “A Gift or Theft Depends on Who Is Holding the Pen” also points out, even at the household of Gertrude Stein and Toklas, where Binh finds and
demonstrates some signs of recognition and intersubjectivity (although highly limited), belonging for Binh is “a state of desire that is perpetually deferred; his race and sexuality render him forever unhomely in all the homes in which he lives, including the supposed “haven” of America” (119-20). Likewise, Binh narrates: “while I have been permitted to stay within the doors of 27 rue de Fleurus, I have been excommunicated yet again from that perfect circle that is at the center of every home” (103).

Troeung is right to point out Binh’s “deferred” desire and how his voice is “excommunicated” from the circle of communication taking place at the level of the story. What Binh’s AIM makes possible—readers’ active interaction with Binh and participation in the narrative—paradoxically leads to a complete inscrutability in his character-character relation. Binh at the level of the story thus occupies a highly limited subject position as a silent and invisible colonial figure. As Truong clearly indicates from the beginning of the novel, Binh at the end of the novel is unemployed and homeless. Upon Gertrude Stein and Toklas’ departure to America, Binh must “start all over again” in a life governed by colonial rules and power relations. By leaving readers as she begins with them, Truong seems to make clear how Binh’s colonial identity is restricted and confined within the external sociocultural and political forces of 1920s Paris.

One might thus argue that Truong thematizes Binh’s failure to construct his visible and independent body by illuminating cyclical structure of the novel and showing Binh’s paralyzed attempt at self-representation. However, it is worth noting that Truong
does not simply repeat the beginning of *The Book of Salt* in her closing. Readers learn only at the end of the novel that Binh’s AIM kept Lattimore’s betrayal unknown in the course of the narrative. Binh’s delayed telling of Lattimore’s betrayal, in other words, redoes the cyclical structure that Truong constructs and requires readers to re-think of their reading and designing of the novel, and interpretation of Binh’s narration. Only after reaching again the moment of Gertrude Stein’s departure at the novel’s last chapter, Binh discloses that Lattimore, too, has actually left him behind. What Lattimore really wanted from Binh was the manuscript of Gertrude Stein’s story that Gertrude Stein kept in her (Binh’s) kitchen cabinet. Lattimore leaves Binh after fulfilling his desire for Gertrude Stein’s story, and Binh is left with Lattimore’s thank-you note, to which he responds, “You are more than welcome, Lattimore, or shall I call you “Monsieur”?” (260). Upon this revelation, readers are brought back to the hierarchy of Binh’s relationship with Lattimore and the poignancy of Binh’s realization of it. At this final moment of exchange, Binh must call Lattimore “Monsieur,” not the intimate second-person “you” or “Sweet Sunday Man.”

Although Lattimore’s betrayal at the novel’s end is tragic, it tells us something significant about the nature of Binh’s storytelling--Lattimore’s final departure as a delayed disclosure in Binh’s telling is a clear sign of Binh’s self-consciousness as a narrator and the authorship he owns over the story he narrates. Binh’s narratorial decision to withhold the information about Lattimore’s betrayal till the very end of his storytelling
(as opposed to his decision to start his flashback with the memory of his unemployment) is deliberate and mimetically motivated. By refusing to confront Lattimore’s betrayal and delaying the moment of disclosure, and in the meantime reviving repeatedly the moments of intimacy with his Sweet Sunday Man in his consciousness, Binh is able to perform the forbidden eroticism until the moment of his story’s end. The more time readers spend with Binh in his consciousness rehearsing his memories with Lattimore, the more affective and cognitive impact readers experience when they finally discover the real nature of Binh’s relationship with Lattimore in servitude. When readers understand the underlying motivations, thoughts and feelings of Binh’s delayed disclosure as well as his ability to withhold the information for specific affective and mimetic purposes, readers are able to contribute to a fuller realization of Binh’s subjectivity as a self-conscious, deliberate and authoritative storyteller of his own tales.

It is crucial to understand better the ways in which Truong’s specific designing of Binh’s self-conscious storytelling in The Book of Salt guide readers to respond to Binh cognitively, affectively, and ethically. By actively participating in and engaging with Binh’s “silent” act of communication, and by paying close attention to the ways in which Binh’s mind is made scrutable and inscrutable at different levels of narrative, readers are able to re-shape Binh’s subjectivity and re-discover depth of his consciousness. Although Binh might disappear from the circle of communication (“ex-communicated”) and becomes inscrutable in his character-character relation, Binh simultaneously returns to
the very center of an alternative communication that Truong constructs, Binh imagines, and readers participate in.

Discussion of inscrutability has been important in this chapter precisely because inscrutability mobilizes itself when we pay closer attention to the compelling productions and consumptions of this stereotype in Asian American literature. We have learned, for instance, that inscrutable minds of the Asian American protagonists in *A Gesture Life* and *The Book of Salt*, when constructed and consumed innovatively and carefully, yield real theoretical, aesthetic, ethical, affective, and political consequences. It is only when we get into the stereotype and its specific working in the narrative that we discover depth and complexities of the inner lives of Asian American characters. In the next chapter, I shift my discussion to a newly emerging literary genre in Asian American literary studies, graphic narrative, to study how inscrutable mind of the protagonist is visualized to trigger strong affective and cognitive responses from readers.
Works Cited


Chapter 2: Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings*: Representing Asian American Inscrutability in the Graphic Narrative

Increasing critical engagement with graphic narratives is visible in university classrooms and many other academic venues. At least five literary journals have devoted issues to graphic narratives (*Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 4; *MELUS*, Vol. 32, No. 3; *English Language Notes*, Vol. 46, No. 2; *Shofar*, Vol. 29, No. 2; *SubStance*, Vol. 40, No. 1). The 1998 edition of *The Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction* includes excerpts from Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Holocaust narrative told in comics form, along with two other graphic works by Jay Cantor and Lynda Barry. Defined as “narrative work in the medium of comics” (Chute and DeKoven, “Introduction” 767), graphic narrative deploys word balloons, the frame of the individual panels, the gutter (the blank space between panels), the strip (the horizontal band of panel arrangement), colors, and the panel layout on a given page, used to portray characters’ actions, thoughts, emotions, and spatial and temporal changes.

What can the graphic narrative tell us about Asian American writers' use of Asian American inscrutability? How do authors visualize inscrutable minds of Asian American characters and trigger strong cognitive and affective responses in the mind of the reader-viewers (“readers”), leading them to various forms of identification and dis-identification with characters? How does the visual representation of Asian American minds in graphic
narrative compel readers to investigate more deeply and productively the stereotype about Asian American inscrutability? In this chapter, I study visual representations of Asian American mind in Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings* (2007). Centrally, I focus on a particular type of Asian American inscrutability that concerns the stereotype about affectless Asians/Asian Americans--that is, a belief that Asians/Asian Americans do not feel and express as much as Westerners do, and Asian/Asian American face is unable or unwilling to express a wide range of emotional expressions and responses.

One can easily detect stereotypical portrayals of affectless, inscrutable Asians/Asian Americans in popular media such as movies (the infamous and bizarre Asian foreign student, Long Duk Dong, in the 1984 film *Sixteen Candles*), comic strips (images of Asian American students as mechanized alien robots in Stephen Davis’ “The Adventures of Antman”), and the ABC *Nightline* show featuring a special dating class for Asian men in America (aired on March 2nd, 2012). In an interview with the host and segment producer, Juju Chang, JT Tran, a self-claimed Asian American playboy who is leading the dating class as a dating coach, says that the problem for Asian American men lies in what he calls “Asian poker face." Tran explains that Asian men fail to draw more favorable responses from their female partners because they do not smile and express their emotions and thoughts enough (i.e., they are affectless and inscrutable). In this regard, Tran asks his students to practice smiling as they approach women for the first time. Although Tran’s dating tutorial for Asian American men is accused of reinforcing
the stereotype about Asian American inscrutability and affectlessness, Tran defends himself and says that his class is about making social changes for Asian men in America who are locked in the “Asian poker face” and thus cut off from the full repertoire of expressive means needed to convey emotions.

Interestingly, Adrian Tomine's Japanese American protagonist, Ben Tanaka, perfectly falls into this category of the affectless and inscrutable Asian American man--one who Tran, the ambitious and proud Asian American dating coach, would no doubt be happy to train. Not only is Ben unable to demonstrate a wide range of emotional expressions, but he also runs into numerous problems in his relationships with women. Ben's “affectlessness,” however, does not come from his inability to show emotion. Ben is scrutuble and affective as angry and frustrated, but the focus on his negative emotions, coupled with his narrow repertoire of emotion-expressing strategies, hinder both readers’ and other characters’ efforts to interpret his responses to events. Tomine, in other words, is working with a representation of limited scrutability and affect through Ben’s negativity, and informs directly reading of Ben and his mind in both the character-character and author-narrator-reader relations. By refusing to fully disclose specific details and reasons behind Ben’s negative emotions, Tomine successfully renders Ben's character inscrutable, enigmatic and even unfavorable. In the rest of the chapter, although I call Ben “affectless” and “inscrutable,” my point is to show his limited range of
emotional responses and how this challenges reading of Ben’s mind, the larger mental landscape of the protagonist.

My question, then, is why does an educated and talented Asian American author like Adrian Tomine reproduce the stereotype about affectless, inscrutable Asian American man by inventing a protagonist like Ben Tanaka? Tomine’s use of the stereotype, I posit, rubs up against reality in ways that ask readers to be moved in particular ways. In what follows, I maintain that Tomine challenges a polarity between resistance and assimilation that typifies contemporary Asian American storytelling traditions by inviting and deflecting readers’ empathetic identification with Ben through a visual and verbal representation of Ben’s limited affect and obscured mind. Whereas the initial portrayals of Ben’s inscrutability through the representation of his negative feelings might distance readers from the protagonist, Tomine gradually increases readers’ access to Ben’s mind and invites them to identify with him by using the visuals that reveal Ben’s overall moods of stasis and paralysis as a larger and deeper background of Ben’s negativity. Any narrative that presents a complex, multidimensional character with more or less admirable traits, of course, can have this “push-pull” effect on readers. As I argue later in the chapter, however, the “push-pull” effect of Tomine’s text, facilitated by the gradual revelation of Ben’s interiority behind his negative feelings, is especially worth noticing, as it provides new perspectives on identity politics crucial in Asian American literature and studies. By shifting readers from the inscrutability to the
scrutability of Ben’s interiority, Tomine successfully shows a construction of interactive and intersubjective space within which readers and Ben interact and intersect for productive and critical interrogation of the self and the other.

In order to better understand the ways in which Tomine guides his readers to actively and imaginatively participate in his story world, I analyze Tomine’s compelling anti-heroic characterization of Ben, careful crafting of images, and use of page layout. I assert that these conscious authorial choices provide readers with a cognitive and emotive map upon which, if followed, they can build critical emotional engagement and disengagement with the novel’s (anti) protagonist. Furthermore, in my attempt to examine how the constructing and debunking of the stereotype of affectless, inscrutable Asian American mind occurs at the level of readers’ cognition and emotion, I engage with theory of mind (ability to read or misread people's behaviors in terms of their underlying thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires), empathy (ability to imagine oneself in someone else's situation and to identify with how he or she feels), emotional body language (body movement and actions associated with specific emotions), the theory of emotional contagion (experiencing somebody else’s emotion through his/her facial and/or body expressions), and concepts of narrative progression, among key ideas. Whereas the first half of the chapter will focus on a discussion of cognition and emotion based on cognitive and neurobiological research, the second half of the chapter will engage with
the cultural and political strategies of the novel that suggest new ways of thinking of identity politics and the study of alterity.

Cognition, Emotion, Mood, and Investigative Empathy

Adrian Tomine’s *Shortcomings* begins with a scene of a young Asian American woman and her first-generation grandfather in his fortune cookie factory. The woman as a narrator tells her audience that although she had always felt distant from her grandfather, “mistaking the language barrier for coldness,” she has finally realized his wisdom and love. As the woman and her grandfather share a final hug, readers learn that this first scene of the novel, in fact, is hypodiegetic (a storyworld within a storyworld). It is a film that the protagonist of the novel, the Japanese American Ben Tanaka, and his girlfriend, Miko Hayashi, are watching.
They are at an Asian American Digital Film Festival in Oakland, California, and Miko is one of the film festival’s organizers. The visual representation of Ben in this scene is worth noting (figure 6). Whereas everybody else in the page sits upright and applauds the ending, Ben’s back is slouched, his hands are still, and his head is turned away. Ben’s
overall body posture, gestures, and facial expressions indicate that Ben is not feeling comfortable with his surroundings. Rather, Ben is trying to isolate himself from the other members of the audience at the theater and their mutually shared feelings of excitement and pride. Ben’s incongruous behavior reflects lack of connection with his peers at the festival. Ben’s isolation, and his failure to be social is also spatialized within the panels, as Tomine locates Ben either at the far back or very margin of the panel space. Sure enough, in the following pages, Ben strongly asserts that this sort of Asian American film is not his "cup of tea" (11): “Everyone knows it’s garbage, but they clap for it anyway because it was made by some Chinese girl from Oakland! I mean why does everything have to be some big “statement” about race?” (13).

The conversation between Ben and Miko continues. As Miko wonders, “It’s almost like you’re ashamed to be Asian,” Ben argues that “After a movie like that, I’m ashamed to be human!” (emphasis original 13). Ben’s bitter reaction to the films about and by Asian Americans deserves careful attention. Tomine, through the perspective of his protagonist, questions and challenges the political assumption that stories about Asian American characters by Asian American authors must be primarily focused on material conditions and ideological values of Asian American community (“Yeah...of digital videos made by Asian Americans who happen to live around here. Didn’t they also have to be left-handed or something?”). Especially when Miko refers to Ben by his ethnicity (“ashamed to be Asian”), Ben corrects Miko by aligning himself with a term that is more...
universal, “human,” and de-couples his individual identity from his group identity (“Asian”). By investing his protagonist with “atypical” worldview that rejects a politicization of Asian American (race) issues, Tomine suggests that his narrative will complicate and problematize the convention of Asian American cultural production that has become almost indistinguishable from a sociological and ideological reading of the ethnic community.

In fact, Tomine’s project is much more complicated than simply complicating and problematizing conventional Asian American narrative by moving beyond the dominant socio-political conventions surrounding Asian American storytelling. On the one hand, Tomine focuses his narrative on the perspective of his protagonist whose view disagrees with the politicization of Asian American cultural production. On the other hand, although Ben’s view is provocative and even progressive, Tomine makes it difficult for readers to determine how to respond to Ben, because this thought-changing perspective is located in a character who is unsupportive and inconsiderate of his girlfriend, who does not hesitate to dismiss the hard work that his girlfriend has put together. Moreover, while Ben is passionately negative about the Asian American film, motivations behind Ben’s negativity remain unclear both to the other characters in the novel and to readers. When Miko questions, "I don’t understand why you have to get so angry" (12), readers are more likely to identify with Miko's bewilderment and bafflement than with Ben’s enigmatic negativity. Upon Ben’s endless complaints about Miko, Ben’s Korean American lesbian
friend Alice, who brings a third-person perspective to the narrative, also points out to Ben: “So she’s gotten a little politically-minded. I don’t get why that’s such an affront to you” (15). No one around Ben, even those who are supposed to know him the most, understands where his anger, rage, and frustration come from. As a result, despite the little time or space given for character development, Tomine succeeds in inserting readers quickly into a plot that characterizes Ben as inscrutable, affectively limited, disagreeable, and even dislikable. Ben’s inscrutability and affectlessness, in turn, complicate his seemingly compelling argument against the politicization of Asian American cultural production.

Readers’ evaluation of Ben’s political view is further challenged when Miko’s eyes, which work like a filter for readers, capture Ben’s double-standards about race and ethnicity. For instance, Miko discovers Ben’s pornographic tapes in his desk and says, “Well […] the thing that kind of bothers me is that all the girls are white […] It’s like you’re obsessed with the typical western media beauty ideal, but you’re settling for me” (28-29). Ben’s peculiar sexual taste in “the typical western media beauty ideal” draws readers’ attention to an irony associated with Ben’s distance from his Asian American identity and its politicization. Although Ben insists that Asian American race issues do not matter to him, they do matter when it comes to his dating choices. Moreover, Ben responds to Miko’s criticism with his immediate, bitter, and short-tempered exasperation and disgust: “Are you crazy? What the hell is wrong with you? […] And you’re acting
crazy over nothing!” (30). The negative emotional expressions Ben displays to Miko are hard to comprehend and sympathize with, as Miko also says, “Stop yelling! What are you getting so angry about?” (30). In the face of Ben’s increasing negativity and lack of any other cues that could allow for a better understanding of Ben’s feelings and thoughts, Ben’s mind becomes more and more inscrutable.

Tomite’s decision to obscure Ben’s mind and challenges readers’ access to his feelings and thoughts leads readers to an interesting direction that both frustrates and enriches their reading experience. In *Why We Read Fiction* (2006) Lisa Zunshine defines the folk-psychology term, "Theory of Mind," as an innate human capacity that seeks to understand “people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires” (6). The triggering of Theory of Mind (ToM) capacity is an important aspect of experiencing a fictional world. When we read fiction, Zunshine continues, we naturally invest characters with a range of potential thoughts, feelings, and desires that function as “cues” to allow us to interpret characters’ minds and further predict their actions. Mind-reading, as much as we do it quite habitually and unconsciously, follows a procedure that is in fact quite logical and deliberate. For instance, Zunshine remarks in elsewhere that when we encounter fictional characters, we first spontaneously locate a range of possible responses to them within a scope that contains “an infinitely rich array of interpretations” (“Theory” 275). Importantly, these interpretations (potential thoughts, feelings, and desires that are keys to understanding fictional minds) are eventually narrowed down in
the course of the narrative as we “organize information in specific ways” based on the
cues provided and orchestrated by the author (emphasis mine, “Theory” 275).

The significance of this cognitive processing of mind-reading lies not only in its
surprisingly logical and specific, albeit unconscious and spontaneous, way that readers
“narrow down” their responses to fictional characters and their minds. What is more
interesting about this procedure, I posit, is its link to emotion-inducing process. To put it
differently, cognition, which is crucial to our theory of mind activity, is a prerequisite for
emotion because emotion requires a cognitive appraisal of the situation and its
consequences. As Paul Ekman accurately points out, what distinguishes emotions from
other psychological phenomena is “our appraisal of a current event” that is often
automatic, but also, “slow, deliberate, and conscious” (“All Emotions” 15-16). Similarly,
Piero Scaruffi in his study of the relationship between cognition and emotion explains
that “emotion, far from being a biological oddity, is actually an integral part of cognition.
Reasoning and emotion […] cooperate” (“The Nature”). Because cognition and emotion
are inseparable, the cognitive elements of mind-reading that Zunshine elucidates
necessarily connect to the emotive activities of readers--how readers feel about fictional
characters, their feelings, and conducts. Similarly, readers of graphic narrative use their
cognitive and emotive faculties to first interpret and appraise the visual representations of
characters and their consciousnesses (cognitive), and to concurrently determine whether
to feel for the characters or to turn away from them (emotive). What and how readers
may feel about Ben in *Shortcomings*, then, closely relate to how they cognitively and emotively process the worldview Ben proposes, as well as his mind that informs this particular point of view.

The real challenge that Tomine’s readers experience, then, is the fact that Tomine orchestrates his narrative in such a way that disallows readers to cognitively and emotively process the protagonist Ben’s interior states by not providing cues upon which readers can “organize information [about the character] in specific ways.” Moreover, because cognition and emotion always cooperate, readers’ (cognitively) impaired mind-reading activity in fiction has significant consequences in terms of their emotive interaction with Ben, namely, their capacity for empathy, a sharing of affect provoked by “simulating how one would feel oneself if one found oneself in the same circumstances as the other person” (Hogan, *What Literature* 247). When Ben’s mind is obscured by his negative feelings, readers may distance themselves from Ben, rather than trying to simulate their feelings in his circumstances, as the process of this simulation itself is challenged by the lack of cues provided by Tomine. Nevertheless, Tomine conceals Ben’s mind in not to completely disallow readers’ reading of Ben’s mind, but to prompt more active and critical forms of guesswork. When Tomine is successful in engaging his readers with his purposefully perplexing cognitive and emotive map constructed in the novel, Tomine’s ideal readers pause and re-think of their relationship with Ben, rather than simply either identifying or dis-identifying with him. The growing difficulty of
mind-reading that readers face functions for Tomine to direct his audiences to the depth and complexities of Ben’s mental and material lives not with patronizing pity, but with what I call “investigative empathy”—the cognitively oriented experience of identifying with others, empathy that requires constant critical and self-reflexive evaluations of both the minds of readers and the protagonist.

In this argument scene (figure 7), for instance, readers’ access to Ben’s face and body is strictly limited. Except for the first panel of the page that zooms in on Ben's face exposed to readers, Ben’s figure is mostly out of the frame (as in the fourth panel). Given that readers have to rely on visual cues from Ben’s body gestures, movement, and facial expressions in order to read his mind (theory of mind), Tomine’s authorial decision to locate Ben’s body in such obscure, subtle, and ambiguous manner and thereby restricting readers’ reading of Ben’s interiority is significant. Even the panel that appears to capture Ben’s anger most vividly discloses only Ben’s profile (the sixth panel), rather than the front view of his full face. Miko’s facial expressions, by contrast, present calmness and self-control, until the moment she leaves Ben alone and slams the door. Instead of “yelling,” Miko logically questions Ben and his unfairly strong (“Are you crazy?”) responses to her.
Figure 7: Shortcomings (30).
Not only does the lack of visual cues in this page restrict readers’ reading of Ben’s mind, but it also slows down readers’ reading process in such a way that potentially evokes in the mind of readers great sense of indecisiveness towards Ben. Although readers recognize Ben’s discontent and frustration generally, readers do not know with confidence what is really happening in Ben’s inner world due to the lack of visual and verbal information provided by the author. At the final panel of the page, on the other hand, Ben’s figure is again faded, his back is turned to readers, and he is left alone against the panel’s dark background (and “SLAM!”). Ben’s figure dissolves into the darkness of the panel, causing him to appear particularly smaller, insignificant, and even lonely and painfully isolated. When Tomine’s visually diminishing Ben’s figure is coupled with the inscrutability of Ben’s mind and his negative feelings, Tomine’s readers are unable to more readily narrow down their interpretations about Ben’s inner state and further evaluate and judge him. Ben’s inscrutability, in other words, undermines both readers’ cognitive (what to think) and emotive (what and how to feel) processing of Ben’s mind, ultimately affecting their ethical evaluation of Ben. By leaving readers unsure and ambivalent of how to respond to Ben cognitively and emotively, Tomine asks his readers to pause before making any quick judgment about Ben based on his more apparent negativity.

The visual ambiguity in the final panel of the page is especially interesting when one considers the issue of narrative sequence and how this could further complicate
readers’ reading and evaluating of Ben’s mind. By capturing Ben’s lone figure in the dark with his back turned to readers, it seems as though Tomine finally attempts to increase readers’ relatively more empathetic feelings for Ben. Once Ben’s face disappears into the darkness and is obscured from readers’ view, Tomine’s readers are guided to focus more on the overall atmosphere of the panel (dark, static, and lonesome), within which Ben is situated, rather than Ben himself as an anti-protagonist of the novel and of the scene. Although Tomine guides his readers to recognize Ben’s failings as a mature and understanding character, readers’ potentially negative ethical judgments about Ben are challenged at first by the visual obscurity, and second by the sympathy that Ben’s lone figure in the final panel appears to evoke in the mind of readers. The next page of the novel, however, immediately questions this more affective reading of the panel and Ben’s circumstances (figure 8). Readers now find Ben at a theater that he manages. Readers detect Ben’s irritation from the very second panel of the page, as he strongly reacts to his male co-worker Gene’s abrupt appearance to his office: “Jesus, Gene... Have you heard of knocking?” (31).

After a brief conversation with Ben, Gene in the fifth panel awkwardly leaves Ben’s office. Ben’s figure is now excluded from the panel, although Gene’s eyes are still fixed on Ben. The last three panels of the page, on the other hand, capture Ben from his back (just as the last panel of the previous page illustrates Ben’s lone figure in the dark from a perspective behind him).
Whereas readers are still disallowed to access Ben’s face, and it is still unclear what Ben is doing in the office, readers soon notice that Ben is in fact peeking at his white blond female co-worker through the security camera in his room. Simultaneously,
readers may also conjecture that it was Ben’s violated “privacy” that irritated him so much at the beginning of the page. This scene, then, confirms that Miko’s suspicion about Ben’s obsession with “the typical western media beauty ideal” was accurate, and Ben’s accusing Miko of acting “crazy over nothing” was unfair and wrong. Stated otherwise, Tomine intentionally guides his readers not to empathize with Ben, first by limiting their theory of mind capacity (insufficient visual and verbal cues about Ben’s mental state in the previous page), and second by designing sequence of his pages in a way that asks his readers to be more critical of their own evaluation of Ben. Readers’ more empathetic feelings toward Ben (the final panel of the previous page) may need to be revised when they reach the final panel of this page of the novel, as the novel now proves clearly Ben’s “shortcomings,” his self-contradictions and double standards toward his relationship and race. Tomine asks his readers to be ambivalent and suspicious about their own understanding of the protagonist and narrative, leaving sufficient room for productive revisions and reevaluations.

Nevertheless, Tomine does not simply leave his readers in a world of eternal uncertainty and ambiguity. As the novel progresses, Tomine engages his readers more actively with Ben by gradually revealing larger emotional background of Ben's mind and makes vivid depth and poignancy of his inner life. And importantly, Tomine does so through his tactical use of visual designs to indicate Ben’s moods. Before analyzing the scene and exploring how Tomine re-orient his readers’ emotional responses to Ben, one
needs to first understand the intriguing dynamics between mood and emotion. Richard Davidson in his contribution to *The Nature of Emotion* (1994) explains that the difference between mood and emotion lies in the duration of each, as “emotions are held to be brief, while moods last longer” (“On Emotion” 51). Moods, as Davidson adds, provide the “affective background, the emotional color, to all we do. Emotions can be viewed as phasic perturbations that are superimposed on this background activity” (52). Davidson further remarks that while emotions can lead to particular moods, moods can also “alter the probability that particular emotions will be triggered” (53). In order to guide readers to empathize with Ben despite his negative and antagonistic emotional responses, then, Tomine must construct Ben’s overall moods as an altering “landscape” and consciousness that run counter to Ben’s negativity (emotion). When Tomine foregrounds Ben’s moods in this particular way, his readers are able to better mirror the larger “affective background” of Ben’s inner world, thereby more readily and willingly re-adjusting their initial distance from Ben.

There are significant affective and ethical dimensions in the interplay between Ben’s emotions and moods. Whereas the focus of Ben’s negative emotion increases his inscrutability and hinders readers’ access to his consciousness, gradual revelation of Ben’s moods as a larger context of his mental state may complicate readers’ affective responses to Ben, and further influence their ethical evaluations of Ben and his character. For instance, after a series of conflicts and discovery of Ben’s all-white pornographic
tapes, Miko decides to leave California and take an internship in New York. In a scene where Ben and Miko drive to the airport, the background color of the entire page turns black. The spatial setting of the page, inside the car, on the other hand, causes panels to appear crowded and cramped, while the sparse and awkward conversation between Ben and Miko further adds tension to the mind of readers. Tomine’s readers in these panels may feel unstable, noticing the cramped dark space and the silence between the two characters. Eventually, this silence breaks as Ben expresses unusually, honestly, and affectively how he feels about Miko and her departure--Ben says, “I’m really gonna miss you” (35). Nevertheless, Ben’s feelings of attachment and longing for Miko quickly take an opposite turn as he starts cursing the traffic (“Oh fuck…What is this? Traffic at 8pm? God Damn it”) and blaming Miko: “See? This is why I said we should leave earlier…Fuck! … You’ve gotta check all this shit in, then go through security, and then…” (36).

The outburst of Ben’s negative emotions, anger and impatience, at this moment of Miko’s departure could lead readers to respond to Ben in two different ways. On the one hand, readers might try to mirror and imagine Ben's state of mind within the given context of the narrative, a near break-up with his loved one. In this case readers are more likely to understand and justify Ben’s irritation and annoyance at Miko as a way for him to cope with his sense of loss. Readers in this context feel for Ben’s clumsiness and inefficiency in his showing of his feelings, because they realize clearly that Ben is
emotionally deficient in that he is unable to express and show his emotions more adequately and openly. This favorable and more empathetic reading of Ben’s mind, however, is soon challenged. As Ben’s use of harsh language and facial expressions dominate the panel space, more and more readers are prompt to process their reading and evaluation of Ben based on what they immediately and apparently see from the surface of the page, that is to say, Ben’s verbal and facial languages that make explicit his insensitivity towards his girlfriend. The range of negative emotions that Ben expresses in turn elicits “distress,” “an aversive emotional response also characterized by apprehension of another’s emotion [that] leads not to sympathy but to avoidance” (Keen “A Theory” 208).

By evoking distress in the mind of readers, Tomine keeps his audiences from more deeply delving into what might be behind Ben’s angry face. On the other hand, Tomine successfully avoids further alienating readers from his story world by re-directing them from their aversive reading of Ben’s mind to a larger context of his life, within which his interiority is situated and embedded. As the novel progresses and as the following analysis of the novel will show, Tomine starts illustrating Ben’s more stable, overall moods of stasis and despair as a background against which his mental and emotional states stand out. Ben’s static and deepening moods run against the phasic perturbations of Ben’s negativity, shedding new perspectives to his previous impatience and insensitivity towards Miko. In order to better understand the source of Ben’s
negativity, Tomine's audiences must now investigate and reevaluate critically and actively the complex relationship between Ben's anti-heroic characterization and the stasis and despair of his moods as a background for such characterization. After Miko checks-in and departs the city, and upon Ben’s return to the airport parking lot, for instance, readers witness six identically imaged panels of the parking lot sans figures (figures 9 and 10).

Whereas there is neither a movement nor a conversation in the page, the repetition of like-images stretches out the brief temporal moment of narrative, during which Ben walks back and forth between the airport departure gate and his car in the parking lot. By not illustrating the scene in, say, one single panel and instead slowing down the time through a series of identical images, Tomine makes possible an “aspect-to-aspect transition,” a device that reveals different aspects of time, mood, and idea as well as their gradual changes and movement (McCloud, *Understanding* 79). Tomine’s use of “aspect-to-aspect transition” in this scene is effective because it allows Tomine to visualize affectively silence, stasis, and tension in the panel space, thereby highlighting and reflecting in turn Ben’s own static mental state situated within the panels. That is, by locating Ben's body (his movement, posture, and face) within the temporal frame of the given panel space designed to slow down progression of the story and increase stasis, Tomine succeeds in capturing the striking similarities between the slowness and stillness of the page and the affective dimensions of Ben’s interiority: emotional paralysis, loss,
and utter loneliness. Just as the time is caught within the panel without any noticeable signs of progression or change, readers may now infer how Ben's mental and material conditions, too, are trapped within his given circumstances without any direction for improvement and resolution.

Figure 9: Shortcomings (36).
Figure 10: Shortcomings (37).

Tomin’s use of “aspect-to-aspect transition” is also to add lyricality to the scene and influence not only readers’ affective, but also ethical relationship with Ben. James Phelan in Living to Tell About It (2004) provides a rhetorical definition of lyricality: “somebody telling somebody else (who may or may not be present) or even himself and herself on some occasion for some purpose that something is,” or “about his or her
meditations on something” (162). Phelan’s definition indicates that the importance of lyricality in rhetorical model lies in disclosing emotion, perception, belief, and static state of the character/character narrator. In lyric narrative, “the character narrator does not undergo any substantial change within the temporal frame of the main action” (Phelan 158). The text instead centers on “revealing the dimensions of the character narrator’s current situation,” thereby guiding readers “sympathetically into the character narrator’s perspective” (158). In the above parking lot scene, for instance, Tomine slows down time and minimizes any movement and change through his effective panel display (“aspect-to-aspect transition”). This consequently captures and reflects the stasis and paralysis of Ben’s mental life, adding lyric quality to his character. Moreover, since lyricality reveals “dimensions of the character narrator’s current situation,” increasing lyricality in the scene diminishes Ben’s inscrutability in the author-narrator-reader relation in such a way that invites readers “sympathetically into [Ben’s] perspective.” Identification between readers and Ben is more likely to grow, and readers’ ethical evaluation of Ben may become less judgmental. By designing temporal and spatial changes of the panels as a way to reflect stasis and lyricality of Ben’s mental state, Tomine guides his readers to focus not on “what” of Ben’s actions, but “how” and “why” of his circumstances that lead Ben to a course of specific action.

This, nevertheless, is only part of the picture. As soon as readers empathize with Ben and his overall moods of loss and stasis, Tomine again complicates Ben’s
characterization and betrays readers’ empathetic responses to Ben. Right after the affectively powerful parking lot scene, Ben appears in his car alone. Ben is sipping from Miko’s coffee cup that she has left behind. Ben’s facial expression and his reflective handling of Miko’s coffee cup initially signal that Ben misses her. Shortly thereafter, however, Ben abruptly stops drinking from the cup and pours the coffee out, as if he has drunk something stale, or something that is an unpleasant reminder of something he does not wish to think about. In the next page of the novel, Ben is back in his living room. After briefly looking at Miko’s empty closet, Ben soon calls Autumn, a white blond girl working in the theater that he manages, and asks her out for a date— and Ben’s adventures with “the typical western media beauty ideal” thus begin.

This turn in Ben’s behavior at this particular narrative juncture is dramatic and may be disturbing to some of readers. By showing how Ben attempts to explore other relationships with other white blonds right after Miko’s departure, Tomine takes his readers back to Ben’s anti-heroic characterization—his inconsistency, contradictions, and ambivalence. Ben’s relentless negativism toward the Asian American race issue, on the other hand, makes a stark contrast with his obsession with white women. How are we as readers supposed to feel about Ben? Why does Tomine invite his readers to bond with Ben on the one hand and on the other distance his audiences from Ben, especially right after moments of increasing empathetic identification with him? How might the simultaneous engagement and disengagement between readers and Ben shed new light on
the issues of identity politics and its literary representation? To better answer these questions, let me now turn more specifically to the questions of alterity and identity politics, and situate Tomine’s rhetorical designing of the novel within this broader context of Asian American literary studies.

Tome’s Strategies for Identity Politics

Tome complicates readers' relationship with the novel’s protagonist, Ben Tanaka, through both his anti-heroic characterization and the stasis and paralysis of his inner world, guiding readers to both engage and disengage with him. I maintain that the ambivalence, contradictions, and tensions established between readers and the protagonist (the ethnic other character of the novel) lead readers to new ways of thinking of the study of alterity and identity politics. Identity politics gained its prominence after the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and 70s and has been a target of reexamination in the recent past. As David Palumbo-Liu points out, “the constant probing, critiquing, stretching, shrinking of the term over the past two decades seems not to have resolved anything” (“Assumed” 765). Not only is the term “identity” met with “a resigned sigh—“Oh that again?,” it has at best marked off “a set of common problems and positions to which one refers from time to time when the occasion calls for it” (“Assumed” 765). For his part, K. Anthony Appiah in his contribution to Multiculturalism (1994), “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” posits that the
politics of recognition, or identity politics, erases “personal dimensions of the self” by essentializing identity (racial, ethnic, and sexual, for instance) as a political marker and organizing principle at the core of the self. Appiah says, "the politics of recognition requires that one's skin color, one's sexual body, should be acknowledged politically in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and their sexual body as personal dimensions of the self” (163). Palumbo-Liu’s and Appiah’s critical views on the issues of identity politics call for a newer approach to identity and identity politics.

As an alternative to the traditional approach to identity politics, scholars such as Richard Rorty and David Hollinger have argued to move “beyond identity” and into a “postethnic” era. These scholars assert that one needs to set aside the distinctions that identity politics draws upon in order to move towards a universal common ground upon which differences of individuals co-exist and co-operate. David Hollinger in Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism (1995), for instance, positively speaks of the possibility of this common ground: “I have taken for granted that the economic, political, and cultural obstacles to a postethnic America are truly formidable, but I also take for granted that revulsion against ethnoracial prejudice is strong enough in the United States today to render the ideal of postethnicity worth developing” (170). Hollinger’s argument is in favor of the “ideals” of postethnicity in a multicultural society--the notion that under the multiculturalist and pluralist framework, and specifically through the “revulsion against
ethno-racial prejudice,” diversities and multiplicities of individuals can thrive and bring together narratives of encounters of differences.

Nevertheless, as Hollinger’s terms such as “taking for granted” and “ideal” indicate, the focus on a universalist common ground is often faced with challenges and complexities of the political, social, cultural, and economic structures of the larger society and world. Other scholars, such as Ray Chow and Susan Koshy, thus contend that the anti-essentialist move to others and their differences under the celebrated pluralism and multiculturalism can often lead to the free floating idiom of multiplicity and hybridity without “actually confronting the conditions that enable such assumptions of noncoincidence to stand in the first place” (Chow, “The Interruption” 182). Suzan Koshy also warns that “formulaic invocations of “multiculturalism,” “hybridity,” “plural identities,” or “border-crossing” are used promiscuously without any effort to link them to the material, cultural or historical specificities of the various Asian American experiences” (“The Fiction” 316). Both Chow and Koshy are concerned more with fundamental structural issues concerning diversity and multiculturalism (the conditions that make possible coincidence or non-coincidence of differences in the first place), and how the idealistic impulse to cross borders of difference might blind people to the specificities of these differences and the ways in which they actually might and might not operate in reality.
Toline also brings up an issue of identity politics and its complexities through the relationship between the individual Asian American male, Ben Tanaka, and the culture in which he lives. Ben’s strong disapproval of the politicization of Asian American experience can at one level be understood as his desire to decouple himself from his Asian American group identity, and his attempt to return to the “personal dimensions of the self” that Appiah favorably speaks of: “I mean … maybe I’d care more if I ever felt like I’d been the victim of some kind of … discrimination of something” (15). Ben’s statement questions and problematizes the assumed link between individual and communal experiences of Asian America (racial discrimination and oppression, for instance), alerting readers “to the way racial typing comes to stand in for individual identity” (Palumbo-Liu, “Assumed” 766). Tomine, however, makes it clear to his readers that there is a price to pay for Ben’s move away from his Asian American ethnicity and identity. That is, Ben’s move comes at the cost of a total rejection of, not a critical revision and a balanced accommodation of, his Asian American ethnic and communal identities. This move leads Ben to self-imposed isolation and otherness (which Tomine visually makes clear at the theater scene), self-hatred and destructive impulse (“It’s almost like you’re ashamed to be Asian”), and increasing inscrutability in both the character-character (“I don’t understand why you have to get so angry”) and author-narrator-reader relations.
For instance, Tomine draws his readers to the irony of Ben's "progressive" political views through characters whose focalizations question Ben’s world views and influence readers’ responses to Ben. Ben and Alice recall their mutual friend from high school who “blamed all his problems on racism.” This "extreme" case of the coupling of Asian American individual and communal identities allows Alice to orient readers to Ben's shortcoming, the opposite side of the extremity that Ben is too blind to see: “Exactly! You’re like the total opposite of him. You refuse to see …” (16). Although Tomine leaves this conversation between Ben and Alice incomplete without Ben’s response, readers find themselves completing the sentence for Alice and Ben--how Ben is unable to come to terms with his Asian American ethnicity as an important part of his own individual identity formation. Through Miko's and Alice's perspectives, which function as filters for readers, as well as through the use of images that portray Ben’s self-imposed otherness and distance from his ethnic community, Tomine demonstrates that Ben’s “progressive” move beyond his identity is vexed with ambivalence, contradictions, and tensions.

In the course of Ben’s dates with his “white beauty ideals,” readers come to realize that Ben is more concerned with race than he lets on. Ben’s concerns prevent him from maintaining a secure relationship with Miko and forming healthy relationships with the white women he lusts after. When Ben fulfills his desire to date white women, readers discover that Ben’s sexual insecurity as an Asian man paralyzes his actions and emotions.
For instance, Ben meets Sasha, the white bisexual, and says to Alice in his most pathetic and insecure voice: “Maybe it’s a good thing if she’s a lesbian…she wouldn’t be so size-conscious” (56). What complicates Ben’s relationships with white women is the stereotype about Asian man’s “size” that Ben is so sharply aware of. Ben tells Alice that the main difference between Asian and Caucasian men is “the Cauc.” Ben remembers from his own experience how he was clearly reminded of this difference. Ben says, “I actually heard a girl tell that joke in college! I was standing right there” (57).

Ben’s sexual insecurity as an Asian male adds an odd twist to his earlier statement about race. Although Ben is opposed to politicization of race and refuses to be categorized by his racial identity, believing that he was never a victim of discrimination of any kind, Ben, as he confesses, was “standing right there” when his male identity was racialized and feminized in public through a racial joke. Ben’s keen awareness of his racialized male identity (Asian American man) is apparent here, as Ben himself reinforces the stereotype by defining the main difference between Asian and white men based on “ethnic” sexuality. The contradiction and irony of Ben’s relationship with his ethnic and racial identity significantly shape readers’ response to Ben. Ben’s conversation with Alice reveals to readers that Ben’s inability to identify himself with his Asian American ethnicity stems from his acute internalization of the traditional racial stereotype about Asian male as deficient and effeminate. In other words, Tomine shows his readers how the political (Asian American stereotype) and the personal (Ben's male identity)
converge in Ben's mind despite his refusal to see his life in political terms. Despite the initial inscrutability of Ben’s mind, as the novel progresses and more and more dialogues unfold, it becomes clearer to readers that this convergence affects Ben's inner and external life in a quite general and pervasive way. After all, Ben is the biggest victim of his own self-refusal, self-ignorance, and self-contradictions. These personal shortcomings of Ben’s own that he is unable to see and come to terms with, then, have great potentials to draw readers more sympathetically and empathetically to Ben.

Nevertheless, empathy and sympathy are not the only feelings that connect readers to the protagonist in *Shortcomings*. Tomine provokes and manifests diverse feelings in the mind of readers (empathy, guilt, discomfort, anxiety, ambivalence, responsibility) in order to a) increase readers’ sensitivity in their interaction with Ben, b) to lead the audiences to make more evaluative judgments about Ben and his mind, and c) to facilitate for readers more genuine and critical multicultural and pluralist experiences. Although any text and any writer can at once invite and deflect empathetic identification between readers and characters, thereby complicating readers’ responses to the characters, Tomine leverages this general aspect of narrative for his own specific thematic and rhetorical purposes—purposes having to do with a reconsideration of the stereotypes of Asian American inscrutability and masculinity, and answering the core question of alterity and identity politics, that is, what it means to interact/identify with the other and his/her differences in a critical and productive way. Tomine especially makes
strategic visual choices to derive diverse feelings and thinking from readers and to reframe them within given panel spaces.

For example, the poignancy of Ben’s internalized Asian American male stereotype and its influence on his mentality is vividly captured in a scene where Ben has his first sexual encounter with Sasha (figure 11). Like in many other panels, much of Ben’s figure is hidden in darkness. Ben's naked body (his Asian American male body) appears small, insignificant, and vulnerable. At the moment when Ben is about to remove his boxers, more than half of his body disappears into the dark background of the fifth panel. While Ben's body gestures and postures are only partially revealed, readers learn from Sasha’s comments that Ben is “actually shaking” (64). After the obscure depiction of Ben’s body, Tomine finally discloses Ben's face as he approaches Sasha’s face to kiss her (figure 12).
Figure 11: Shortcomings (64).
Readers are now allowed to confront the full exposure of Ben’s face. At the moment of his long-anticipated sexual encounter with his white ideal, Ben is sweating and his face is rigid. In these panels, Ben appears as though he is going through an experience that is more painful than exciting. Tomine manages his visualization of Ben quite differently here. Instead of using the dark background to obscure Ben’s mind, Tomine uses it in order to gradually show how overwhelmed Ben is (his figure is almost embedded in the darkness of the panels) at this moment of his dream-come-true. Tomine guides his readers to see and feel here the truly raw feelings of Ben’s insecurity and even fear.
Tome’s vivid visualization of Ben’s painful insecurity as an Asian male, which leads him to emotional and physical paralysis, is to enhance readers’ understanding of Ben’s characters (thereby diminishing his inscrutability to readers) and to guide readers to revisit more empathetically and critically their own ways of thinking and feeling about Ben and his personal shortcomings: his self-contradictions and negativity. Ben’s desiring the white ideal and also fearing that he does not have what it takes to attain this ideal reveals to readers that Ben in fact responds to cultural norms and narratives, and is significantly shaped by them. Ben’s negativity and insensitivity towards Miko and the politicization of Asian American ethnicity, as well as his own contradicting his relationship with his ethnic and racial identity, might all need to be seen within a broader set of cultural circumstances that need to bear some responsibility for his actions and reactions. Through this critical revision of Ben’s character in terms of his relationship with the cultural conditions under which he is living, Tomine allows his readers to re-construct their knowledge about Ben and delve more deeply into his inner life. Tomine’s readers, when guided this way, come to realize that Ben's mind and emotion system are more complex than his inscrutability and negative responses originally suggest. The idea of “border-crossing” loses its critical power when this term is used promiscuously and frequently without any consideration for specific racial, ethnic, and sexual groups and their conditions. Tomine, on the other hand, presents here a possibility of different kind of border-crossing between his readers and his protagonist by inviting readers’ active and
re-evaluative revisions and re-examinations Ben’s perspectives, the specificities of his mental and material life.

The final, third chapter of the novel provides most effectively an example of this critical bordering-crossing between readers and Ben. Tomine foregrounds in his narrative a process of simultaneous identification and dis-identification between readers and Ben as a strategy that can be useful for the study of alterity. As the chapter begins, readers learn with Ben that Miko, in fact, used the internship at Asian American Independent Film Center as her opportunity to move in with a white American photographer/fashion designer in New York. On the one hand Miko’s betrayal adds sympathy to readers’ evaluation of Ben. On the other hand, Ben's indignation and fury toward Miko's interracial relationship draw readers’ attention to Ben’s self-contradicting racialization of Asian American experience: “I mean, tell me you don’t agree that when you see a white guy with an Asian girl, it has certain connotations” (91). Although Ben is unable to see past race in Miko’s relationship (consider Ben's earlier complaints about everything turning into “some big statement about race”), Alice’s girlfriend, Meredith, accurately points out to Ben (and to readers) the irony of his view, given his own obsession with white girls: “Is your attraction to white women a sublimated form of assimilation?” (92)

As much as Tomine uses Miko’s betrayal as a way to reveal Ben’s shortcomings and contradictions, Miko's blatant unfaithfulness sheds negative light on Miko for the first time in the novel. Even Alice, whose view provides more objective third-person
perspective in the novel, does not hesitate to say, "I mean, now am I finally allowed to talk shit about her? Fucking two-faced bitch" (107). Surprisingly, Ben responds to Alice with utmost understanding and tenderness for Miko: "No. Don't. We all have our reasons" (107). Although readers see clearly Ben's double standards and hypocrisy in his argument with Meredith, readers are also made to feel uncertain whether to note Ben's "unfair" indignation ("I can't believe she'd fall for a fucking rice king. I can't fucking believe it") and thus detach themselves from Ben, or to dismiss Ben's contradictions and instead sympathize with him. Which direction does Tomine want his readers to move? Interestingly, Tomine’s visual choice at this moment of narrative further intensifies readers’ uncertainty about how to respond to Ben. Readers now see a panel of Miko’s hair spread against a pillow with floral patterns. It is an image from the photo that Miko's white American boyfriend took in the bedroom that Miko shared with Ben in California—an image that emphasizes Miko's infidelity. This, however, may also reminds more attentive readers of the strikingly similar image of Sasha’s blond hair spread against the exact same pillow, an image that readers might remember from the earlier scene of the novel, the moment of Ben's sexual encounter with Sasha (Figures 13 and 14).

Although there exist significant spatial and temporal gaps between these two images, and there is no verbal indication that links these two separate images together, Tomine’s visual at this particular narrative moment is designed to invite readers’ active participation and challenge their responses to Ben. That is to say, it is readers’ job to add
coherent narratives to the images by linking them together and considering what these
two images, once complete with narratives, might imply about Ben and readers’ ways of
thinking and feeling about him. Despite Ben's anti-heroic characteristics and constant
self-contradictions and double-standards, Tomine concurrently attempts to sidestep his
readers in order to show how Ben's shortcomings are vexed with his mental and material
conditions that lead to a series of false and self-damaging misunderstanding of himself
and others, which we all experience one way or another. Although Ben was unfair to
Miko, Ben is consequently deserted and betrayed by his girlfriend and must finally admit
that "we all have our reasons."

Figure 13 and 14: *Shortcomings* (65, 95)
The unstable nature of readers’ relationship with Ben, then, is the key to moving beyond identity and getting to identity at the same time. Identification with a character, whose mind is obscured by negativity and limited affect as well as his complex relationship with the cultural conditions under which he is living, in Tomine's novel functions as interpretive and affective lenses through which readers experience with Ben challenges of getting to know one’s self in his/her relationships with others. Because Ben is trapped in his contradictory double-thinking about race as played out in his sexual insecurity, he is kept from exploring further his life to its fullest extent. At the end of the novel, Miko finally makes clear for Ben his shortcomings that Tomine readers at the end of the novel also see and feel both empathetically and ambivalently: “You know what’s pathetic, Ben? Trying to hold onto something just because you’re pathologically afraid of change […] I think you also have a problem with […] weird self-hatred issues and just the relentless negativity” (102-103).

The last page of the novel focuses on Ben as he alone leaves New York (Figure 15). The total absence of verbal text in this page allows Tomine to once again attune readers to Ben’s overall moods. The aspect-to-aspect transition between the panels significantly slows down time (as it did in the earlier airport scene) and furnishes a long enough pause that orients readers to Ben’s static mental state. Tomine’s use of silence to end the graphic novel and to direct readers’ emotional engagement with Ben is salient.
The stasis and silence in Ben’s mind, visualized and spatialized in the panel space, function to stress the emotional intensity of a given moment. While Ben meditates on his inner-self without making any movement or sound, readers are more prompt to feel deeply Ben’s state of mind situated in the airplane—a place of liminality and in-betweenness suggestive, perhaps, of a kinesis of consciousness in some narrative space beyond the last page of the graphic novel. Although Ben might have missed the boat in terms of opening to a full intersubjective state with others, readers of the graphic novel,
when directed by the visual and verbal tools of the author, do come to establish an
intersubjective contact zone with Ben. And this contact zone, where our mind meets with
Ben's mind, is strategically and affectively liminal, open-ended, and suggestive, filled
with unresolved contradictions, tensions, and ambivalence. And this, Tomine seems to
suggest, is how our identity plays out in our life.

In *Shortcomings* Adrian Tomine strategically creates a not-so loveable anti-
protagonist, Ben Tanaka. Ben is sullen, bitterly critical, and filled to the brim with a
double-think that ultimately entraps him both psychologically and materially. Tomine’s
designing of Ben's anti-heroic characterization is to guide his readers to maintain
objective distance from him and critically evaluate his mind and actions. Concurrently,
the initial inscrutability of Ben's mind and his negative emotional responses warn readers
that any immediate and quick judgment and reading of Ben's actions and emotions will
take them only to the shallow surface of Ben's exterior, his seemingly angry and
frustrated face, body, and movement. By gradually revealing the depth of Ben's interior
fraught with his self-othering contradictions and ambivalence, Tomine asks his readers to
carefully and critically relate to Ben to better understand his consciousness and identity
make-up inflected by the given social and emotional landscape of the society surrounding
him. Although the novel ends with unresolved tensions and contradictions of Ben's mind
and behaviors, when Ben says "We all have our reasons" at the novel's end, readers are
invited to join the interactive and intersubjective space with Ben as "we" that Ben reflexively refers to.

In the next chapter, I continue the discussion of the stereotype about Asian American mind as it unfolds in a short story form—the innovative ways in which the formal, cultural, and historical strategies intersect in the short stories by Hisaye Yamamoto.
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Chapter 3: Hisaye Yamamoto’s Short Stories: Silence as Formal, Thematic, and Rhetorical Strategies in the Character-Character and Author-Narrator-Reader Relations

Short story as a literary genre differs from other short narratives such as tales and myths. In order to be classified as short story, a text must be short, but it should also satisfy “not simply the requirements of narrativehood (represent one or more events) but the requirements of storyhood” (Prince “The long,” 328), representing complexities and varieties of themes, characters, plots, and structures, and their development. Some of the other theorists, on the other hand, have paid attention to features such as closure (absent in open-ended stories), dramatic conflict (missing in plotless stories), and metaphysical substructures (underlying apparently realistic stories) as crucial elements that distinguish the short story from other narrative forms (see The Columbia Companion). Although fickle and contentious in its form and definition, it might be safe to conclude more generally that the short story is a literary work that is long enough for full development and short enough to be read in a single setting with “a placidity and thematic span that makes reading [it] a wondrous surprise” (Gelfant The Columbia 2).

In this chapter, I study Hisaye Yamamoto’s two short stories, “Seventeen Syllables” (1949) and “Wilshire Bus” (1950) to test and examine Yamamoto’s engagement with the genre in her attempt to reframe the stereotype of Asian American inscrutability—to see how the author invites her readers quickly into the plot, and allows
them to explore complexities of Asian American characters’ consciousnesses within the short form of the short story. I investigate the link between Yamamoto’s method of narration and silence, Asian American inscrutability in a linguistic form. Silence has been commonly used in Japanese culture and art as a means of aesthetics. Masao Miyoshi in *Accomplices of Silence* (1974), for instance, explains that Japanese culture is primarily a visual culture, rewarding “reticence” than eloquence (xv). Miyoshi continues to say that similarly in Japanese art, “it is not articulation but the sublet art of silence that is valued. […] Often, the scene of the Japanese novel is set by suggestion and evocation rather than description” (xv).

Yamamoto’s use of silence is different. Yamamoto foregrounds silence in her writing as a crucial literary strategy to satisfy her communicative, thematic, political, and rhetorical ends. While silence in character-character relation often leads to inscrutability, Yamamoto favors strategies of indirection in her communication to her audiences. James Phelan defines character narration as “an art of indirection,” a technique that allows the author to communicate “to her audience by means of the character narrator’s communication to a narratee” (*Living* 1). The significance of character narration, Phelan adds, consists in “the author’s ability to make the single text function effectively for its two audiences (the narrator’s and the author’s, or to use the technical terms, the narrate and the authorial audience) and its two purposes (author’s and character narrator’s) while also combining in one figure (the “I”) the roles of both narrator and character” (1).
Although Yamamoto in her two short stories deploys a third-person narrator, not a character narrator that Phelan speaks of, Yamamoto effectively uses art of indirection through her strategic orchestration of silence in the character-character dynamics. Yamamoto communicates with her readers via the character-character silence, revealing both the thematic significances in character-character relationship, and her own rhetorical concerns in author-narrator-reader relationship.

Interestingly, too, Yamamoto engages with different styles of third person narration and different kinds of silence in each story. In “Seventeen Syllables,” for instance, Yamamoto uses what Dorrit Cohn in *Transparent Minds* (1978) calls “consonant” narration to show that the narrator’s knowledge of focalizing character’s psyche coincides with the character’s self-knowledge. This has a significant impact on readers’ reading of character-character silence. Precisely because the narrator’s perceptual and attitudal stance remains more or less closely aligned with that of a focalizing character, in order for readers to decipher inscrutability foregrounded in character-character relation, they need more information and cues than what the narrator’s narration could reveal to them. As a result, Yamamoto’s readers turn to the larger context and structure of the story, events, progressions, and actions that together convey indirectly Yamamoto’s messages. In “Wilshire Bus,” on the other hand, one can see Yamamoto’s use of what Cohn calls “dissonant” narration that directs readers to “the narrator’s superior knowledge of the character’s inner life and his superior ability to
present it and assess it” (29). Dissonant narration in “Wilshire Bus” shapes readers’ reading and evaluating of character-character silence in significant ways. Although the focalizing character of the story, Esther, remains inscrutable and silent, the third person narrator through his/her dissonant narration reveals to readers that Esther is in fact covering up her real feelings and thoughts by the expression of something else. Narrator’s cognitive privilege over Esther’s inner world discloses something that Esther refuses to reveal, influencing in turn readers’ reading and evaluating of her thoughts, feelings, and actions.

In my discussion of the first story, “Seventeen Syllables,” I use tools such as narrative progression, delayed disclosure, and theory of mind in order to show that silence exists both in character-character and author-narrator-reader relations. This silence, I posit, works as an effective communicative and thematic strategy between the author and readers, and discloses the poignancy of repressed emotions and desires among different generations. Especially by using silence that is interpersonal and situated in family relationship (daughter-mother relationship), Yamamoto in “Seventeen Syllables” effectively questions issues of generation gap and feminist criticism, among others. In “Wilshire Bus,” I examine ethical implications of silence through the Japanese American Esther’s act of turning away--turning away from the historical and cultural reality of postwar America. Silence in “Wilshire Bus” differs, since silence in this story has to do with Esther’s failure to speak up in a public place among people that she does not know.
This kind of silence in the story allows for the study of in-group and out-group categorizations, and how they complicate both Esther’s empathetic feelings for her fellow Chinese American and the reader’s ethical evaluation of Esther’s actions. Esther’s non-verbal activity and her interior monologue suggest not only the depth of her inner life, but more importantly, the politics and ethics of silence laden with the irony of self-deception and ignorance.

**Art of Silence in “Seventeen Syllables”**

The opening of “Seventeen Syllables” provides a perfect model for the typical “indirect” and “ambiguous” Japanese communication style that is “designed not to communicate ideas but to feel out the other person’s mood and attitudes” (Christopher, *The Japanese* 43):

The first Rosie knew that her mother had taken to writing poems was one evening when she finished one and read it aloud for her daughter’s approval. It was about cats, and Rosie pretended to understand it thoroughly and appreciate it no end, partly because she hesitated to disillusion her mother about the quantity and quality of Japanese she had learned in all the years now that she had been going to Japanese school every Saturday […] “Yes, yes, I understand. How utterly lovely,” Rosie said, and her mother, either satisfied or seeing through the deception and resigned, went back to composing. (8 emphasis mine)

Yamamoto's portrayal of the communication between the second-generation daughter, Rosie Hayashi, and the first-generation mother, Tome Hayashi, reveals interesting communicative dynamics that indeed interrupt a fluid conversation. The mother is waiting for her daughter’s “approval” of her Japanese poetry (haiku), while the
daughter, whose knowledge of Japanese is insufficient to appreciate the mother’s poetry, must pretend not to “disillusion her mother about the quantity and quality” of her Japanese. Tome’s response, on the other hand, is rather ambiguous both to Rosie and readers. Instead of reporting more definitively what Tome’s response really means, the third person narrator of the story gives readers two possibilities—“either satisfied or seeing through the deception”—without confirming either. From the very beginning of the story, through the indirectness and ambiguity of the conversation between Rosie and Tome and a use of third person narrator who is unable to interpret for readers the ambiguous nature of Tome’s reaction, Yamamoto exposes her readers to the tension that is not resolved until the very end, the enigmatic inscrutability and silence between Rosie and Tome. Given that the primary role of a conventional communication is an interchanging and sharing of information and knowledge, the mode of communication between Rosie and Tome appears inefficient and incomplete. The conversation ends only after Rosie and Tome “feel out” each other’s moods and attitudes through their deceptive and evasive “approval” and resignation. In the meantime, readers have hard time assessing Tome’s mind.

The communicative efficiency between Rosie and Tome, however, does not necessarily lie in a direct exchange of information or knowledge. Sociologist Stanford Lyman, for instance, examines a Japanese interactional style, and notes that “[b]luntness of speech is not a virtue among Nisei. […] It is the duty of the listener to ascertain the
context of the speech he hears and to glean from his knowledge of the speaker and the context just what is the important point” (“Generation” 53 emphasis mine). Given how openly Yamamoto spoke of the influence of Japanese tradition on her writing (“I am sure the Japanese tradition has had a great influence on my writing since my parents brought it with them from Japan and how could they not help but transmit it to us?”), Lyman’s remark sheds light on the pattern we find in Rosie and Tome’s conversation. On Rosie’s part, “[i]t was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when one meant no, no” (8) in order to avoid “bluntness of speech” and any further linguistic complications with her mother. Having no common language to share with Tome, and given Tome’s apparent plea for Rosie’s “approval” of her poetry (Rosie’s knowledge of the “speaker” and the “context”), it is inevitable and necessary for Rosie to politely pretend and say “yes” rather than “no.”

On Tome’s part, Tome strategically and consciously manifests silence as a considerate and neutral response to a situation that could potentially embarrass her communicative partner and daughter, Rosie. In order not to humiliate Rosie for her incompetent Japanese, and finding no way to challenge the genuineness of Rosie’s response in a language that Tomie mutually shares with Rosie, Tome makes a practical and thoughtful move to ambiguously and silently exits the scene.

As much as silence in Rosie and Tome’s conversation is a cultural phenomenon that challenges what the West might consider as a direct and efficient mode of communication, it is also a mode of writing and storytelling for Yamamoto. Yamamoto
makes a great use of the “subtle art of silence” (Miyoshi, *Accomplices* xv) in order, first, to enable communication (albeit ambiguous and deceptive) between Rosie and Tomie despite the generational and linguistic obstacles between them. Rosie and Tome can avoid conflicts and save each other’s feelings and face. On the other hand, silence in character-character relation works as a rhetorical tool through which Yamamoto indirectly communicates with her audiences. Through the unresolved tension and inscrutability between Rosie and Tome, Yamamoto draws readers’ attention to the difficulties that the generational, cultural, and linguistic gaps between Rosie and Tome cause to the daughter-mother relationship. In other words, Yamamoto deploys silence more as a formal device that operates as a key to the making of her story world rather than as an abstract cultural concept that leads to a series of mystifications about Japanese silence--mystifications bearing on Japanese inscrutability as a cultural and ethnic characteristic.

Interestingly, the purpose and function of Tome’s silence are twofold. On the one hand, the silence in Rosie and Tome’s conversation contributes to Rosie’s limited point of view about her mother, and undercuts her access to Tome’s consciousness, rendering Tome inscrutable in character-character relation. On the other hand, Tome’s silence provides herself a private space of her own within which she expresses herself through an act of haiku writing. Soon after the story unfolds, Tome adopts a pen name, Ume Hanazono, and starts writing haiku for a Japanese daily newspaper. Whereas Tome as
Rosie’s mother and Mr. Hayashi’s wife is the usual familiar figure whose routine is easily readable and predictable, preparing for meals, cleaning the house, and working in the family farm, Tome as Ume Hanazono is an inscrutable and impenetrable “stranger”: “Ume Hanazono, who came to life after the dinner dishes were done, was an earnest, muttering stranger who often neglected speaking when spoken to and stayed busy at the parlor table as late as midnight scribbling with pencil on scratch paper or carefully copying characters on good paper with her fat, pale green Parker” (9). As soon as Tome “[comes] to life” as an eager, earnest haiku writer, Ume Hanazono, she ironically becomes “lifeless” to Rosie. To Rosie, Ume Hanazono is a “muttering stranger,” not a passionate literary aficionado, who often remains silent and neglects speaking “when spoken to.” Especially when Ume Hanazono isolates herself from the surroundings to focus on her writing, Tome’s inscrutability even threatens the normality of the Hayashi family with some significant “repercussions on the household routine” (9). As Rosie observes, Ume Hanazono’s silence and inscrutability divide the family into two separate categories, the literary and the non-literary groups: “Before, Rosie had been accustomed to her parents and herself taking their hot baths early and going to bed almost immediately afterwards […] Now if a group of friends came over, it was bound to contain someone who was also writing haiku, and the small assemblage would be split in two, her father entertaining the non-literary members and her mother comparing ecstatic notes with the visiting poet” (9).
Rosie’s limited access to Tome's (Ume Hanazono) consciousness evokes inscrutability and tension in character-character relation. By the same token, Yamamoto makes important narrative choices in order to establish the same kind of tension in the author-narrator-reader relation, which does not lead to a complete silence, but to an art of indirection. For instance, Yamamoto allows only little distance between Rosie and the narrator by introducing Rosie as a primary focalizer of the story, whose perception and knowledge the third person narrator adopts to tell the story (consonant narrator). Rosie’s limited access to her mother restricts the narrator’s evaluation of Tome’s thoughts and feelings, thereby restricting in turn the reader’s immediate access to Tome’s interiority. Ume Hanazono as seen through Rosie’s focalization and retold through the narrator’s restricted narration is removed and detached, and this is how readers get to experience Tome the haiku writer. Consequently, the “ecstatic notes” that Tome compares with “the visiting poet” alienates Tome not only from Rosie, but also from the great mass of Yamamoto’s English speaking readers whose knowledge of Japanese and haiku is as limited as that of Rosie’s.

Nevertheless, Tome’s inscrutability in the character-character and author-narrator-reader relations does more than simply restricting Rosie’s, the narrator’s, and readers’ access to Tome’s interiority. Yamamoto as the implied author of the story (a textual construction of the real author who is responsible for the designing of the text) orchestrates the production and consumption of Tome’s inscrutability behind the back of
the narrator in ways that prompt readers to more actively explore the specific working of silence as an alternative, indirect mode of communication in both the character-character and author-narrator-reader relations. Interestingly, unlike many other short story writers who “try to build up suspense in the shortest time possible,” Yamamoto constantly diverts readers’ attention “with apparently irrelevant details” (Cheung, *Articulate* 37).

Right after Rosie’s description of Tome as a “muttering stranger,” for instance, the Hayashi family travels to the neighboring town to visit the Hayano family. And it is during this random visit to the Hayano family that readers witness for the first time Tome’s interaction with people in a context outside her usual home environment.

Focus of the story is now on the new coat that one of the four Hayano girls, Haru, proudly presents to Rosie, “Oh, you must see my new coat!” (10). Rosie’s response to Haru’s coat betrays Haru’s excitement and pride: “It was a pale plaid of grey, sand, and blue, with an enormous collar, and Rosie, seeing nothing special in it, said, “Gee, how nice” (10). Haru’s disappointment towards Rosie’s plain and unenthusiastic response is apparent, as Haru contests, “Nice? […] Is that all you can say about it? It’s gorgeous!” (10). Haru thus breaks into the adult conversation and displays her coat to Tome. And Tome, unlike Rosie, elicits contented giggling from Haru by responding more properly and favorably, “May I inherit it when you’re through with it?” (10). Tome’s playfully childlike and thoughtfully exaggerated manner makes a stark contrast not only with Rosie’s disinterested and mundane response to her peer, but also with Rosie’s earlier
observation of her mother as a “muttering stranger,” whose inscrutability had “some repercussions on the household routine.” That is, although the interaction among Rosie, Tome, and Haru over Haru’s new coat is seemingly irrelevant and insignificant, and might not be necessary for plot dynamics, this incident is integral to readerly dynamics. The event in fact reveals significant errors in Rosie’s observation of Tome and the narrator’s retelling of that observation, influencing readers’ knowledge, understanding, and affective responses to the characters (see Phelan’s “Principle of Affective Relevance” in *Reading People, Reading Plots*). Yamamoto’s art of diversion, then, is to orient readers to the gaps and restrictions in Rosie’s perspectives and narrator’s narration. As readers navigate through these gaps, the seemingly irrelevant details of the story, readers come to re-evaluate and reinterpret Tome’s seeming silence and inscrutability, reconstructing “the assumptions, beliefs, norms, meanings, and purposes of the text” (Phelan, *Living* 39).

It is precisely in this manner that Yamamoto weaves into her story issues of feminism and the generation gap—by distracting her readers with seemingly meaningless events and details, and thereby delaying important moments of thematic disclosures. When Yamamoto was asked about her views on the politics of writing, she asserted, “I have no message. […] I don’t want to tell anybody anything. I just want to write—because writing is the easiest thing for me to do” (quoted in Higashida, 35). Yamamoto’s statement is ironic. How can any story (writing) be without a message? How can a writer
avoid telling anybody anything when writing is also a storytelling? To better understand Yamamoto’s statement one needs to look more closely into the ways in which Yamamoto writes, the ways in which she communicates with her readers by not telling them anything. Instead of directly and didactically orienting readers’ attention to the politics and themes of the story, Yamamoto as the implied author chooses silence as her mode of communication and asks her readers to put together the untold meanings and messages of the story. By inviting readers to take an active role in constructing, not only consuming, the story, Yamamoto places greater rhetorical and cognitive responsibilities on readers.

The gaiety and excitement surrounding Haru’s coat abruptly comes to a halt as Tome starts discussing haiku with Mr. Hayano and unknowingly provokes Mr. Hayashi to suddenly leave the host family. While Tome apologizes to the Hayano family about Mr. Hayashi’s abruptness and rudeness in exiting the house, Rosie does not share with Tome Tome's embarrassment, as Rosie had “no desire to stay” anyway (11). Heading home, Tome starts talking to Mr. Hayashi and apologizes to him for her haiku: “I’m sorry,” her mother said. “You must be tired.” […] “You know how I get when it’s haiku,” she continued, “I forget what time it is.” He only grunted”’ (12). What follows next, the highly visual, allusive, and suggestive description of Rosie’s consciousness, is worth noting:

As they rode homeward silently, Rosie, sitting between, felt a rush of hate for both—for her mother for begging, for her father for denying her mother. I wish this old Ford would crash, right now, she thought, then immediately, no, no, I wish my father would laugh, but it was too late: crumpled in the dark against one
of the mighty eucalyptus trees they were just riding past, of the three contorted, bleeding bodies, one of them hers. (12)

Yamamoto in this passage makes vivid her thematic message to readers through the very silence in character-character relation. While no one in the passage speaks, Rosie’s consciousness discloses slowly the delicacy and complexity of her relationship with her parents. Although Rosie was indifferent to their sudden departure from the Hayano family, Rosie is now upset not only with her father, but also with her mother “for begging.” Rosie at one point imagines themselves in a car crash, but she immediately regrets and hopes that her father will laugh. Moreover, it seems as though Rosie is not only upset with her parents, but with herself, too (and thus imagining all three of them, her father, mother, and herself, bleeding in a car crash). Rosie’s ambivalent feelings towards her parents, the situation, and herself is clear to readers, but what she really thinks of the very source of begging and denying in this scene, the haiku, is not clear. The third person narrator of the story stops short of further elaborating on Rosie’s deeper consciousness surrounding the mother’s haiku. Tension and instability remain in the mind of readers, and it is readers’ job to explore further the passage and what message it might be withholding behind its silence. Being able to identify neither with her mother’s haiku nor with her father’s irritation towards her mother, Rosie’s mind is filled with indecisiveness, helplessness, guilt, regret, and even self-hatred. The above passage through its very ambiguity and silence poignantly illustrates the challenges that Tome’s
haiku poses to Rosie’s full identification with her mother, Tome, and her understanding of herself in her relation to the mother.

Tome’s haiku in this regard is highly ironic. Although haiku is a method of self-expression for Tome, Tome’s presence is effaced from Rosie as soon as Tome takes up the role of a haiku writer. In the face of Tome’s haiku, Rosie is driven to a state of ambivalence and alienation from the mother. In other words, Yamamoto challenges the notion of female silence as a means of female communication by placing it specifically within Tome’s haiku, within a Japanese American cultural frame of the generation gap between issei mother and nisei daughter. Feminist scholars have often drawn a parallel between female language and silence in order to illustrate formally and thematically “the many barriers to female expressions” (Cheung, *Articulate* 4). That is, the “many barriers to female expressions” in oppressive patriarchal societies and cultures have historically prompted females and female writers to find ways to represent themselves without being noticed and interrupted by the dominant power. Joan Radner and Susan Lanser, for instance, developed theories such as “strategies of coding” to show the innovative, secretive, and exclusive ways in which women and women writers express “ideas and attitude proscribed by the dominant culture” (“The Feminist” 412). Although oppressed and repressed, women (or women’s texts) often operate “within the dialectic of speech and silence,” and negotiate “a compromise between revelation and concealment of the forbidden through textual disguise” (Friedman, “The Return” 142), using strategies that
include appropriation, juxtaposition, distraction, indirection, trivialization, and incompetence, for instance (see Radner and Lanser’s “the six coding strategies”).

Rosie’s relationship with Tome indicates that the cultural, social, and linguistic discrepancies between the issei mother and nisei daughter can undermine female bonding and silence (the “strategies of coding”) as a way of female communication. To Rosie, Tome’s haiku (Japanese culture and language) turns her mother into the inscrutable Ume Hanazono whose silence Rosie is unable to decipher. Although Rosie feels for and respects her mother’s haiku, Yamamoto’s readers understand that Rosie’s “yes” towards Tome does not come from a complete comprehension of the mother, but from the necessity and obligation fraught with sympathy, alienation, and ambivalence towards Tome: “It was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when one meant no, no” (8). The previous image of the three bleeding bodies in Rosie’s imagination and her immediate regret subtly and yet effectively direct readers to the depth and complexities of Rosie’s simultaneous identification and dis-identification with her mother, the ambivalent “yes” that leads both Rosie and Tome to the incommunicable and unresolvable silence.

Instead of immediately investigating the thematic significance of Tome’s silence by focusing directly on Rosie-Tome relationship, however, Yamamoto communicates to her audiences by constructing two narrative tracks that eventually intersect at the ending: Tome and her writing of haiku and its effect on her family life (and vice versa); Rosie and her relationship with Jesus, a son of the Mexican Carrascos family that the Hayashi
family hires for farming. As the focus of the story moves to Rosie’s sexual awakening with Jesus, Yamamoto’s readers are again diverted away from the silence between Rosie and Tome, and its thematic disclosure. Jesus asks Rosie to meet with him one night at the packing shed. Reluctantly and yet with great excitement, Rosie secretly leaves her home during a visit from the mother’s sister and her husband. At the packing shed that Rosie and Jesus promised to meet, Rosie and Jesus share their first kiss:

When he took hold of her empty hand, she could find no words to protest; her vocabulary had become distressingly constricted and she thought desperately that all that remained intact now was yes and no and oh, and even these few sounds would not easily out. Thus kissed by Jesus, Rosie fell for the first time entirely victim to a helplessness delectable beyond speech. (14)

Although Yamamoto’s diversion to Rosie-Jesus plot may be distracting to some of readers, emergence of this plot in fact gives Yamamoto’s readers an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of “silence” in its relation to passion and desire through Rosie. In doing so, Yamamoto leads her readers to discover a significant juxtaposition between Rosie and Tome. Rosie in her first physical exchange with Jesus may strangely remind readers of the ways in which Rosie misunderstands Tome when she switches her role to Ume Hanazono. Ume Hanazono, the eloquent haiku writer, is an “earnest, muttering stranger” to Rosie. When her mother writes haiku, her words disappear, and she withdraws herself to the parlor table and occupies herself with her pen and paper. Even if Tome manages to create a place of her own through her poetry writing and experiences power of creativity and privacy, Rosie is unable to read her mother and her intense
pleasure as a haiku writer. Interestingly, Rosie in the powerful moment of desire enacted shows a response similar to how Rosie would describe her mother at the moment of her creative self enacted. Rosie only whispers “yes and no and oh,” looking very much like her mother, the “muttering stranger.”

Sau-ling Wong has noted that “sexual desire, ‘primitive’ in origin, profoundly pleasurable, and intensely private, is an apt metaphor for the basic human drive to seek individual fulfillment” (Reading 7). If Tome seeks her individual fulfillment through her passion for haiku, Rosie does so through her growing sexual desire for Jesus. And just as Tome’s passion is held back by her reality as the first-generation Japanese American mother and wife, who is supposed to keep the “household routine” without any diversions, Rosie’s sexual awakening, the “terrible, beautiful sensation,” too, renders Rosie speechless and helpless, taking her back to the reality: “But the terrible, beautiful sensation lasted no more than a second, and the reality of Jesus lips and tongue and teeth and hands made her pull away with such strength that she nearly tumbled” (14). Although Rosie is unable to read her mother’s inner world when she turns to a passionate haiku writer, her mother’s inscrutability to Rosie is indicative of depth of her consciousness, the depth that she is unable to share with Rosie and the rest of the family. Likewise, Rosie’s failure to communicate and express the intensity of her desire and awakening signals the depth of her intense pleasure. The temptation for the “profoundly pleasurable and intensely private” individual passion and the restrictions that follow are precisely what
Rosie shares so intimately with her mother, although Rosie is unable to notice it. By distracting readers to Rosie-Jesus plot, Yamamoto triggers an important cognitive activity in the mind of readers and invites them to reconstruct conceptual and structural wholes of the work that “give the text its particular shape” (Phelan, Living 49). Yamamoto’s use of multiple plots through diversions in “Seventeen Syllables,” then, is the author’s way of communicating with her readers while strategically avoiding any direct conversation.

The tension of separateness, the “repercussions” of Tome’s haiku on the Hayashi family’s household routine, arises again right before the story ends. In the middle of the field work, the Hayashi family receives an unexpected visit from Mr. Kuroda, a haiku editor of the San Francisco based Japanese newspaper, Mainichi Shimbun. It turns out that Tome’s haiku won the first prize at the newspaper’s haiku contest, and Mr. Kuroda was bringing a traditional Japanese painting as a surprise gift for Tome. Pleased and humbly honored, Tome invites the editor inside the home for a cup of tea, while Rosie and her father are left behind in the field. Shortly after Tome’s withdrawal with Mr. Kuroda, Mr. Hayashi expresses to Rosie his frustration towards Tome: “‘Ha, your mother’s crazy!’ Rosie’s father said, and Rosie laughed uneasily as she resumed judgment on the tomatoes. She had emptied six lugs when he broke into an imaginary conversation with Jesus to tell her to go and remind her mother of the tomatoes, and she went slowly” (17). Rosie’s “imaginary conversation” with Jesus, her (forbidden) pursuit of individual fulfillment (the sexual desire), is suddenly interrupted by the father’s
accusation of her mother being “crazy.” Rosie’s uneasy and slow response to her father again shows the increasing tension in Rosie’s mind, her ambivalent reluctance to assist the father in his efforts to interrupt Tome’s (forbidden) individual fulfillment (passion for haiku). Rosie complies with her father’s request and heads home, where Tome is discussing haiku with Mr. Kuroda:

Abashed in the great man’s presence […] she started to whisper the message, but her mother pushed her gently away and reproached, “You are not being very polite to our guest.” “Father says the tomatoes…” Rosie said aloud, smiling foolishly. “Tell him I shall only be a minute,” her mother said, speaking the language of Mr. Kuroda.” (17)

Although Rosie’s reluctant response to her father’s request to bring the mother back to the field, that is, from the inscrutable Ume Hanazono to the familiar Tome Hayashi, shows the possibility of bonding between Rosie and Tome, there still exists a significant gap between the daughter and mother. Because Tome as Ume Hanazono speaks “the language of Mr. Kuroda,” the great man whose presence makes Rosie abashed, Rosie is yet again alienated from her mother and her passion she seems to share only with the great stranger. The discrepancies (linguistic, cultural, and generational) between Rosie and Tome make their communication indirect and ambiguous, and their parallel passions incompatible. As Rosie returns to the field without her mother, Mr. Hayashi surprises everyone--Rosie, Tome, Mr. Kuroda, and readers--by smashing the picture that Mr. Kuroda brought for Tome. Mr. Hayashi’s violent disapproval of Tome’s haiku presents an immediate disruption to Rosie and Tome. This violence, in

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consequence, guides Rosie and Tome to directly confront the restrictions of their shared reality for the first time. Rosie and Tome are finally brought together in a shockingly revealing and devastating manner. After Mr. Kuroda hurriedly leaves the Hayashi family, Rosie and Tome watch the wreckage of the painting in dying fire. And in front of this dying fire, Rosie’s and Tome’s stories converge at last. Instead of retreating to her silence and exploring her inner thoughts and feelings as the inscrutable haiku writer, Ume Hanazono, Tome openly and directly shares with Rosie the secrets behind her marriage and silence, spelling out a cautionary tale for Rosie’s growing desire for Jesus. Tome tells Rosie that she was pregnant before immigrating to America by a lover she could not marry due to their different social status. Tome gave premature birth to a stillborn son in Japan, and as an alternative to suicide, she came to America and married Mr. Hayashi.

At the end of her tale and amid Rosie’s great confusion and shock, Tome kneels on the floor and urgently appeals to Rosie, “Promise me you will never marry!” (19). Now, Rosie, “who has newly experienced the thrills of romance, must look squarely at her mother’s chastening marriage and review her adolescent world through the darkening lens of Mrs. Hayashi’s hindsight” (Cheung, “Double” 284). Shocked more by the request than the revelation, Rosie secretly reminds herself of “Jesus”:

Jesus, Jesus, she called silently, not certain whether she was invoking the help of the son of the Carrascos or of God, until there returned sweetly the memory of Jesus’ hand, how it had touched her and where […] Promise, her mother whispered fiercely, promise. Yes, yes, I promise, Rosie said. But for an instant she turned away, and her mother, hearing the familiar glib agreement, released her. Oh, you, you, you, her eyes and twisted mouth said, you fool. Rosie, covering
her face, began at last to cry, and the embrace and consoling hand came much later than she expected. (19)

Interestingly, this last scene simultaneously ends and starts the story. For the very first time in the story, Tome directly confronts Rosie and asks her not to marry in order to protect her from the same fate of tragic love and marriage that might constrain Rosie’s social and individual advancements. While unwillingly complying with the mother’s proposal, Rosie is already thinking of Jesus and reminds herself of his hand, “how it had touched her and where.” It is clear to readers that despite Tome’s concerns and fear, Rosie’s romance has already launched. Rosie’s ambiguous and reluctant answer, “Yes, yes, I promise,” takes readers back to the opening dialogue between Rosie and Tome that was filled with indirection and deceit: “Yes, yes, I understand. How utterly lovely” (8). Again for Rosie, “[i]t was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when one meant no, no” (8). Although probably “seeing through the deception” (8) this time again, Tome embraces Rosie with the “consoling hand” that came much later than Rosie expected. What is different about this last scene, however, is that Tome does not simply resign and go back to her composing. Instead, Tome approaches Rosie and provides her daughter her “consoling hand.” While still fraught with ambiguity, ambivalence, and indirection, Tome’s last gesture suggests, as Stan Yogi observes, “the maturity that Mrs. Hayashi now expects of her daughter, who has been initiated into the excitement, pain, and disillusionment of adult life” (“Legacies” 174).
Both Rosie and Tome remain ambivalent and silent (Rosie with her indirect and ambiguous “yes,” and Tome with her incomplete “Oh, you, you, you”) till the end of the story. Character-character silence, in other words, still remains at the center of the story, at the center of the daughter-mother relationship. Despite the inscrutability between Rosie and Tome, and although the third person narrator of the story still provides readers limited access to what Rosie and Tome might be really thinking and feeling, Yamamoto’s readers through the author’s art of indirection come to experience with Rosie and Tome the painful effects of human limitations upon this dramatic convergence of Rosie’s and Tome’s silence. When Tome’s silence finally breaks after Mr. Hayashi’s devastating violence, readers learn that Tome’s pursuit of self-advancement is permanently gone. Likewise, even if Rosie’s sexual passion and desire have just begun, the ambiguous clasping of Rosie’s and Tome’s hands imply that Rosie’s stories will be re-articulated within a circle of the same reality that Rosie shares with her mother, “the excitement, pain, and disillusionment of adult life.” There seems to be no “resolution” in Yamamoto’s story. Due to the absence of more direct resolution and completeness, however, readers may see most clearly and poignantly how the non-verbal interactions in the character-character and author-narrator-reader relations could tell a story that is richer and deeper than any direct verbal interactions might be able to tell. Yamamoto’s story has just ended with ambivalent and incomplete “yes” and “oh,” but a further exploration of the story is now available to readers.
Ethics of Silence, Ethics of Looking Away in “Wilshire Bus”

Yamamoto in "Seventeen Syllables" demystifies stereotype of the inscrutable Oriental through her innovative use of silence in a conventional indirect and ambiguous Japanese conversation style. Silence in character-character relation proves to be a mode of communication between Rosie and Tome, and captures the intricacy and complexities of the issei mother and nisei daughter relationship. The indirectness and ambiguity of Rosie-Tome interactional style significantly delay the sharing of their secrets and the meeting of their consoling hands. Nevertheless, it is the very silence between Rosie and Tome through which the daughter and mother pursue their forbidden parallel passions, Rosie’s growing sexual desire and Tome’s haiku writing. This silence ultimately brings Rosie and Tome together to acknowledge and possibly face limits of their reality that they intimately share despite the linguistic, generational, and cultural discrepancies between them. In author-narrator-reader relations, on the other hand, silence is a strategic method of indirect communication between the author and audiences. Yamamoto’s use of diversions, multiple plots, and restricted narration effectively delay important thematic disclosures and instead create gaps that readers must fill in to complete the story. These gaps prompt Yamamoto’s readers to participate in the story world more actively, to reconstruct the meanings, norms, and values of the story with the author. Through the very silence in the gaps and without being direct or didactic, Yamamoto succeeds in conveying her messages to her readers.
My second case study for this chapter, Yamamoto's "Wilshire Bus," is set in post-World War II Los Angeles and recounts a disturbing episode that happened during the Japanese American protagonist Esther Kuroiwa’s bus ride to visit her husband in a soldiers’ home. Silence in “Wilshire Bus” can be thought of in relation to Esther’s acute self-consciousness about her Japanese identity in the postwar era of America. At first glance, Esther’s silence seems to represent the conventional mode of Japanese politeness concerned primarily with belonging and fitting in, or “to become and remain accepted by the other members of the group” (Matsumoto, “Reexamination” 407). Through her calm, contemplating, and silent exterior, that is, without exposing herself and provoking her surroundings and “the other members of the group,” Esther politely and quietly preserves her position and remains “accepted” within the given circumstances. As the story about her interethnic encounter on the bus unfolds, however, readers are invited to explore more deeply the interior of Esther’s silence and what Esther’s peaceful exterior refuses to reveal—the complex ways in which Esther’s mind struggles with her own emotions, memories, and conscience within the given social and historical circumstances of postwar America.

Whereas the narrator’s role in “Seventeen Syllables” is restricted to reflecting as closely and objectively as possible Rosie’s thoughts and feelings without any evaluation or interpretation, the narrator of “Wilshire Bus” is given a role of reproducing the tone of Esther’s thoughts and feelings by more actively evaluating, interpreting, and translating
Esther’s consciousness in ways that influence readers’ perceptions about Esther. What distinguishes the third-person narrator in “Wilshire Bus” from that of “Seventeen Syllables,” then, is the ways in which her manner of reporting unsettles the key distinction between narrator (who speaks) and focalizer (who sees). The narrator in "Wilshire Bus" is allowed not only to speak, but also to see, think, and feel, that is, to perceive. Structuralist theory of narrative maintains that each narrative text has two parts, story (the what/content of narrative) and discourse (the how/expression of narrative).

The diagram clearly indicates that characters belong to the story plane of narrative, seeing, feeling, and experiencing actions, happenings, and setting. The narrator, on the other hand, belongs to a discourse plane, which is “said to “state” the story” (Chatman, Story 31) and to “recount or to enact an event according to whether or not it is explicitly presented, that is, uttered as such by a narrator” (Story 32 emphasis original). Because narrators do not reside at the level of story and do not actually experience or see
the events, happenings, and setting of the story world, narrators only report on the story world, *recounting* and *enacting* what and how the characters see, feel, and think at the level of story. James Phelan, however, proposes an alternative view to suggest that narrators, too, can be focalizers and perceive the story world. The idea that narrators only report events from outside the story, Phelan asserts, “inadequately captures the dynamics of narration *as experienced by readers*” (“Why” 57 emphasis mine), since if the narrator cannot perceive, the “narratees, implied readers, and flesh and blood readers, who get much of their access to that world through a narrator, also cannot perceive that world—or can do so only through a focalizing character darkly” (“Why” 57). Moreover, I posit that limiting the narrator’s role to that of the reporting function fails to explain the freedom, flexibility, creativity, and power of the implied author—how implied author as a second self of the real author orchestrates and designs the story to influence the perceptions of her readers.

Because the third-person narrator in “Wilshire Bus” both reports and focalizes, Yamamoto’s readers must more deeply interrogate the composition and structure of narrative sentences. Yamamoto’s readers in “Wilshire Bus” understand and experience the story world not only through the utterances and events that the narrator recounts and enacts, but also through the textures and tones of events and actions that the narrator reproduces through her perceptions. Readers must examine and infer from these textures the unstated details and nature of Esther’s consciousness, the psychological, emotive,
historical, and ethical make-up of Esther’s mind rendered inscrutable in silence. Studying these textures reveals to readers the ways in which Esther represses her emotions and memories to turn away from certain realities of her present life in postwar America. As the following analysis of the story will show, Yamamoto shapes readers’ cognitive, emotive, and ethical reading of Esther’s mind and her self-conscious act of looking away by shedding light on both Esther’s and the narrator’s perceptions, as well as the gaps between them.

“Wilshire Bus” begins with a serene description of Esther’s bus ride to her husband, Buro, who is staying at the Los Angeles Soldier’s home for treatment of his back injured in the war. Despite the particular circumstances of Esther’s bus ride, a visitation to her wounded husband, and the reference to post-World War II era, Esther, whom we learn later was interned during the war, displays a great sense of excitement and optimism: “She always enjoyed the long bus ride very much. […] she took vicarious pleasure in gazing out at the almost unmitigated elegance along the fabulous street” (34). The effect of the narrator’s report of Esther’s thought pattern in this sentence is two-fold. On the one hand and most basically, the narrator’s report makes clear to readers Esther’s state of mind— that is, the way she is “flush with optimism” (Elliott, “Sins” 55). On the other hand, readers notice from the terms the narrator uses to describe Esther’s feelings and thoughts, such as “vicarious pleasure,” “unmitigated elegance,” and “fabulous street,” the ironic echoing of Esther’s inner state that defies the ways in which one’s
mood is often influenced by the given environment. According to the post-Cartesian theorists, minds “are not closed-off, inner spaces but rather lodged in and partly constituted by the social and material structures that scaffold people’s encounters with the world” (Herman, *The Emergence* 9). If one’s mind is often and inevitably shaped by the larger circumstances within which he/she resides, narrator’s reporting and evaluating of Esther’s consciousness and action in this scene seem to signal to readers that Esther might be misreading her surroundings.

“Dissonant” narration, according to Dorrit Cohn, is the kind of third person narration that can be found in narrative where the authorial cast is stronger, and where the third person narrator with his/her cognitive privilege can more actively and assertively presents and assesses character’s inner life. In such narrative, there is more possibility of “explicit judgment of the fictional figure by his narrator” (*Transparent* 29). Narrator’s active manner of interpreting of Esther’s consciousness (“vicarious pleasure,” for instance) reveals a higher level of narrative dissonance, and points to Yamamoto’s stronger authorial involvement designed to draw readers’ attention more squarely to the unstated texture and tone of Esther’s moods--the self-imposed nature of Esther's optimism. Esther is not only cheerful, but she is *overly* cheerful, and she is *overly* and *suspiciously* eager to embrace postwar optimism. Yamamoto, by deploying a narrator with superior knowledge and ability to assess and even judge Esther’s inner life, indicates to readers that there is something more to Esther’s act of looking out the window in
silence. The narrator’s manner of reporting translates Esther’s mind in ways that orient readers to her unwillingness to focus on certain realities of Japanese American life in LA at the time.

That is, Yamamoto foregrounds what might be the problematic of Esther’s consciousness--her attempt to escape and deny her reality in silence--at the beginning of the story in order to compel readers to actively interrogate Esther’s thought and discourse patterns in their relations to the time and place of narrative. At the level of story, Esther presents her cheerful exterior by “gazing out at the almost unmitigated elegance along the fabulous street.” At the level of discourse, however, Yamamoto deploys a third-person narrator whose manner of reporting reshapes the representation of Esther’s consciousness and actions. This narrative technique enables Yamamoto to guide her readers to detect and investigate the gap and irony between Esther’s responses in the story world and the interior states and nature of these responses as evaluated, translated, and filtered by the narrator’s perception at the level of the discourse. Shortly after the opening scene, readers learn from the narrator that Esther, during one of these bus rides, “committed a grave sin of omission,” which caused her “acute discomfort” (34) for a long time afterwards. This incident, the story reveals, involves an elderly “Oriental man and his wife,” and a drunken white man on the bus. As the woman boards the bus and sits next to Esther, Esther welcomes her seat companion: “Esther turned her head to smile a greeting (well,
here we are, Orientals together on a bus), but the woman was watching, with some concern, her husband who was asking directions of the driver” (35 emphasis mine).

Esther’s response to this “Oriental” woman is crucial in terms of readers’ evaluation of Esther’s silence and how it leads Esther to commit a “grave sin of omission” later in the story. Interestingly, the narrator does something quite unusual in her reporting of Esther’s thoughts and actions in this scene. The narrator first does what any other narrator would do--as a reporter of the story, the narrator recounts Esther's act of welcoming through her indirect third-person mediation: "Esther turned her head to smile a greeting." The ambiguity, the ironic gap that readers must further investigate, arises when the narrator makes a self-conscious choice in her rendering of Esther’s consciousness by moving from a use of indirect technique to a direct quotation of Esther’s thoughts in her own modes of expression. The narrator changes her mode of narration by conveying the exact words running through Esther’s mind in order to capture more directly and precisely the raw feelings of Esther’s consciousness: “(well, here we are, Orientals together on a bus).” This intervention by the narrator reveals to readers Esther’s self-awareness of herself as the “Oriental,” the racial marker that Esther is made acutely conscious of even while looking out the window “with vicarious pleasure,” and even when turning her head to “smile a greeting.” Narrator’s use of parenthesis furthermore distinguishes visibly Esther’s words, as if this part of Esther’s interiority deserves extra emphasis and attention from readers.
Readers can infer from the narrator’s self-conscious attempt to reproduce textures and layers of Esther’s consciousness that Yamamoto tells her readers that there is something embedded, silenced, and rendered inscrutable behind Esther’s exterior. For one thing, the gap between Esther’s actions and thoughts in her response to the “Oriental” woman serves important thematic and ethical purposes for the author. Esther’s smile, although unnoticed by the fellow woman, signifies both the similarities and differences between the two distinct individuals of Asian origin, nevertheless lumped together as “Orientals” by the Western point of view. Esther’s inner response to the woman, “(well, here we are, Orientals together on a bus),” on the one hand can be interpreted as Esther making a genuine effort to acknowledge something common to her and the woman’s situation. Nevertheless, the narrator’s rendering of Esther’s consciousness against her action (turning her head to smile a greeting) very likely indicates Esther's self-awareness of herself in a racial term. Esther feels obligated to turn away from the window and face the woman and smile not only to greet her, but also because Esther is aware that they are seen as the “Orientals together,” who supposedly share the same Oriental face, that is, the same Oriental inscrutability. Until the woman’s appearance, Esther continues to look out the window with face that does not invite or require any further reading or notice, since it is the inscrutable Oriental face. Through her silence and unthreatening inscrutability, Esther is able to remain accepted on the bus. Esther’s peaceful presence through her non-presence is interrupted when the other Asian woman with the same Oriental face gets on
the bus. This woman, unlike the other white passengers on the bus, can read and acknowledge Esther’s face, because both Esther and the woman, after all, are the “Orientals together.” Esther thus turns and smiles—her face is finally exposed, and her silence is interrupted.

On the other hand, Esther’s smile is also an indication of Esther’s difference from the woman, precisely because Esther’s smile is a mask that she self-consciously wears to satisfy the given expectation and her own self-consciousness that Esther and the Chinese woman are the “Orientals together on a bus.” The narrator points out to readers that Esther’s smile was never acknowledged by the fellow woman. The Chinese woman was instead watching her husband "with some concern" (35) as he was speaking to the driver for direction. In the meantime, Esther makes her difference from the couple clear by noticing the woman’s husband’s English: “[H]is English was inflected in such a way as to make Esther decide he was probably Chinese” (35). Esther and the woman are indeed different kinds of Orientals. If the Chinese couple’s “inflected” English is what allows Esther to distinguish herself from the couple, Esther’s difference is made even clearer and poignant to readers when the Chinese woman breaks her silence and voluntarily exposes her presence to the drunken white man on the bus. Unlike Esther, the Chinese woman openly expresses her disapproval of the disturbance that the man is causing: “Suddenly, the woman with the chrysanthemums jerked around to get a look at the speaker and
Esther felt her giving him a quick but thorough examination before she turned back around” (emphasis mine 35).

The Chinese woman’s conscious choice to “get a look at [the man]” adds a significant twist to Esther’s silence and sheds light on what really makes Esther and the woman different. While Esther’s gaze is still directed out the window, the Chinese woman’s gaze faces directly the drunken man. Instead of remaining silent, detached, and unnoticed like Esther, the Chinese woman fully expresses her unwillingness to tolerate the man by giving him “a quick but thorough examination before she turned back around” (35). Interestingly, the narrator once again draws readers to see more clearly Esther’s consciousness, how Esther is closely following and even feeling the Chinese woman’s movement and action to be seen and acknowledged. Esther might distance herself from her fellow “Orientals” by noticing their “inflected” English that made her decide that this couple was probably Chinese. Readers, on the other hand, are likely to hone in on the contrast between Esther’s silence and the Chinese woman’s assertion of agency, her refusal to remain silent, through her “quick but thorough examination” of the man on the bus, which, as the narrator points out, Esther herself “felt.” Although Esther remains silent and detached, Esther is in fact keenly aware of her fellow Oriental woman’s difference, the risk of self-exposure that the woman is taking in public. The Chinese woman’s action makes an even more vivid contrast with Esther’s silence and influences readers’ evaluations of both Esther and the woman. Whereas Esther secures
her safety through her silence, the Chinese woman’s action makes her vulnerable to the violence of racism. The drunken man now orients his attention to the woman and launches a series of racist verbal attacks on her: “‘Well if you don’t like it,” he continued […] “Why don’t you go back to China, where you can be coolies working in your bare feet out in the rice fields? You can let your pigtails grow and grow in China. Alla same, mama, no tickee no shirtee. Ha, pretty good, no tickee no shirtee!’” (35-6).

During the drunken man’s tirade, Esther, notwithstanding the other passengers on the bus, continues to remain silent, in effect providing tacit approval of the man’s racist attack against the woman. The drunken man’s voice thus grows jovial, “as though he were certain of the support of the bus” (35). This scene, as Marie Mullins has pointed out accurately, reveals “not just an isolated incident of racism, but also the depth and pervasiveness of anti-Asian sentiment in post-World War II America” (“Esther’s” 80). More importantly, I posit that Yamamoto offers an important insight into the ethical, political, and historical complexities between and among different Asian communities in America by illustrating the “depth and pervasiveness of anti-Asian sentiment” through Esther’s problematic and complicit silence towards her fellow Oriental woman. That is to say, Yamamoto situates the instance of anti-Asian sentiment within a context of interethnic relations between Japanese American and Chinese American, ethnic communities that are both in-group (Asian minority) and out-group (Japanese vs. Chinese) simultaneously. Even when Esther identifies with the Chinese woman (in-
group), Esther must distance herself from the woman in order to keep her very Asian identity from being exposed to the “depth and pervasiveness of anti-Asian sentiment,” targeting explicitly her out-group Chinese fellow in this case. Yamamoto does guide her readers to witness and even judge critically Esther’s silence first through her passive indifference towards the drunken man’s disturbances, and second through her “tacit approval” of the racist attack that he conducts against her fellow Asian woman and seat companion. Nevertheless, Yamamoto challenges and complicates readers’ understanding and evaluating of Esther’s silence and her “grave sin of omission” by highlighting how anti-Asian sentiment and its pervasiveness in postwar America undermine a larger sense of community among different Asian groups and Esther’s moral obligation for her fellow Asian female.

The narrator, for instance, reports and assesses Esther’s reaction, or more precisely, her non-reaction, as a way to reveal the conflicts and tensions in Esther’s inner world: “As he talked on, Esther, pretending to look out the window, felt the tenseness in the body of the woman beside her. The only movement from her was the trembling of the chrysanthemums with the motion of the bus” (emphasis mine 36). The narrator mediates actively in this sentence in order to render Esther’s consciousness and capture the delicate nuance of Esther’s action. Esther is not just looking out the window, but she is “pretending” to look out the window, precisely because Esther is keenly aware that she must not and cannot just ignore what her fellow “Oriental” woman is undergoing
emotionally and physically. The narrator, in other words, makes clear to readers that Esther’s self-conscious, intentional act of looking out the window is designed to hide and repress what she actually knows and feels about the Chinese woman’s feelings. Esther indeed “felt the tenseness in the body of the woman” even while “pretending to look out the window” (36). When Esther’s disguised act of turning away is coupled with her recognition of the Chinese woman’s “tenseness,” readers are faced with a difficult task of evaluating the contrasting views that Esther’s external and internal responses represent respectively. Moreover, Esther’s ability to recognize what the Chinese woman is feeling in fact reveals to readers Esther’s cognitive and emotive capacity to share the emotions experienced by others, her capacity for empathy. Yamamoto’s decision to place Esther’s seemingly insensitive and irresponsible silence along with her empathetic capacity to recognize the woman’s feelings has a potential to reduce readers’ judgmental attitude towards Esther. It is both her exterior (looking out the window) and her interior feeling of empathy that readers must take into consideration to better evaluate Esther’s response to the event more holistically.

It is nevertheless important to note that Esther’s recognition of the Chinese woman’s feelings fails to reach a fuller development and actual realization of empathy. Although Esther identifies what and how the woman is feeling (the “tenseness”), she is unable to identify with the woman, unable to imagine herself in the Chinese woman’s shoes and be the Chinese woman herself. Patrick Hogan in *The Mind and Its Stories*
explains that there are largely two types of empathy that can be distinguished based on different kinds of similarity from which empathy may grow: categorial empathy and situational empathy. Situational empathy is concerned more with circumstances and situations as the triggering factors for empathetic feelings. That is to say, one feels for and identifies with a situation that the other is going through, and the identification with his/her circumstances expands to the identification with that person. Consequently, situational empathy does not directly involve character identification. Categorial empathy, on the other hand, has more to do with identification with group-defining features, such as character traits, physical properties, race, ethnicity, and so on. In this regard, Hogan posits that categorial empathy through categorial identity undergirds “the ethics of group protection.” People tend to “oppose in-and out-groups” based on category-defining traits, and the delimitation of such group has “deeply significant consequences in term of both evaluative judgment and practical discrimination” (The Mind 243 emphasis mine). Categorical empathy, then, suggests that the in-group and out-group distinctions may play a crucial role in one’s feelings and actions toward the other, promoting him/her to make judgments and even discriminations that can probably be interpreted and pardoned as more “evaluative” and “practical” than simply judgmental and discriminative.
A closer examination into Esther’s interiority sheds light on the working of categorical empathy, and reveals how Esther’s self-consciousness about her Japanese identity prevents her from fully empathizing with the Chinese woman:

Esther herself, while believing herself properly annoyed with the speaker and sorry for the old couple, felt quite detached. She found herself wondering whether the man meant her in his exclusion order or whether she was identifiably Japanese. Of course, he was not sober enough to be interested in such fine distinctions, but it did matter, she decided, because she was Japanese, not Chinese, and therefore in the present case immune. Then she was startled to realize that what she was actually doing was gloating over the fact that the drunken man had specified the Chinese as the unwanted. (36)

Esther’s detached response toward the Chinese woman can be thought of originating from her in-group and out-group identifications of herself as Japanese and the fellow woman as Chinese. In the face of the drunken man’s “exclusion order,” Esther decides not to be the “Orientals together on a bus” with the Chinese woman. Esther instead makes her Japanese identity clear by remaining detached from the scene and what the Chinese woman is going through—Esther is “therefore in the present case immune” (36). In order not to become vulnerable to the drunken man’s racist attack, Esther refuses to empathize with the out-group Chinese woman and thereby commits a “practical discrimination” against her fellow Asian.

Nevertheless, Esther’s evaluative and practical detachment in this scene does not stop her from realizing with pain and shame how she must be feeling about the woman in more general ethical terms. Esther understands that she must be feeling annoyed with the
speaker and sorry for the old couple. Esther’s awareness about her shared Asian identity with the couple and what might be the appropriate emotional response to them forces Esther to believe that she is “properly” annoyed and sorry. Esther is torn between what might be a practical way for her to handle the situation (feeling detached), and what might be an ethically proper way to respond to the situation (feeling annoyed with the speaker, and sorry for the couple). Esther’s attempt to believe that she is “properly” annoyed and sorry shows her sense of guilt and shame, as well as her acute moral and ethical capacity. Esther’s self-consciousness about her Japanese identity might free Esther from the man’s exclusion order and make her “immune” in the present case. But the very same consciousness about her identity (“Orientals together”) troubles Esther, causing her pain when she later recollects the incident.

Yamamoto further challenges reading and evaluating of Esther’s actions by orienting readers to the larger context of post WWII America, within which Esther resides, and shows the significant ways in which her environment shapes her identity, actions, and consciousness. Yamamoto now introduces through her narrator Esther’s encounter with a man who was wearing the “I AM KOREAN” button in order to avoid misunderstanding of his ethnicity as a Japanese. This episode indicates not only the pervasiveness of anti-Japanese sentiment after the Pearl Harbor, but it also demonstrates how Esther herself contextualized and rationalized the “I AM KOREAN” button even while feeling the heat “rising to her throat”: 
True, reason had returned to ask whether she might not, under the circumstances have worn such a button herself. She had heard rumors of I AM CHINESE button. So it was true then; why not I AM KOREAN buttons, too? […] But perhaps the man didn’t even read English, perhaps he had been actually threatened, perhaps it was not his doing—his solicitous children perhaps had urged him to wear the badge. (36-37)

This fragment of Esther’s memory shows how Esther, despite her initial sense of anger and betrayal, comes to ask herself “whether she might not, under the circumstances have worn such a button herself.” Esther contextualizes and thereby justifies the man’s attempt to distinguish himself as Korean “under the circumstances of” anti-Japanese sentiment after Pearl Harbor and WWII. By disclosing to readers Esther’s episode with the man, Yamamoto invites her readers to re-read and re-evaluate Esther’s earlier attempt to distance herself from the Chinese woman in parallel with Esther’s own reading of the man’s action within the larger postwar environment. Just as Esther pardoned and embraced the man’s button, Yamamoto’s readers might find themselves reconsidering Esther’s turning away from the Chinese woman as an evaluative and practical discrimination necessary under the threat of potential racist attack. One might argue that Yamamoto asks her readers to come to terms with both Esther’s and the man’s decisions to turn away from the scene of racism not as an example of their moral deficiencies, but more as a revealing case of how post-WWII America threatened and undermined interethnic bonding between and among different Asian communities in America.
Esther hopes to resolve her struggle between her own sense of justice and her given circumstances by alternatively facing the woman, not the drunken man, and expressing belatedly her concerns for her fellow:

Trying now to make up her moral shabbiness, she turned towards the little woman and smiled at her across the chrysanthemums, shaking her head a little to get across her message (don’t pay any attention to that stupid old drunk, he doesn’t know what he’s saying, let’s take things like this in our stride). But the woman, in turn looking at her, presented a face so impassive yet cold, and eyes so expressionless yet hostile, that Esther’s overture fell quit flat. (37)

Yamamoto’s narrator in this scene explicitly evaluates and interprets Esther’s belated move to turn to the woman as her attempt to “make up her moral shabbiness.” This judgmental point of view of the narrator, however, can be revised by readers, especially by their knowledge of the ways in which Esther’s mind is embedded within the broader social, material, and political environments of her postwar life. Even while orchestrating the narrative behind the back of her third person narrator, Yamamoto simultaneously invites her readers to see and feel beyond what the narrator sees and feels about Esther by actively contextualizing Esther’s consciousness and actions, and situating readers’ evaluation of Esther within this context. Rather than believing the narrator’s assessment that Esther’s belated move is simply her effort to make up her “moral shabbiness,” Yamamoto’s readers may infer that Esther attempts to come to terms with the discrepancy between her sense of moral justice and the restrictions of her given reality by belatedly responding to the woman. When guided this way, Yamamoto’s readers may
become more sensitive and critical to the narrator’s manner of reporting and evaluating. When readers see Esther’s “face [falling] quite flat” in the face of Chinese woman’s “eyes so expressionless yet hostile,” Yamamoto’s readers are guided to feel for Esther and witness more empathetically how Esther’s self-conscious detachment as a temporary escape from her reality drives her to a state of complicit silence, causing more tension and pain in her mind.

Yamamoto further introduces a white man on the bus who also did not speak, like the rest of the white passengers on the bus, until the drunken man’s exit. This white man’s speech influences readers’ response to Esther more empathetically, as it reveals a striking reality that Esther’s attempt to look out the window and be part of the rest of the silent passengers on the bus did not secure her from the racist attack of the drunk. The drunken man leaves the bus after his final comment, “‘So clear out, all of you, and remember to take every last one of your slant-eyed pickaninnies with you!’” (37). Upon the drunken man’s exit, the white “bespectacled man” on the bus stands up to give “a clumsy speech” to the Chinese couple and, as the narrator remarks, “possibly to Esther”: “‘I want you to know,’” he said, “‘that we aren’t all like that man. We don’t all feel the way he does. We believe in an America that is a melting pot of all sort of people’” (37 emphasis mine). The bespectacled man’s kind gesture and speech, which are as belated as Esther’s move to turn towards the Chinese woman, only make clear to Esther and readers that Esther, too, was part of the drunken man’s “exclusion order.” Even if Esther through
her detachment acted as though she were part of the “we” with the rest of the other silent white passengers on the bus, she was inevitably the “you” and thus a target of the exclusion order. Esther was not supposed to look out the window and remain detached from what was happening to the Chinese woman on the bus. It was also happening to Esther herself, “the Orientals together” after all.

Despite her effort to turn away, then, Esther in the end is confronted with the poignant truth of her reality. Esther ends her bus ride as she started it, with her eyes fixed on the outside the window: “The rest of the ride was uneventful and Esther stared out the window with eyes that did not see. Getting off at last at the soldiers’ home, she was aware of the Chinese couple getting off after her, but she avoided looking at them” (37). Esther’s eyes “that did not see” remind readers of her empty eyes that looked at “almost unmitigated elegance along the fabulous street” at the beginning of the story, her self-conscious attempt to avoid facing the realities of her present life—the Chinese couple under a racist attack, the “Orientals together on a bus.” Through the irony of Esther’s own eyes “that did not see,” Yamamoto reinstates Esther’s inscrutability and allows her readers to detect how Esther’s consciousness traverses from a self-conscious detachment to a painful recognition of her present mental and material life restricted by the reality that Esther is unable to escape from. The only “resolution” Esther comes up with is to avoid looking at the Chinese couple as they exist the bus.
Esther’s internal transformation from detachment to a painful recognition, in other words, does not lead to a fuller progression of the story towards resolution, from silence to the breaking of that silence. Instead, what readers notice in the final scene of the story is Esther entering Buro’s hospital room with uncontrollable “feminine” sobs, thereby submitting to “the implicit pressure of Buro’s mythmaking” (Elliott 58). This ending of the story is enigmatic, disappointing, and even disturbing, especially given the complexities and depth of Esther’s consciousness revealed to readers through Yamamoto’s delicate orchestration of the story. Seeing his wife crying helplessly, Buro is amazed, because Esther had never shown him such “weakness” (38) before. Mistaking Esther’s tears as her feminine and emotional response to her husband, Buro tenderly asks Esther, “What’s the matter? You’ve been missing me a whole lot, huh?” (38). Esther’s sobbing, her painful response to the realities that she witnessed and experienced on the bus, is taken as her “weakness” and femininity by Buro. Buro’s reading of Esther frustrates Yamamoto’s readers who are keenly aware of the unstated message that Esther’s sobbing, her very vivid emotional response, is in fact expressing for the very first time. After finally drying her eyes, Esther “sniffed and nodded and bravely smiled and answered him with the question, yes, weren’t women silly?” (38).

How are we to interpret Esther’s response to Buro? Although Esther’s inability to tell Buro what she really experienced and felt is a continuation of her silence in one way, Esther also breaks that continuation and refuses to repress her emotion by crying at her
husband’s hospital room—a private and intimate space different from the public space of the bus. Esther’s strong emotional response at her husband’s presence is indicative of the burden of self-exposure as a woman and the Oriental in a public space. Esther’s very first tears, in other words, guide readers to notice once again restrictions of environment imposed on Esther, and how they might have influenced her response to the Chinese woman. Even with her husband, however, Esther cannot help facing the risk of self-exposure. Esther is met with distortion of her emotion as “weakness” and femininity by her husband. Buro’s “myth making” in turn underscores another restriction that Esther has as a woman. Esther’s emotion spills out beyond her control, but she hides the reason for the emotion. Although Esther smiles “bravely” at the story’s end and performs successfully the role of a feminine and loving wife for Buro, readers know and feel that this smile will cause Esther “acute discomfort for a long time afterwards whenever something reminded her of it” (34).

Yamamoto’s decision to leave Esther’s “grave sin of omission” unresolved effectively guides her readers to directly witness and experience with Esther the “acute discomfort” that Esther in fact was feeling from the beginning of the story when she was looking out the window with “vicarious pleasure.” By ending the story with its enigmatic open-endedness, and by not allowing Esther to break her silence, Yamamoto once again reinforces the poignant effect of Esther’s realities, how Esther is doomed to suffer over and over whenever something reminds her of her sin. Yamamoto’s readers might first
experience the temptation to look down on Esther and her moral sense as she constantly and consistently turns away from what she sees, knows, and feels about the Chinese couple’s and her realities in postwar America. In the face of Esther’s suffering, and given the history’s psychological impact on the helpless individual, this temptation is balanced against “the demands [that readers’] superior knowledge places on [their] sense of justice” (Phelan, Living 62). That is to say, precisely because readers have learned about the link between Esther’s silence and her self-consciousness about her Japanese identity in postwar America, Yamamoto's readers may join reluctantly, if not fully and willingly, Esther and commit with her the “grave sin of omission.” Yamamoto’s readers deploy the same complicit silence and turn away from what they witness, Esther’s “sin,” the painful, self-conscious, and “practical” silence that she imposes on herself. After all majority of Yamamoto’s readers belong to the “we” that the bespectacled man on the bus was referring to: “‘I want you to know,” he said, “that we aren’t all like that man. We don’t all feel the way he does. We believe in an America that is a melting pot of all sorts of people’” (37). It is only fair and accurate to say that we all share the “grave sin of omission” one way or another.

Yamamoto’s two short stories “Seventeen Syllables” and “Wilshire Bus” might not be very different from any other Asian American short stories when it comes to the thematic issues that the stories are concerned with. “Seventeen Syllables” foregrounds generational differences and questions concerning the oppression of women; in “Wilshire
Bus,” racism is a major subject of the story. What distinguishes Yamamoto’s stories from any other “traditional” Asian American stories are the ways in which Yamamoto frames Asian American materials with particular kinds of narrational methods. In “Seventeen Syllables,” readers join Yamamoto in decoding the silence between Rosie and Tome by exploring what the author uses as her primary method of writing and communication: diversions, restricted narration, delayed disclosure, and use of multiple plots. In a process of active decoding with the author, readers come to reconstruct actively and critically the meanings, values, and standards of the story. In “Wilshire Bus,” Yamamoto’s readers are put in a position of witness, just like Esther herself, in order to detect, examine, and understand Esther’s self-conscious and tactful turning away from her inner feelings, thoughts, and conscience. While the narrator’s reports and perceptions directly influence readers’ perceptions, Yamamoto behind the back of the narrator orients readers to the ironic gaps between Esther’s internal and external responses to her reality. These gaps eventually lead readers to more actively and critically re-examine the narrator’s and their own perceptions towards Esther and the complex ways in which Esther’s mind operates within and against the given broader social, historical, and political environments of her life. Yamamoto invites readers to the challenging task of evaluating—cognitively, emotively, and ethically—Esther’s silence and the depth and complexities of her inner life.
In my next chapter, I examine Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* in order to demonstrate how Kingston frames her own autobiographical story by using a range of narrative techniques that enrich storytelling traditions and practices. Kingston productively reshape the ways in which one’s life story can be told and read.


Yamamoto, Hisaye. Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories. New Brunswick: Rutgers


Chapter 4: The Critique of Inscrutability in Memoir: Fictionalization as Counter-narration in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*

Maxine Hong Kingston's 1975 memoir, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, undoubtedly is one of the most widely taught texts in American colleges in recent years. The Modern Language Association's *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* series, for instance, features a volume on Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* along with other canonical texts such as Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Despite its enthusiastic reception in American academia and continuing popularity among general audiences, however, *The Woman Warrior* has caused debate among Asian American critics. These critics problematize and question Kingston's representation of Chinese culture and Chinese Americans via imaginative scene-making, myths, and fictionalization, especially given *The Woman Warrior*’s generic categorization as non-fiction, or memoir.

Thus Asian American playwright and author Frank Chin in his 1991 article writes:

> With Kingston's autobiographical *Woman Warrior*, we have given up even the pretense of reporting from *the real world*. Chinese culture is so cruel and she is so helpless against its overwhelming cruelty that she lives entirely in her *imagination*. It is an imagination informed only by the *stereotype* communicated to her through the Christian Chinese American autobiography. (26 emphasis mine)
In order to more fully comprehend and evaluate Chin’s criticism, it is important to first understand the particular composition and construction of Kingston’s memoir, *The Woman Warrior*. Throughout five short narratives, Kingston, the author, narrator and one of the protagonists of her memoir, interprets, re-tells, and re-writes her mother’s “talk-stories” about Chinese past, family tradition, and family history. Interestingly, until the last chapter, Kingston remains in the background of the book, and her mother, unknown relatives in and from China, and mythical figures of Chinese myths and tales dominate earlier chapters of the memoir. Structurally, Kingston’s book is circular. Kingston as the adult narrating I appears and disappears throughout the text, coming and leaving home repeatedly. In doing so, Kingston exposes to and shares with her readers her process of gradually coming to terms with her Chinese cultural and familial backgrounds. Especially at the final chapter of her memoir, Kingston finally appears as a protagonist, and tells her readers that “the beginning [of the story] is [the mother’s], and the ending, mine” (206). Kingston completes her project of reconstructing herself and her identity through her Chinese heritage by putting her mother’s story next to hers at the final chapter of her book.

In this regard, Kingston’s retelling of her mother’s ancient stories is in part her effort to reclaim her place in the family and its Chinese tradition. In order to retell her mother’s Chinese stories in her time and place, that is, modern America, Kingston undertakes significant translation and speculation, “complex, strategic, sympathetic, and
also violent maneuvers” (Bolaki, “Translations” 41). Kingston must create “a transgressive Chinese American text, one that “claims America” but also pays its debt to the origina[l] (Bolaki 41). Although the “original,” mother’s stories about China and family, is the crucial part of Kingston’s identity, Kingston is faced with challenge of dealing with the inscrutability of her parents about her heritage. The mother imposes on Kingston burdens of the unknowable and unverifiable, as Kingston is not supposed to question the mother or share the mother’s stories with any one. Upon telling mysterious stories about Kingston’s unknown aunt in China, for instance, Kingston’s mother warns Kingston: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you’” (4). The secrecy and unknowability of mother’s stories render Kingston’s Chinese heritage and tradition inscrutable not only to Kingston, but also to readers in author-narrator-reader track. As Kingston as the narrating I struggles to interpret more precisely and accurately mother’s ancient stories, readers, too, experience with Kingston the unknowability of history.

Incrutability in Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, then, relates not necessarily to the constructing and stereotyping of Asians or Asian Americans as an inscrutable ethnic other. In Kingston’s text, inscrutability indicates a concept closer to historical and generational unknowability and alienation—gaps between Kingston (present) and her mother (Chinese past, tradition, and heritage), as well as Kingston’s resistance to investigation through historical methods of inquiry. Stretching inscrutability to cover this
range of meanings, however, does not undermine or violate coherence of inscrutability as
the stereotype of Asians/Asian Americans. Rather, Kingston shows the various ways in
which this term can be used innovatively as a critical and creative tool for Asian
American literature and storytelling. Precisely because Kingston’s mother's stories are
rendered inscrutable (unknowable) and there is no way for Kingston to verify the stories,
Kingston in her effort to write her memoir relies heavily on imaginative reconstruction of
the original and even fictionalization, of which Chin fiercely disapproves given the text's
putatively nonfictional status. Nevertheless, it is important to understand better the big
picture of Kingston’s effort in her memoir. The original (mother’s stories) is important,
but it becomes meaningful to Kingston only when Kingston can make sense of it, and
when she can see her life and herself through it. Reimagining the mysterious story about
her unknown aunt, for instance, Kingston confesses: “Unless I see her life branching into
mine, she give me no ancestral help” (8). The purpose of Kingston’s memoir, then, is to
meet the challenge of dealing with the inscrutability of her mother, her mother’s stories,
and history of the family by building on what she does know about her heritage and then
imaginatively adding to it. Kingston’s departure from the “real world” in this sense is to
transform the unknowable, inscrutable part of her Chinese tradition and history into a
scrutable story of her own that could provide Kingston what she calls “ancestral help.”
The inscrutability of her Chinese heritage allows Kingston to fictionalize for the
nonfictional purpose of locating her own identity within this larger heritage.
Viewing Kingston’s text as a memoir in the traditional sense is now largely discredited. Many scholars, such as Cynthia Sau-ling Wong in *Maxine Hong Kingston’s “The Woman Warrior”: A Case Book* (1999), have already established that Kingston engages in innovative and creative uses of the genre, focusing specifically on fictionalization as an important aspect of her writing. My interest, then, lies not in whether Kingston’s use of fictionalization in her memoir violates rules of the genre, thereby misrepresenting reality of Chinese American life. After all, “genre does not tell us the style or construction of a text as much as how we should expect to 'take' that style or mode of construction—what force it should have for us” (Bruss, *Autobiographical 4*). By shifting the emphasis to how readers “take” Kingston’s style and mode of construction, I am interested in further investigating the ways in which Kingston succeeds to guide her readers to willingly read and believe Kingston’s text as if it were a memoir when they can clearly see her departure from it (via imaginative scene-making, myths, and fictionalization).

In this chapter, I study *The Woman Warrior* and its mode of storytelling and writing through a rhetorical theory of narrative (“somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened”). I believe that rhetorical approach to *The Woman Warrior* sheds light on the dynamics between the author and readers that makes possible writing and reading of a nonfictional memoir that is simultaneously fiction, myth, and imagination. I posit that Kingston’s underlying
authorial purposes (thematic, aesthetic, and affective) give a specific shape to her memoir, allowing Kingston to become a purposive orchestrator and designer of her memoir, and a legitimately, strategically, and empathetically deficient (or “fallible”) narrator. Kingston’s “deficient” and “fallible” storytelling in her memoir seeks to reflect not the historical truths and facts, but rather authorial and rhetorical concerns that make *The Woman Warrior* more unique, creative, and compelling. Kingston’s innovative use of thought report, free indirect discourse, and other textual and contextual strategies reshape seemingly inscrutable Asian American traditions and practices--traditions and practices associated with the unknown and mysterious oriental--and help readers establish necessary bond and trust with the author. Through the cooperation between author and readers, and through readers’ willingness to understand that “the search and struggle for a sense of [ethnic] identity is a (re-)invention and a discovery of a vision” (Fischer 196), *The Woman Warrior* demonstrates how the art of storytelling gives birth to compelling and innovative ways of representing one's life.

Reading the memoir rhetorically

Before applying rhetorical theory to *The Woman Warrior*, it is helpful to study some of the core concepts of the theory, including the idea of the implied author as well as its role and relationship with readers. James Phelan in the introduction to *Living to Tell About It* (2005) identifies his approach to narrative as rhetoric: “That is, rather than
focusing only on textual features and their relationships, I am concerned with the multilayered communications that authors of narrative offer audiences, communications that invite or even require their audiences to engage with them cognitively, psychically, emotionally, and ethically” (Phelan 5). Rhetorical theory’s emphasis on the author-reader relationship furthermore draws attentions to the “feedback loop among the implied author’s agency, textual phenomena, and reader response” (Phelan 38). The implied author, a second self that a writer creates in his/her construction of a text, can be viewed as “the source for the assumptions, beliefs, norms, meanings, and purposes of the text” (Phelan 39). Readers, on the other hand, “reconstruct both the implied author and his or her assumptions, beliefs, norms, meanings, and purposes” (Phelan 39).

The implied author’s status as a textual, second self that a real author constructs, who is “usually a highly refined and selected version, wise, more sensitive, more perceptive than any real man could be” (Booth, Rhetoric 86), indicates clearly the implied author’s distance from a real author, and draws readers’ attention to the constructed nature of authorial agency and narrative. The implied author, in other words, is a useful tool to evade constraints or limitations imposed on the biographical circumstances of the real author, and provides for the real author flexibility of narrative construction and freedom from the “responsibility” of what he/she can say and do in his/her narrative (it is the implied author, the second self, not the real author, who says and writes). What is the role of the implied author in a text like The Woman Warrior, a
memoir where Kingston as the real author of narrative is expected to talk about her real self and her real experiences based on truths of her real life? Although debate about the implied author has historically focused on fiction for the most part, modern auto/biography has already destabilized the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, as the “recent tendencies in biography and biographical criticism convey the impression that biography as a whole is drifting toward fiction” (Schabert, “Fictional” 1). Dorrit Cohn, for her part, sees the “historical and novelistic genres that center on a life plot as the generic region where factual and fictional narratives come into closest proximit[y]” (Cohn, “Fictional” 3). The dotted lines in the chart below illustrate how fiction and non-fiction (e.g., auto/biography) can overlap, straddle, and even traverse one another.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Domain: History} & \\
\hline
\textbf{Biography} & \textbf{Autobiography} \\
Strachey, \textit{Queen Victoria} & Rousseau, \textit{The Confessions} \\
\hline
\text{third-person novel heterodiegesis} & \text{First-person novel homodiegesis} \\
\text{fictional biography} & \text{fictional autobiography} \\
\text{Tolstoy, \textit{Ian Ilyitch}} & \text{Bronte, \textit{Jane Eyre}} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{History vs. Fiction (reproduced from Dorrit Cohn, “Fictional versus Historical Lives: Borderlines and Borderline Cases,” 4)}
\end{table}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Domain: Fiction} & \\
\hline
(Regime: Third-Person) & (Regime: First Person) \\
\end{tabular}
\caption{History vs. Fiction (reproduced from Dorrit Cohn, “Fictional versus Historical Lives: Borderlines and Borderline Cases,” 4)}
\end{table}

The unstable and fluid nature of the “historical and novelistic genres that center on a life plot” makes it necessary to add “implied authorial-I” (Phelan, “The Implied” 179).
128) to the four autobiographical “I’s” that Smith and Watson in their *Reading Autobiography* (2001) identifies, that is, the historical-I of the real author, the narrating-I, the narrated-I, and the ideological-I (see Phelan in “The Implied”). The implied authorial I in autobiography also leads to a new insight that “the author of literary nonfiction is free to shape the characters and events into his or her vision of their thematic, affective, and ethical significance within the limits imposed by the responsibility to the extratextual existence of those characters and events” (Phelan, “Rhetoric” 8). As Phelan further adds, in many cases, these authors, once enamored of “their visions of the larger thematic, affective, and ethical purpose of the narrative,” further sacrifice “responsibility to the extratextual dimensions of their narrative on the altar of authorial purpose” (Phelan, “Rhetoric” 8). Likewise, thinking of the implied author in *The Woman Warrior* can reveal something important about Kingston’s use of fiction, imaginative scene-making, and tales in her memoir, that is, Kingston’s “vision of the larger thematic, affective, and ethical purpose of the narrative.” Kingston freely communicates with her readers through the implied author’s agency, deciding how and when to use different narrative techniques and increase or reduce inscrutability, the unknowability of history and tradition in character-character and author-narrator-reader relations. Kingston’s orchestration of the whole text with its affective, thematic, and ethical dimensions informs readers’ interpretation of her memoir, and the imaginations and fantasy that she engages with for her narrative construction.
As much as the implied author’s role is crucial for Kingston to construct her narrative, Kingston must also establish her relationship with her readers in a way that secures readers’ approval of her departure from “the responsibility to the extratextual dimensions of narrative.” The first chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, “No Name Woman,” is vitally important in this regard. Kingston has to set a tone of her memoir and makes her deviating away from its convention as her method of writing, while also making sure her status as a believable and trustworthy memoirist whose story readers will respect and trust. From the very first chapter of her memoir, Kingston distances herself from assumptions of autobiography. “No Name Woman” unfolds not with Kingston’s telling about herself, but her mother, Brave Orchid’s telling young Kingston stories about the unknown and unverifiable aunt in China, who was ostracized for bearing a child in adultery and eventually killed herself and her child after the villagers’ raid against her. Kingston’s attempt to retell these stories to her readers as clearly and comprehensively as possible presents great challenges to Kingston. Growing up in the United States, Kingston is alienated from the traditions of her Chinese family and culture that her mother speaks of. Making matters worse, Kingston is prevented from preparing herself as an accurate and competent narrator of her memoir, since Kingston is told by her mother not to question truthfulness of the aunt’s story and seek verification. After telling young Kingston the obscure incident involving her aunt, Kingston’s mother warns Kingston never to try to verify truth of the story: “ ‘Don’t let your father know that I told you. He
denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. […] The villagers are watchful’ ” (4). There is no evidence to prove if this aunt existed, and if the villagers’ raid and her suicide really happened. Brave Orchid’s story ends more like a cautionary tale for young Kingston rather than truth found in nonfiction.

Kingston (the author) achieves two things by presenting Brave Orchid’s story and yet restricting both the experiencing-I’s and narrating-I’s perceptions and abilities to verify the story. On the one hand, the unknowability of mother’s story makes it inevitable, necessary, and even justifiable for Kingston as the narrating-I to imagine and assume larger picture of the aunt’s tragedy, so that Kingston in her time and place can relate to the story and perform her role as a teller of her memoir. On the other hand, and as a result of the narrating-I’s limited knowledge about the family history, Kingston’s readers, who access the story world through the narrator, have to approve Kingston’s move to imagine and assume facts as an acceptable and legitimate mode of storytelling. In other words, Kingston establishes the inscrutability and unknowability of Chinese past and heritage in both the character-character and author-narrator-reader relations by limiting Kingston’s access to her mother’s stories at both levels of the story and discourse. This inscrutability of family past and history, however, gives a specific shape to Kingston’s narration and discloses in turn Kingston’s underlying authorial purposes—thematic, aesthetic, and ethical—that she needs to communicate to her readers. By
inviting readers to identify with the unknowability of history that Kingston faces as both experiencing and narrating-Is, Kingston strategically guides her readers to approve Kingston’s speculations. Kingston successfully forces her readers to actively construct who Kingston really is based on the imaginations used to complete the story that Brave Orchid only partially tells.

Kingston’s first interpretation of the mother’s story, for instance, depicts her aunt as a submissive and oppressed female figure in the male-dominated, patriarchal society of traditional China: “Perhaps she had encountered him in the fields or on the mountain where the daughters-in-law collected fuel. Or perhaps he first noticed her in the marketplace. […] His demand must have surprised her, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told” (6). Kingston, then, revises her interpretation once more and portrays her aunt as an aggressive and liberated woman who does not hesitate to express her desire for man: “She looked at a man because she liked the way the hair was tucked behind his ears, or she liked the question-mark line of a long torso curving at the shoulder and straight at the hip” (8). Whereas Brave Orchid’s storytelling focuses on what happened to the aunt, Kingston’s interpretations are concerned with motives behind the event. Interestingly, too, not only do Kingston’s interpretations vary, but they are also contradictory. Kingston’s contradictory interpretations also demonstrate gradual movement in Kingston’s imaginative and speculative process—from more hypothetical (“Perhaps she had encountered him in the fields”) to less hypothetical and more assertive
(“His demand must have surprised her”). By telling the history of “No Name” aunt to her daughter, and by not allowing Kingston to seek truth of the story, Brave Orchid aims to prepare her daughter for the danger and risk of entering womanhood. Kingston, on the other hand, transforms this cautionary tale into a story rich with possibilities, possibilities that Kingston speculates with different degrees of certainty.

Kingston’s interpretation and reinterpretation of her mother’s story show how imagined scenarios and events function as a way for Kingston to creatively interrogate the mystery (inscrutability of family history and tradition) imposed on her aunt. Kingston’s shift from the expected hypothetical to the simple past also indicates that retelling of her mother’s story allows Kingston to gradually construct a story of her own, that is, her memoir, through which she represents her thoughts and feelings. Whereas the aunt is merely a “No Name Woman” in the original version of the story, Kingston’s imaginations and speculations about her aunt’s circumstances add voice and presence to the aunt. Kingston’s “No Name” aunt becomes more real and vivid to Kingston.

Kingston’s imaginative reconstruction of the story in this regard is two-fold. On the one hand, Kingston diminishes the historical and generational inscrutability in character-character relation by giving “stories” to her aunt and by connecting with her, thereby positioning herself within the family history: “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (8). On the other hand, by embellishing the original story and adding more possibilities and details to its bareness, Kingston undercuts the
unknowability in author-narrator-reader relation. Kingston guides her readers to respond empathetically not only to the ordeal that the aunt might have endured, but also to Kingston’s own anxiety towards her Chinese culture and her ambivalent relationship with her family. Kingston through her story retelling questions “the family’s deliberately forgetting [her aunt]” (16) and problematizes oppressions of the traditional patriarchal culture of China. Although Kingston’s use of imagination to reconstruct family history in her memoir might lead Kingston to “sacrifice responsibility to the extratextual dimensions of narrative on the altar of authorial purpose” (Phelan, 18), Kingston’s readers may communicate with the author more deeply and actively, creating a memoir that both the author and readers write together.

By departing from the conventions of autobiography, and by imagining facts and recreating her own version of reality, then, Kingston evokes a world that is truly relatable to herself. Kingston’s imagined storylines in this regard challenge the limits of the genre and function as what Abigail Gosselin calls “counterstories,” an alternative narrative structure through which “the authors represent aspects of lived experience more realistically than they could otherwise, as they are unconstrained by the limitations of the dominant paradigm and thus able to achieve more sophisticated purposes” (“Memoirs” 134). The historical and generational inscrutability between Kingston and the stories that her mother tells requires Kingston to adopt a method of writing unconstrained by the “dominant paradigm” of memoir, which focuses on the pursuit of historical truth.
Kingston’s reliance on multiple protagonists, imaginative reconstruction, the circularity of narrative structure, and the use of Chinese myths indicate that Kingston’s work challenges “the idea that the normative pattern of personal growth should be a linear journey to individual autonomy” (Fong, “Kingston’s” 117). What is also important about these “counterstories,” Gosselin adds, is that these stories have to “accurately reflect complications of experience,” so as to act as “mirrors of lived experience rather than as fairy tales, moral lessons, or means of escape” (Gosselin 134). The question, then, is how does Kingston “accurately reflect” complications of her experience? How does Kingston’s use of imagined storylines as her “counterstories” allow Kingston to avoid “fairy tales” and “moral lessons”? It is important to note that Kingston’s speculations and imaginative and fictional world making are her attempt to mirror accurately complications of the world she lives in--in particular, those arising from her having grown up both with Chinese and with American cultural traditions.

Kingston engages with a range of storytelling techniques and textual strategies to reconstruct the past that her mother tells. Through her reconstruction, Kingston aims to locate her Chinese heritage within her present, so that she can better reflect and recreate her own identity and reality. The third chapter of the memoir, “Shaman,” is important in this regard. In “Shaman,” Kingston recounts Brave Orchid’s medical training in China. In this chapter, Kingston primarily does two things through two distinct methods: first, Kingston retells her mother’s stories based on historical and documentary-like research
(conventions of more traditional non-fictional writing), and second Kingston re-invents new stories of her own based on her imaginative world making and speculations, because Kingston “disliked the unsureness in [Brave Orchid’s] voice” (60). Interestingly, too, these imaginations are based on and modified from cultural, historical, and familiar references Kingston knows about, albeit in a more or less limited way. Here Kingston’s eclectic narrative methods relate directly both to her effort to uphold her responsibility to the extratextual dimensions of narrative (historical and biographical truth) and the challenges that she faces due to the complications of her reality limited and restricted by the unknown part of her heritage. By choosing to use specific narrative techniques and forms, Kingston mirrors the cultural and generational inscrutability between her mother (who represents Chinese tradition and culture) and herself, and suggests how their relationship is fraught with tensions, anxieties, and possibilities for bonding.

In the “Shaman” chapter, readers are invited to a special kind of tale where factual and historical biography, documentary-like research, imaginative reconstruction, and fictional storytelling conspire to reconstruct and reinvent truth of Kingston’s mother’s past. By reimagining stories concerning her own mother, Kingston seeks to restore her relationship with her mother and reduce the sense of alienation caused by the generational and historical gap between herself and her mother. “Shaman” starts with Kingston’s highly detailed descriptions of a metal tube that holds Brave Orchid’s medical
diploma from China as well as ostensibly factual and biographical statements about the mother and her education:

The largest [of the three scrolls inside the tube] says that in the twenty-third year of the National Republic, the To Keung School of Midwifery, where she has had two years of instruction and Hospital Practice, awards its Diploma to my mother. […] This document has eight stamps on it: one, the school’s English and Chinese names embossed together in a circle; one, as the Chinese enumerate, a stork and a big baby in lavender ink; one, the school’s Chinese seal; […] one, the red seal of Dean Woo Yin-kam, M.D.; one, my mother’s seal, her chop mark larger than the president’s and the dean’s; and one, the number 1279 on the back. Dean Woo’s signature is followed by “(Hackett).” (57-8)

Actual dates and real names of the people and cities provide for Kingston and readers reliable and definite points of verification. Not only is Kingston assured by the concreteness and clarity of this part of her mother’s past, but readers, too, are able to derive from Kingston’s narration a strong sense of factuality and reliability. Moreover, Kingston further supports and proves her statement by conducting historical researches and providing to her readers more historical references: “I read in a history book that Hackett Medical College for Women at Canton was founded in the nineteenth century by European women doctors” (58). Whereas imaginative reconstruction is the dominant mode of storytelling in “No Name Woman,” the “Shaman” chapter resembles more conventional autobiography and biography, overtly drawing readers’ attention to Kingston’s efforts to establish a referential contract between her memoir and her readers. Kingston makes clear her concern for factuality and precise references by making a shift to a more traditional mode of non-fictional writing at the beginning of “Shaman.” This
shift, however, does not last long, because Kingston soon makes another move back to her more imaginative and fictional writing style.

In order for Kingston to remain real and reliable to her readers within her newly constructed autobiographical world despite her lack of consistency, Kingston is further required to make stronger readerly support and trust. Interestingly, Kingston gains and secures readers’ support and trust by allowing them to experience and witness what Kingston as an autobiographer with limited referential resources undergoes. In doing so, Kingston creates strong cognitive and affective connections and identifications with her readers. Kingston’s attempt to provide verifying references to her readers is clear when Kingston translates and confirms her mother’s graduation photo based on her limited knowledge about her mother during the years of her education in China: “My mother does not have smiling eyes; the old woman teacher (Dean Woo?) in front crinkles happily, and the one of faculty member in the western suit smiles westernly” (59 emphasis mine). The use of parentheses and a question mark is effective in exposing to readers Kingston’s own cognitive processing for verification (parenthesis signaling Kingston’s consciousness) and the uncertainties that she faces in this process (the question mark). Readers’ direct exposure to Kingston’s mind and her challenges in this narrative moment has a potential to create immediacy and intimacy between readers and Kingston, which is crucial for them to bond together.
Moreover, Kingston’s translation of her mother’s graduation photo ultimately points to the discrepancy between Kingston herself and her mother, that is, Brave Orchid’s non-smiling eyes. This discrepancy prompts Kingston to further imagine mother’s circumstances in such a way that could bring her mother closer to herself. Kingston’s imaginative reconstruction and fictionalization of her mother’s past, in other words, is her attempt to reduce distance between herself and her mother, thereby reconstructing her identity through her maternal linage. Through her constant speculations and imaginative attempts in her memoir, and by sharing the challenges of uncertainties with her readers, Kingston asks her readers to feel for and further approve the various ways Kingston writes her memoir, although these ways often involve inconsistency and lack of historical truth. Whereas Kingston as the second-generation Chinese American born and raised in America readily recognizes the “western suit” and western smiles of the strangers in the photo, Kingston is particularly alienated from her own mother. Her mother’s eyes hold a world beyond Kingston’s reach, a “land on the other side of the oceans”: “In America my mother has eyes as strong as boulders, […] nor has she stopped seeing land on the other side of the oceans. Now her eyes include the relatives in Chin[a]” (59). The ambiguity of her mother’s eyes and the unknown world that they hold magnify Kingston’s frustration towards her limited access to the family history. Kingston is not afraid of sharing her frustration with her readers, either: “There are no snapshots of my mother. […] ‘Mother, did bangs come into fashion after you had
the picture taken?’ One time she said yes. Another time when I asked, ‘Why do you have fingerprints on your forehead?’ she said, ‘Your First Uncle did that.’ I disliked the unsureness in her voice” (60). Kingston’s questions only face her mother’s “unsureness,” and while Kingston’s frustration increases, Kingston has no place to turn to for more definite answers.

The “unsureness” in Brave Orchid’s voice renders the mother alienating, unknowable, and even inscrutable to Kingston. Interestingly, this sense of unsureness in character-character relation is replicated in the author-narrator-reader relation, as Kingston decides to maintain the same degree of unknowability in both the experiencing and narrating-Is’ perceptions. That is, the narrating I of Kingston’s memoir does not have sufficient knowledge and information that could resolve for readers the “unsureness” in character-character relation. Readers come to experience the same unsureness with Kingston without much help from the narrator. Kingston’s ignorance as a narrator adds an interesting twist to the ways in which readers experience and read the memoir.

Kingston might be considered to be an incompetent narrator if one thinks of her ability to convey precise and accurate information about the Chinese past that she retells. If readers seek historical truths of events being narrated, readers may find Kingston “unreliable.” Narrative unreliability, however, places emphasis on a relationship between the implied author’s views and the narrator’s views: a narrator is reliable “when he speaks for or acts in accord with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author’s norms),
unreliable when he does not” (Booth, *The Rhetoric* 158-59). Interestingly, although Kingston is not able to resolve the “unsureness” in character-character relation and thus evokes the same sense of unknowability and inscrutability of past in author-narrator-reader relation, this inscrutability captures the larger truth about Kingston’s relationship with her mother and the complications of her reality inflicted both by the American values of her present life and the Chinese values of the family.

Kingston’s ignorance and the unsureness left unresolved in both character-character and author-narrator-reader relations, then, are endorsed by Kingston’s implied authorial I. Kingston’s audiences as the ideal readers of the author are thus required to approve and recognize Kingston’s incompetent narration, and focus more on the larger picture of the memoir that the non-historical truths of Kingston’s narration reveals. Kingston associates her lack of knowledge (her incompetence as a narrator) with her lack of archival resources (“There are no snapshots of my mother”), not necessarily with her lack of competency as a narrator. Kingston also shows her readers her raw and honest affective responses to her ignorance (“I disliked the unsureness in her voice”) and simultaneously connects her feelings to her endless attempt at verification (use of photos and historical research). It is not Kingston’s lack of knowledge that shapes readers’ reading experience. Rather Kingston moves her readers by inviting them to identify with the cognitive and emotive challenges that she experiences in her attempts to uncover the unknown part of her Chinese heritage.
Once readers understand and acknowledge that Kingston’s ignorance as a narrator is a crucial rhetorical tool for the author to reveal a larger authorial design of the memoir, as well as her way of engaging with readers cognitively and affectively, readers may start listening to Kingston’s narration non-literally. Reading *The Woman Warrior* non-literally means that Kingston’s readers focus not on the pursuit of historical truth, but on the context of Kingston’s fictionalization and the ways in which her orchestration of her memoir reveals something important about herself. Obscurity of mother’s history, for instance, leads Kingston to engage with fictional techniques of storytelling. Kingston imagines her mother’s circumstances in order to reconstruct what might have happened to her: “Free from families, my mother would live for two years without servitude. She would not have to run errands for my father’s tyrant mother with the bound feet […] Now she would get hot water only if she bribed the concierge. When I went away to school my mother said, “Give the concierge oranges” (62). Without any support and evidence, and based only on the limited information that Brave Orchid at one point of her life left home to study medicine, Kingston depicts Brave Orchid’s life and her feelings and thoughts as if she fully understood them, as if she were the mother herself and she were in mother’s mind. Kingston first assumes that her mother lived under an oppressive family environment and desired freedom from the family (“free from families … without servitude”). Kingston also imagines her mother’s role as a daughter-in-law, running errands for the “father’s tyrant mother with the bound feet.” In order to reconstruct her
mother’s story, Kingston uses techniques similar to thought report, and captures imaginatively and hypothetically how relieved and free the mother might have felt being away from home and pursuing her dream of being a doctor.

In this imaginative and reconstructive process, Kingston on the one hand violates rules of non-fictional writing by exercising “the novelist’s freedom” (Cohn, “Fictional” 6), that is, representation of someone else’s inner life. On the other hand, Kingston simultaneously makes her violation unavoidable and her pursuit of historical truth impossible by foregrounding the unsureness and unknowability of mother’s history in both the character-character and author-reader-narrator relations. Kingston’s readers, who recognize and identify with Kingston’s limitations as a conventional memoirist, approve this violation, as Kingston’s lack of knowledge is a crucial part of authorial and rhetorical design. Moreover, Kingston, in order to gain and secure readers’ trust and support, deploys textual strategies that emphasize her transparency and openness with her readers. As much as Kingston is incompetent, that is, lacking knowledge and information, Kingston is honest about her lack of knowledge and is willing to share her limitations with her readers. Kingston’s use of conjectural phrases, such as “would,” is especially effective in making transparent her incompetency as a writer and narrator of her memoir in a traditional and conventional sense, and reminds her readers of what they will have to take into consideration when evaluating Kingston’s narration.
It is also interesting to note that Kingston does not simply imagine facts, but she makes the best use of the limited knowledge that she has no matter how insufficient that might be to prove historical truths. Despite Kingston’s ignorance about her mother and the mother’s life in China, Kingston uses her contextual and more general knowledge about China and her limited interaction with her mother in her recreating of the mother’s past. Kingston’s words such as “servitude” and “tyrant mother” are derived from her general knowledge about married women’s status in their husbands' families in ancient China. Her mother’s telling Kingston “Give the concierge oranges,” on the other hand, allows Kingston to assume that “Now she would get hot water only if she bribed the concierge.” Although Kingston replicates in her own voice the same unsureness that she disliked in her mother's account, Kingston strategically orchestrates her unsureness and thereby makes her imaginations and assumptions more plausible and reliable. Kingston’s honest incompetency adds more legitimacy to her memoir and narration, helping her gain more trust from her readers.

Kingston’s attempt to represent her mother’s inner state and environment further leads to her effort to portray her own inner state and her environment. Kingston, in other words, writes her memoir through the story of the mother, and creates intimate connection and identification with her mother. At the end of the chapter, Kingston makes a confession to her mother: “‘When I’m away from here,’ I had to tell her, ‘I don’t get sick. I don’t go to hospital every holiday. […] Here I’m sick so often, I can barely work. I
can’t help it, Mama’” (108). Despite the unsureness of her mother and her history, and despite the conflicts and discrepancy between Kingston and the mother, Kingston registers her emotional connection and identification with Brave Orchid. As much as Kingston might feel guilty about her being away from home and family, Kingston’s own desire for freedom and independence may remind readers of Brave Orchid’s own pursuit of freedom and independence at medical school. Just as Kingston thinks her mother freed herself from servitude and her tyrant mother-in-law by going away from home for education, Kingston, too, expresses her desire to leave home and free herself from her Chinese family. In doing so, Kingston shows her identification with her mother. As Priborkin accurately points out, by depicting inside views of the mother, Kingston “substitutes or interchanges her own mental states with her mother’s, either because she attributes her own feelings to the fictional representation of her mother, or because she is convinced that her mother’s mental states would resemble her own in the described socio-cultural circumstances” (Priborkin, “Cross-Cultural” 167).

Kingston’s use of fictional techniques becomes even more overt in her fourth chapter, “At the Western Palace.” Kingston’s use of fiction in this chapter is her way of freely and creatively imagining her mother’s point of views. By imagining her mother’s inner world, Kingston in fact imagines herself, the ways in which she is viewed by the mother. Through her fictionalization of her mother’s consciousness, Kingston depicts vividly her relationship with her mother. In this chapter, Brave Orchid brings her sister
Moon Orchid to the United States. Moon Orchid has been living in Hong Kong, while her husband, who emigrated to America long ago and married a second wife in America, sent money to support her and the children. While this chapter seemingly focuses on Brave Orchid’s reunion with Moon Orchid and Moon Orchid’s failed attempt to regain her status as a wife, Kingston makes interesting authorial decisions to deploy a third person narrator. Kingston’s use of third person narration in this chapter allows Kingston to reflect both her mother’s feelings towards her children and Kingston’s own feelings towards how her mother might be feeling about her children. More specifically, Kingston actively penetrates Brave Orchid’s consciousness through free indirect discourse, a type of discourse that represents “character’s utterances or thoughts” by combining “two discourse events (a narrator’s and a character’s), two styles, two languages, two voices, two semantic and axiological systems” (Prince, Dictionary 34).

Brave Orchid is at San Francisco International Airport, waiting for Moon Orchid to arrive from Hong Kong. While Brave Orchid anxiously waits for her sister, her children, including Kingston, do not share their mother's excitement and anxiety: “Brave Orchid had made two of her own children come too because they could drive, but they had been lured away by the magazine racks and the gift shops and coffee shops. [...] Her bad boy and bad girl were probably sneaking hamburgers, wasting their money. She would scold them” (113-4). Kingston’s use of the third person narrator on the one hand gives readers the feeling of fully exploring Brave Orchid’s consciousness and reveals
closely and intimately what she is thinking and feeling. Readers understand clearly Brave Orchid’s thoughts and feelings in her own words and perceptions, although they are largely mediated by the words and perceptions of the third person narrator. Kingston’s third person narrator points out how Brave Orchid feels about her children and their indifference to the historical moment of the family reunion. Her “bad boy and bad girl” do not appreciate family values and would rather waste their money, “sneaking” western food.

Revelation of Brave Orchid’s inner world on the other hand discloses to readers something important about Kingston herself. Alan Palmer in *Fictional Minds* (2004) explains that free indirect discourse “combines the subjectivity and language of the character […] with the presentation of the narrator,” thereby allowing the author (through the voice of his/her narrator) and readers to experience inner speech, thoughts and feelings of the character’s consciousness (54). Free indirect discourse in this chapter, then, allows Kingston to intertwine her own perceptions and mind as an author of her memoir with her mother’s (imagined) inner worlds, showing the subjectivities of both herself and her mother. Kingston’s use of expressions such as “bad body and bad girl” and “sneaking” is especially worth noticing. Precisely because free indirect discourse combines both the character’s and narrator’s discourses and subjectivities, it is difficult for readers to distinguish exactly whose discourse Kingston is representing in this narrative moment. The ambiguity of languages and possibility of multiple minds captured
through Kingston’s strategic use of a third person narrator make possible Kingston’s representation of her own inner worlds. By showing what she thinks Brave Orchid might be feeling about her children (“bad body and bad girl”) through the voice of her third person narrator, Kingston effectively reveals the sense of guilt that she feels towards her mother. By examining the ways in which Brave Orchid’s and Kingston’s minds converge and emerge through the voice of a third person narrator and her free indirect discourse, readers can better understand Kingston’s position within the family, and how Kingston’s relationship with her mother is fraught with anxieties, tensions, guilt, and ambiguities.

In “Shaman,” Kingston strategically uses conjectural phrases and her limited interaction with her mother in order to imagine Brave Orchid’s unknown history in medical school. By doing so, Kingston creates an identification with her mother despite the generational and cultural gaps that separate her mother from herself. In “At the Western Palace” chapter, Kingston again demonstrates her effort to shrink the gap between herself and her mother through her use of third person narration, by constantly mixing her mother’s perception with that of the third person narrator whom Kingston deploys and relies on in order to represent her own feelings towards her mother. After all, Moon Orchid’s attempt to find her husband back ends neither with Brave Orchid’s nor with Moon Orchid’s perspectives. The chapter instead concludes by focusing on Brave Orchid’s daughters, thereby representing Kingston’s voice and view: “Brave Orchid’s
daughters decided fiercely that they would never let men be unfaithful to them. All her children made up their minds to major in science or mathematics” (160).

The final chapter of the memoir, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” is different from all the other chapters of the book. In this chapter, Kingston emerges as a protagonist of her memoir and recounts her real life experiences. Nevertheless, even this chapter deviates from the conventions of autobiography. Instead of providing historical truth or her knowledge about herself, her life, and her family, Kingston’s main goal is to let her readers know that because the stories that readers have read so far have no referential basis, there is no way for Kingston to tell her audiences what and how much to believe. The first line of the chapter reads, “What my brother actually said was, ‘I drove Mom and Second Aunt to Los Angeles to see Aunt’s husband who’s got the other wife.’” (164). In a few lines below, Kingston corrects herself: “In fact, it wasn’t me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he’d told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs” (164).

How are readers supposed to interpret Kingston’s narration in her final chapter? In a final chapter of narrative where readers naturally expect some sense of closure, Kingston ironically opens up most widely the problematic of her memoir—the untruthfulness of her stories, her lack of verifying information, and the lack of consistency in her manner of narration. Importantly, too, Kingston’s inconsistency and untruthfulness appear to be more intentional and even deceptive here. Kingston looks untrustworthy in this chapter.
Why does Kingston make a move that might destroy the trust and bond she has established throughout her previous chapters at the end of her memoir?

Through the twist in her final chapter, Kingston in fact steps into her narrative most assertively and authoritatively, and shares with her audiences some of her most important philosophies as a writer. First, Kingston emphasizes the importance of the listener in a story world who in turn becomes a narrator (“one of my sisters told me what he’d told her”). Equally, Kingston draws attention to the importance of a narrator and the narrator’s techniques in the shaping of a story, whether bare or twisted into designs. Depending on who tells the story and who listens to the story, and based on the kind of form that the story takes, a story and the world it creates will always change. Kingston also shows that the indeterminacy of narrative is what makes narrative worth interrogating. Right before the chapter ends, Kingston once again confuses her readers by saying, “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending mine” (106). Kingston then unfolds a story about a woman warrior in ancient China who was captured by a chieftain during a raid. The woman gives birth to children during her captivity, and in order to share her longing for her homeland with her children, whose languages are different from her own, she decides to sing rather than speak. This song, Kingston explains further to her readers, is a song that the Chinese still sing to their own instruments, and “it translated well” (209).
Kingston through this final talk-story emphasizes her approach to narrative texts not as a stable object, but as a “verbal construct, and thus, as a living organism capable of evolution” (Bolaki, “It Translated” 54). Kingston’s text has multiple listeners and narrators, and it is, according to Kingston, co-authored by her mother and herself, and yet it still translates well. Kingston’s memoir translates well precisely because it never rests. It rests neither on any static distinction between fiction and nonfiction nor on a single set of conventions that might falsely attempt to assign narratives to overrestrictive categories. Although Kingston’s memoir might evoke confusion and criticism, it is clear at the end of her memoir that Kingston has indeed made her voice clear to her readers and thereby represented herself and her writing well to her readers. This is the truth about her life that Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* depicts, and it, I believe, has translated well.
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Conclusion:

In this concluding chapter of my dissertation, I would like to revisit each chapter as a way to remind ourselves of the range of issues and semantic variability that the Asian American authors’ use of inscrutability in the texts under examination demonstrates to us.

In Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*, Franklin, the character narrator of the novel, is scrutable in character-character relation, but inscrutable in author-narrator-reader relation. Franklin’s scrutabilty to the other characters in the novel relates closely to Erving Goffman’s concept of face as an image of self, influenced by social attributes and social interactions (see Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*). That is, Franklin wears a mask of scrutable Asian American to satisfy the social expectations of himself as the model minority, the transparent and trustworthy elderly of the Oriental origin. Franklin as the narrator, however, is inscrutable, as his narration is often interrupted by his traumatic memoires of the World War II and K, the Korean “comfort woman,” Franklin’s tragic first love. Franklin’s inscrutability is to represent the complexities of narrating historical events and memories (WWII and comfort women), especially when they conflict with the burden of performing as a scrutable immigrant figure at the story level for survival and acceptance in 1990s America. Interpretive tension and anxiety increase for readers as Franklin’s inscrutability contradicts his scrutability in character-character relations. Through this tension, however, Lee shows that Franklin’s inscrutable mind has a close connection to his present material and mental conditions in 1990s America and his
fraught relationship to the past laden with guilt and shame. Readers are invited to interrogate more actively and empathetically the link between Franklin’s disguising and misleading scrutability at the level of the story and his increasing inscrutability at the level of the discourse. Chang-rae Lee’s use of a scutable and inscrutable Asian American protagonist, then, is an effective rhetorical tool that not only engages readers more actively and affectively, but also better highlights the cognitive, affective, and ethical complexities of literary representations of history.

Inscrutability in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* has less to do with the racial stereotype about Asians/Asian Americans. Instead, Truong focuses more on the ways in which the character narrator of the novel, Binh’s socioeconomic and sociolinguistic position as a Vietnamese live-in cook in 1920’s Paris restrict his subjectivity, performativity, and visibility. The political, economical, and linguistic contexts of the novel render Binh inscrutable to the other characters in the novel. By contrast, Truong allows for readers a full access to Binh’s subjectivity at the level of the discourse by representing his inner world through various narrative techniques. Truong’s ability to reveal the hidden side of the protagonist, to represent details of Binh’s inner life to her readers is crucial in formation of Binh’s character and Binh’s relationship with readers. Although representation of character’s inner life is one of the most prominent features of fiction, Truong’s specific designing of Binh’s self-conscious storytelling in *The Book of Salt* guides readers to respond to Binh cognitively, affectively, and ethically. By actively
participating in and engaging with Binh’s “silent” act of communication, and by paying close attention to the ways in which Binh’s mind is made scrutable and inscrutable at different levels of narrative, readers are able to re-shape Binh’s subjectivity and re-discover depth of his consciousness. Although Binh might disappear from the circle of communication and becomes inscrutable in his character-character relation, Binh simultaneously returns to the very center of an alternative communication that Truong constructs, Binh imagines, and readers participate in.

In *Shortcomings* the anti-protagonist of the novel, Ben Tanaka, is inscrutable both in character-character and author-narrator-reader relations. Ben’s inscrutability has to do with his relative lack of emotions and focus on negative feelings. Ben’s characterization, in other words, seemingly satisfies the stereotype of Asians/Asian Americans as affectless and passionless. Especially by actively using visual ambiguity, Tomine makes it difficult for readers to understand better larger emotional background of Ben’s mental state, where his negativity comes from. Tomine’s designing of Ben's anti-heroic characterization and inscrutability is to guide readers to maintain objective distance from Ben and critically evaluate his mind and actions. Concurrently, the initial inscrutability of Ben's mind and his negative emotional responses warn t readers that any immediate and quick judgment and reading of Ben's actions and emotions will take readers only to the shallow surface of Ben's exterior, his seemingly angry and frustrated face, body, and movement. By gradually revealing the depth of Ben's interior fraught with his self-
othering contradictions and ambivalence, Tomine asks his readers to carefully and critically relate to Ben to better understand his consciousness and identity make-up inflected by the given social and emotional landscape of the society surrounding him.

Yamamoto in "Seventeen Syllables" demystifies stereotype of the inscrutable Oriental through her innovative use of silence in a conventional, indirect, and ambiguous Japanese conversation style. Silence in character-character relation proves to be a mode of communication between Rosie and Tome, and captures the intricacy and complexities of the issei mother and nisei daughter relationship. The indirectness and ambiguity of Rosie-Tome interactional style significantly delay the sharing of their secrets and the meeting of their consoling hands. Nevertheless, it is the very silence between Rosie and Tome through which the daughter and mother pursue their forbidden parallel passions, Rosie’s growing sexual desire and Tome’s haiku writing. This silence ultimately brings Rosie and Tome together to acknowledge and possibly face limits of their reality that they intimately share despite the linguistic, generational, and cultural discrepancies between them. In author-narrator-reader relations, on the other hand, silence is a strategic method of indirect communication between the author and audiences. Yamamoto’s use of diversions, multiple plots, and restricted narration effectively delay important thematic disclosures and instead create gaps that readers must fill in to complete the story. These gaps prompt Yamamoto’s readers to participate in the story world more actively, to reconstruct the meanings, norms, and values of the story with the author. Through the
very silence in the gaps and without being direct or didactic, Yamamoto succeeds in conveying her messages to her readers.

In “Wilshire Bus,” Esther’s inscrutable face is represented through her act of turning away—turning away from the dominant force of racism after World War II and Pearl Harbor. In order not to expose herself to the prevalent racism of postwar America, Esther remains inscrutable, refuses to exist, and attempts to forget the reality of her present life. At the level of discourse, however, Yamamoto deploys a third-person dissonant narrator whose manner of reporting reshapes the representation of Esther’s consciousness and actions. This narrative technique enables Yamamoto to guide her readers to detect and investigate the gap and irony between Esther’s responses in the story world and the interior states and nature of these responses as evaluated, translated, and filtered by the narrator’s perception at the level of the discourse. The dissonant mode of narration used in “Wilshire Bus,” in other words, renders Esther highly scrutable to readers, and readers come to experience empathetically the poignancy of Esther’s act of turning away from what she knows about her present lives and realities in postwar America.

Inscrutability in Kingston’s The Woman Warrior relates not necessarily to the constructing and stereotyping of Asians or Asian Americans as an inscrutable ethnic other. In Kingston’s text, inscrutability indicates a concept closer to historical and generational unknowability and alienation—gaps between Kingston (present) and her
mother (Chinese past, tradition, and heritage), as well as Kingston’s resistance to investigation through historical methods of inquiry. Precisely because Kingston’s mother’s stories are rendered inscrutable (unknowable) and there is no way for Kingston to verify the stories, Kingston in her effort to write her memoir relies heavily on imaginative reconstruction and even fictionalization of the original story that mother tells. Nevertheless, it is important to understand better the big picture of Kingston’s effort in her memoir. The original (mother’s stories) is important, but it becomes meaningful to Kingston only when Kingston can make sense of it, and when she can see her life and herself through it. The purpose of Kingston’s memoir, then, is to meet the challenge of dealing with the inscrutability of her mother, her mother’s stories, and history of the family by building on what she does know about her heritage and then imaginatively adding to it. The inscrutability of her Chinese heritage allows Kingston to fictionalize for the nonfictional purpose of locating her own identity within this larger heritage.

What I hope my discussions of the four texts and two short stories of innovative Asian American authors in my dissertation have captured is the link between narrative form and larger cultural issues associated with the representation of Asian American minds: how Asian American authors since 1945 have deployed the stereotype of inscrutability--that is, the inscrutability of the minds of Asians and Asian Americans--in order to reframe/reexamine/debunk the stereotype in various ways, and how tools and...
concepts used by scholars of narrative can contribute to the study of post-1945 Asian American literature. Importantly, I aimed to demonstrate in my dissertation how a nuanced investigation of narrative form can yield insights into the sociocultural embeddedness of my case studies—insights that would not be available if such formal questions were by passed. Furthermore, it is important to note that Asian American authors under examination flexibly, innovatively, and creatively stretch inscrutability to cover a wide range of meanings. The stretching of the term, however, does not undermine or violate coherence of inscrutability as the stereotype of Asian/Asian Americans. Rather, the various ways in which inscrutability is formed and operated in different texts for different purposes indicate that the inscrutability, the historically and biologically formed stereotype of the Oriental and their mental states, in fact can be used for author’s advantage and to debunk that exact stereotype, as a critical and creative tool for Asian American literature and storytelling. Instead of summing up my dissertation with definite answer or closure, I would like to end this dissertation with the following questions that I hope to pursue further in my future work: 1) what formal and contextual conventions of storytelling do authors use to present the minds of their characters in post-1945 Asian American fiction, 2) what kind of role does gender play in shaping and complicating Asian American inscrutability, and 3) how does this body of fictional texts invite actual audiences to take on a position of the authorial audience when it comes to engaging with the minds of Asian American characters? Critical investigation of the inscrutability of
Asian/Asian American mind can open up rich discussions about Asian American literature, the exciting formal and thematic intersections that occur in it, and importantly, the people who write and read this body of literature.
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