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Beyond K's Specter: Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, Comfort Women Testimonies, and Asian American Transnational Aesthetics

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In the decade since its publication in 1999, Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* has been consistently read by critics as an exemplary transnational Asian American text.[1] Kandice Chuh first hailed the novel as "sketching a transnational and postcolonial horizon of knowledge"[2] and "model[ing] a transnational conception of the lurching, sometimes irascible processes of subject formation that directly undermines the unilateral seamlessness of the immigration narratives forwarded by U.S. nationalism."[3] Other critics have followed suit by seeing in the novel "a shift in perspective from a nationally oriented, patriarchally centered narrative of immigration and cultural assimilation to a fragmented, transnational narrative,"[4] as well as a probing account of "transracial/transnational adoption"[5] and a pervasive quality of "diasporicity."[6] *Gesture*, one might say, has kept Lee in good pace with critical trends within Asian American Studies. While his 1995 debut, *Native Speaker*, firmly established him in the Asian American literary canon via its trenchant examination of identity politics, this second novel, in tandem with the field, moves resolutely beyond a U.S.-centered framework toward a more global one spanning WWII Asia as much as 1990s America. *Gesture*'s narrative shuttling between these two mirrored sites of racialist and colonialist politics, particularly its focus on the haunting effects of a Korean comfort woman on an Asian American model minority subject, gives it timely currency as a paradigm of Asian American transnational aesthetics. As Chuh justly points out, since the comfort women issue can readily be "narrativized to serve U.S. imperialist/nationalist ends" by those who seize upon the comfort woman as an "exemplary figure of subjugation under Japanese imperialism [that] seemingly argues for U.S. intervention," *Gesture* instructively links the

"legacies of Japanese colonial occupation of and U.S. neo-colonial presence in Korea" in a way that "disarticulates Korean liberation from U.S. intervention."[7] Moreover, the novel's portrait of wartime Japan and postwar U.S. as "co-formed nations, arising from material and ideological forces that continuously transform the existence of both or all national sides," makes it a prototypical work of what Laura Doyle calls "dialectical transnationalism."[8]

I will argue here, however, that *A Gesture Life* exemplifies both the conceptual gains and the potential pitfalls of contemporary Asian American literature's transnationalizing efforts. My essay lays out this argument in three parts. In the first, I read Lee's novel via the interlocking concepts of Freud's uncanny and Arendt's banality of evil. One important feature of *Gesture* is its putting into interplay psychoanalytic theory and political philosophy to yield a narrative that richly entwines macro-imperial histories with individual psychic (after)lives. Asian American literature has a long lineage of texts that connect the psychic to the sociocultural, particularly in the autobiographical and bildungsroman genres,[9] but *Gesture* is more properly deemed a *de*bildungsroman (or what Hamilton Carroll recognizes as a deconstructive bildungsroman[10]), for it traces the breakdown of identity through the protagonist's repeated self-disavowals rather than identity's consolidation through an accretion of experiences. Provocatively, Lee makes use of an aged narrator—in his metaphor, a subject in "twilight" (72)—to do this thematic work. If Asian American fiction has been dominated by voices of youth, with the child narrator much deployed to tell personal coming-of-age stories as much as cultural memoirs of various Asian groups in America, the hoary narrator has been a relative latecomer. Yet it is a particularly expedient vehicle for transnational imaginings, for it enables contemporary writers such as Lee to inhabit the retrospective psyches of elderly immigrant characters, and by extension, to cloak historical accounts of Asia with the realist effect of memory. Indeed, the twilight narrator stands to become a central device in the evolving aesthetics of transnational realism, and in turn, theories of memory and repression, especially as they intersect with analyses of race and nation, may emerge as ever more crucial to transnational texts to come.

I read *Gesture* via these overlapping theoretical frames so as to reveal not only Lee's insights into the psychology of criminal repression but also two related problems of his novel. First, by purely psychologizing responsibility for war crimes, specifically that of the comfort women's wartime sexual enslavement, *Gesture* evokes a privatistic closure to, and eclipses the public nature of, what remains a highly contested and unresolved political matter. Second, the novel's thematic economy, though transnational, continually polarizes Asia and America in a way that existentially privileges the latter. In Lee's partitioning, Asia stays largely fixed as the space and as the time of war atrocities and biopolitical regimes of death, whereas America signifies the geographical and temporal site of survival and memory, repression and its overturning, guilt and its absolution. To sharpen these problematic aspects of Lee's novel and to locate them within the broader context of international

debates on comfort women, I turn in the second part of my essay to contemporaneous real-life comfort women survivors' testimonies. Against the backdrop of these survivors' prominently self-assertive voices and their collective political activism, Lee's muting of the comfort woman figure in his text becomes much more conspicuous—and consequential. Finally, in the third section, I recontextualize *Gesture* within current debates in Asian and Asian American Studies to show that Lee's aesthetic of alterity, which recovers the comfort women's past only to render the symbolic comfort woman a gothic specter, is reflected in much Asian American literary criticism today, in which the comfort woman figure is repeatedly invoked as a limit point to disciplinary knowledge or artistic representation. As an alternative to this ultimately self-referential attitude, my conclusion proposes a transnational aesthetic that takes not alterity but the human as its theoretical premise.

This reading of *Gesture*, I hope, will serve as a reminder that a transnational perspective is the beginning, not the end, of a potentially progressive critical practice, and that beyond staking out territorial coordinates, the task remains for us to fill in our newly expanded imagined geographies with political and ethical meaning.

Evil's Uncanny Banality

On the face of it, *A Gesture Life* is not a "comfort woman book." The comfort women enter in mostly as backdrop, silhouettes that descend from a truck, blink at the sun, then whimper at the approach of men. As the novel proceeds, they become ever more shadowy and disembodied, discursive fragments scattered across dialogues between men, first as eagerly anticipated "fresh girls" to replace the "old Japanese aunties" (106), then as "soft slips of flesh, a brief warm pleasure to be taken before it was gone" (251), and finally as just "fucking skeleton" (302). The only individuated comfort woman in the novel is Kkutaeh, whose name presumably means "bottom" or "last" (173), but who comes to be referred to simply as K. This reference to her by an initial highlights her textual role as a synecdoche for Koreanness, an ethnic and colonial identity. The abridgment suggests that her character designates a symbolic space rather than a fully interiorized subject.

Instead, Chang-rae Lee focuses on and through Franklin Hata, an Asian American immigrant, septuagenarian, "number-one citizen" and everybody's "good Charlie" (95) in Bedley Run, a picturesque affluent suburban town in 1990s New York state. Before assuming his role as the most model of model minorities, Hata was Lieutenant Jiro Kurohata, a medic in the service of the Imperial Japanese Army during WWII, stationed in a desolate outpost in Burma in the war's closing months and assigned the task of maintaining the health and hygiene of the camp's five Korean comfort women. And before this, he was surnamed Oh, an ethnic Korean born into a ghetto of hide tanners and renderers before he was adopted by a noble Japanese

family of apothecaries. Lee thus constructs three layers of displaced identities for his protagonist: first as part of a diasporic minority community of Korean laborers who, like K, occupied the bottom rung in the Japanese nation; then as an imperial subject complicitous with the Japanese colonization of Korea; and finally as a self-refashioned Japanese immigrant assimilating hard into middle-class America.

The novel is written in the first person, and we are at first seduced by Hata's voice of frank intimacy. "People know me here," he tells us in a simple and quiet opening line. But it does not take us long to realize that knowing Hata is a tricky business. For one, his preliminary self-presentation makes note of the "almost Oriental veneration" he enjoys as an "elder" in Bedley Run, and he comments, not without a touch of pride, that his status as a "friendly and outgoing silver-hair" joins with his Japanese name to make him "odd[ly] delightful [and] town-affirming" to his mostly white neighbors (1–2). These self-orientalizing gestures, however, are not without design, though we learn this only seventy pages later. After numerous emphatic self-markers of his Japaneseness, Hata surprises us with the following revelation: "Most of us," he confesses, "were ethnic Koreans, though we spoke and lived as Japanese, if ones in twilight" (72). Aside from the remarkable belatedness of this piece of key information in our knowing Hata, we notice the uneasy syntax of his confession, his claiming Koreanness only by an object pronoun, and then only by leaving the door open to his being an exception to "most of us." His rendering of himself as an "Oriental" thus conveniently hides his Koreanness within an undifferentiated category, even as this new alias reinscribes the "O" that at once initiates and echoes his Korean patronymic.

In these permutations of a name, Lee signals Hata's never fully completed and partly self-sabotaging attempt to erase his connections to K and Koreanness, and in turn, his double-edged relation to racism, colonialism, and sexual slavery. By abridging his Japanese surname, Hata drops the initial "K" as much as the embedded "oh" in the center of "Kurohata," but this condensed form expunges Korean associations only superficially, for it uncannily memorializes the choking sound uttered by K after his first sexual encounter with her. In a scene ambiguously suggestive of rape, where K lay unmoving and unspeaking, "sleeping, or pretending to sleep, or somehow forcing herself to" as Jiro "cast [him]self upon her," her sole reaction afterward was that of sobbing "*hata-hata*" in "quelled gasps" (260–61). Hata's eventual name, then, though emptied of visible signs of his past, is an exact echo of K's crying, at once erotic memento and private albatross, summoning to his ear an acted-upon complicity in the comfort system that only he hears. Our journey into Hata's character always traces this reversed route of magnified elisions, where the disavowed becomes ever more audible with each accretion of a farther-flung diasporic identity—but only because he insistently marks the trail of his own disavowals. In turn, we come to know him via the path of disidentifications he lays out for us, his gestures toward the cracks of his life's summing-up. We can say that Lee constructs the narrative as a look, from the inside out, at a limit-point repression

where the unconscious, fatigued of repression's psychic expenditures, now methodically leaves symptoms all around. With calculated self-crumbling, the voice of Hata's unconscious outlines all too visibly the contours of its original trauma and invites only too energetically a scrutiny that will bring it, as the novel's final line intimates, "almost home" (356). The twilights of biological life's slowing and colonized life's self-eclipsing converge here.

Several narratological elements are of interest here. First, the novel is structured as a retrospective where the Hata of 1990s America continually recalls the Kurohata of 1940s Southeast Asia. The unreliability of memory and narration, teasingly at play throughout, is often considered a postmodern theme, though it is also a particularly diasporic tactic, mobilized by many contemporary Asian diaspora writers to insinuate their mediated access to Asian histories and to formalize the distance between their sites of writing and the sites of their narratives. Lee marshals a number of these narratological diasporic alibis. One is the double temporal framing: the two time frames of Hata's narrative form an echo chamber where the murmurings of WWII are amplified through the details of the present but nonetheless remain remote, past. Another is the double spatial framing: Asia and America, the Japanese military camp and the New York suburban town, mirror each other to yield superimposed geographies, but the power hierarchies of race and gender in the two settings are nonetheless not interchangeable. These doubling devices serve to distance Hata's as well as our access to the comfort women's history, even as the flashbacks and flashforwards constantly meet and constellate around K as the central haunting figure of the text.

Lee is not without antecedents in these literary gestures. The writer whose style Lee's most resembles is Kazuo Ishiguro, whose first three novels all explore the memorial landscape of repressed psyches vis-à-vis WWII.[11] Reading Ishiguro, we get the feeling his narrators cannot or will not recall a past that is ambivalently laden with both pain and guilt, so they eke out their postwar lives with compulsive-repetitive rituals of forgetting. Ishiguro's writing places us at the crossroads of wartime trauma and postwar repression, political responsibility and historical suffering—the very thematic territory Lee maps out for Hata in *Gesture*. Like Ishiguro's narrators, Hata too "abandons himself to the compulsion to repeat, which [replaces] the impulse to remember."[12] A classic case of Freud's repetition compulsion, Hata absorbs himself relentlessly in rituals of cleaning, as if to reproduce in his picture-perfect Bedley Run house a replica of the comfort station. The latter he remembers as "a lone clean island in the growing fetor of the camp," the only newly built hut in that forgotten outpost of Japan's losing war (186). For Hata to relive his role as the guardian of hygiene is also for him to repeat erasing his Koreanness, to cleanse himself of the "germ of infirmity" that his superior officer, Captain Ono, frequently ascribed to him during the war (266). As Freud indicates, this reenactment of the compulsive body becomes a substitute for and a defense against memory: the surest way to forget an event is to relive it.

At heart, what Hata reenacts in order to forget is his wartime complicity in the comfort system, his persistent failure to convert his split loyalties into acts of ethical intervention. In effect, Lee puts into contrapuntal play two protagonists, with two reverberating psychic economies: the older Hata of troubled conscience belatedly besieged by war guilt, and the younger Jiro of ethnic abjection struggling with imperial assimilation. The former provides a vista into the psychology of criminal repression, the latter into what Hannah Arendt calls the *banality of evil*—how a "quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous" person can commit deeds of atrocity without the slightest compunction.[13] Arendt's focus on the Nazi soldier as a fundamental political-ethical problem for the twentieth century can be usefully transferred to the figure of the Japanese imperial soldier, who has likewise come under historical scrutiny as a modern "mob man" or "cog in the mass murder machine," someone who suffers not so much from moral depravity as "sheer thoughtlessness."[14] Just as Arendt would cite totalitarianism and anti-Semitism as circumstantial factors for the banality of evil, so Lee probes the ideological power of imperialism and racism in producing obedient, banally evil subjects. Lt. Jiro Kurohata always did his job well, and in the wartime camp, this meant keeping the comfort women clean and healthy enough for continued "service." Yet he himself was the perfect servant as well, not simply because he unquestioningly abided by military directives, but because he desired above all that which was denied him as a Korean subject within the Japanese empire: citizenship. Hence, the language of young Jiro's unthinking, robotic motion habitually overlaps with the language of his imperial envy and ethnic repression. For instance, in the novel's first full narration of the WWII setting, Jiro stumbles upon a scene where he is obliged to carry out his duty as a Japanese officer precisely by confronting and then denying his Koreanness. At a welcoming house in Singapore, he suddenly sees a door flung open and a naked girl running out, "blood staining the inside of her legs." As she tries to run past him, he catches her "automatically," and to her pleas to let her go, he responds, "unthinking," "There's no place to go" (111). But even as Lee invokes this language of unreflective action, he stages the scene as Jiro's unconscious and disowned identification with the girl, for we discover a moment later that Jiro had spoken to her in Korean.

As Arendt points out in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann, the banality of evil manifests itself most clearly in language, through "clichés, stock phrases, . . . conventional, standardized codes of expression" that obviate the need for thinking.[15] Lee's novel dramatizes this linguistic complicity by underscoring how language gets pressed into the service of banalizing atrocities. At one point, Jiro explains the comfort system to a younger corporal as a "common procedure," "a most familiar modality," and that "like everyone else [he] appreciated the logic of deploying young women to help maintain the morale of officers and foot soldiers in the field" (163). At another point, he describes the comfort women as those who had "unwittingly enlisted or been conscripted into the wartime women's volunteer corps, to

contribute and sacrifice as all did" (180). In these sanitized explanations, the absurdity of "unwittingly enlisting" quickly collapses into the rote rhetoric of duty and sacrifice.

To be sure, the term "comfort woman" is itself an insidious euphemism, as are "comfort stations" and "welcoming houses." What is intriguing about Lee's adoption of the Arendtian insight is his linking of it to the theme of repression to show how language, when complicitous in the concealment of historical atrocities, can return in uncanny ways to unsettle present normal speech and ironically open the way to belated recollection. Since language too has its historical life, once it has been used to normalize the horrific and violent, it bears the potential to return at the same nodes to horrify and violate the normal, to project into the present echoes of the past and provoke scrutiny into both times. So it is the very words history has used as euphemisms that Lee recalls to haunt the novel. In his text's proliferation of "comfort" and "welcome," Asia's "welcoming houses" (105, 111) start to resonate with the not "unwelcoming" house of America upon Hata's arrival in 1963 (3–4, 135–36), the ambivalent year of civil rights hope and violence. While the two contexts are clearly differentiated, with U.S. racism and xenophobia paralleling but not coinciding with Japanese military aggression and sexual slavery, Lee does suggest a resemblance in the two systems of racialized power, and hence the resonance of the comfort women's history for later Asian American politics.

But lest we align Hata too quickly with the comfort women as kindred victims, Lee repeatedly reminds us of Jiro's collusion in the comfort system via K. In life, K was an unusually lucid critic of the Japanese empire, giving voice to the novel's one explicit critique of Japanese imperialism. In one of their early conversations, Jiro cites the "Emperor's mandate . . . to develop an Asian prosperity, and an Asian way of life," to which K answers sardonically that "it seems to be a Japanese life" (249). This political challenge, however, fails to move Jiro, and it is only when K tells him her life's story—how she and her sister were traded by their family as substitute recruits for their younger brother, how they were misled to believe they would be transported to work in a boot factory—that she comes to serve her real pedagogical function in the text. It is her life story rather than her political critique that triggers Jiro's first feelings of doubt and self-reflection about the comfort system. "I was somewhat taken aback by her account," he confesses after her autobiographical narrative. "I could not quite accept the whole truth of it. But it was more perhaps that I had reached the limits of my conception, than thinking there was something in her story to doubt" (250). In this instant, Jiro comes close to acknowledging his own banality of evil.

An explicit self-criticism, though, would not be forthcoming for another fifty years, not until the retired Hata, bereft of kin and left alone to empty hours and private memories, confronts his memory of his second rape of K. If he had tricked himself into giving a neutral description of the first sexual encounter, this second one signals all too plainly his participation in the comfort system: "I never meant for this

but I could no longer balk, or control myself, and then something inside her collapsed, snapped clean, giving way like some storm-sieged roof, and then I descended upon her, and I searched her, every lighted and darkened corner, and every room" (295). With K thus explicitly metaphorized as the comfort house, Hata at last arrives at a frank admission: "For in my own way I comprised it, my yearning and wishing and my wanton hope, the sum of which, at end, amounted to a complete and utter fraudulence. For that is, finally, what she would escape if she could, not the ever-imminent misery and horror but the gentle boy-face of it, the smoothness and the equability, the picture of someone heroic enough to act only upon his own trembling desire" (295). Despite his professed love for K, despite his Koreanness and his abject identification with the comfort women, Hata in the end narrates himself as a war criminal of unpunished complicity, a subject more colonizing than colonized, who has been called to no earthly tribunal except that of old age's slow time and solitude. It is the desire for this confession that has driven his self-referential trail of narrative symptoms from the outset, and it is the solace accompanying this disclosure that permits him, in the novel's penultimate scenes, to forestall gestures for once and act to save those closest to him from drowning as much as financial ruin. Insofar as Hata succeeds in not only narrating buried memories but arriving at some insight into his historical guilt, we can read the novel as a psychoanalytic parable of criminal repression's overcoming.

In granting Hata this much lucidity and grace, Lee far exceeds the Arendtian portrait of evil's banality. If Arendt diagnoses the banality of evil as a by-product of modernity's "dichotomy of private and public functions"—which we may liken to the Hata/Jiro split—and if no amount of public cross-examination would lead to a private epiphany in the case of an Eichmann for her, Lee by contrast affords the repentant war criminal a much more hopeful scenario.[16] By offering Hata the chance to come to terms with Jiro's complicity in the comfort system, Lee reroutes communal judgment through repression's uncanny channels to confer upon the war criminal deferred reflection, moral absolution, and the self's near-homecoming. But such hope, wishfully contingent on the work of an exhausted psyche, remains what Arendt would call a "purely individual and still non-political expression" of human responsibility (131). We can go further and say that such a recuperative conclusion disquietingly divorces responsibility from the realm of political action and relegates it to that of private conscience—and private penance, after all, is not public reparation. Tellingly, then, once K has served her textual function as the crime to be pleaded guilty to, the novel transfers Hata's redeeming feats onto other marginalized American subjects as surrogate beneficiaries. In an episode of possibly self-ironic melodrama toward the novel's end, Hata saves from drowning first his Afro-Korean American adoptive grandson, Thomas, then his faithful South Asian American friend Renny Banerjee, in a dual heroic act that unmistakably reverses his previous trail of half gestures and failed interventions. Amid such septuagenarian consolation and reconstituted masculinity, what becomes of the comfort woman's recompense?

This question returns us to the scene of K's autobiographical narrative. In this testimonial encounter, Jiro states he "could not quite accept the whole truth" of K's account. On the one hand, he concedes this might stem from his own limited understanding of the comfort system. On the other, K might indeed be an unreliable narrator herself. Although the text never provides evidence to contradict her narrative of captivity, it leaves unresolved the issue of her general truthfulness. At one point, when Jiro asks if she is pregnant, she answers, "No. . . . There's nothing in me. There can't be. If there is, then God forgive me for what I'll do" (294). Later, however, when Jiro comes upon her body at the site of her death, he would discover another "tiny, elfin form," "miraculously whole," with "figured legs and feet, the utter, blessed digitation of the hands" (305). While K might have been honestly deceived about her own pregnancy, Lee leaves open the possibility that even the comfort woman may not be a truthful witness to herself. Yet the interpretive rub here lies not in K's possible dishonesty but, rather, Lee's ultimate refusal to let her voice access any truth, even concerning her own body, beyond Hata's.[17] And truth, of course, particularly the power to claim truth, is at the very contentious heart of the comfort women debate.

Belated Witnesses

While the preceding section explores the contours of the comfort woman as articulated in *A Gesture Life*, the next section will focus on what has sometimes been called Lee's strategic "disarticulation" of K, as when Anne Anlin Cheng refers to K's "final, disarticulated body."[18] Before proceeding with that deconstructive inquiry, however, I will foreground here the relevant social and discursive contexts around Lee's writing of this novel. At the moment Lee was memorializing K in the late 1990s, comfort women survivors' voices were far from spectral. This was the decade when the comfort women issue erupted as one of international political significance for the first time, after former comfort woman Kim Hak-sun stepped forward in 1991 as the first public witness in a class-action suit against the Japanese government. Shortly thereafter, historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki disclosed archival documents that incriminated the Japanese wartime government for sanctioning, and the imperial army for establishing and operating, comfort stations.[19] In the next few years, many more women of various nationalities and ethnicities would come forth as public witnesses, broadening the Korean Council's lawsuit into an international redress movement. Lee's composition of *Gesture* was thus predicated on the appearance of these testimonial accounts in the American media, as well as the publication of several book-length collections compiled in and translated into English.[20]

In this international context, former comfort women have emerged as vital political agents primarily through the genre of the testimony. As Yoshimi observes, comfort women testimonies are "extremely important—not only because the information they contain does not exist in written form, but also because these

intense experiences sometimes gave rise to strikingly vivid memories, and as the questions are repeated, facts and relationships that can only be narrated by those involved come to light." As a historian acutely aware of the limits of historical archives, Yoshimi further emphasizes that "only through these women's testimonies can we discover the stark realities that never appear in military and government documents, reports, or statistics."[21]

At the same time, as numerous trauma studies scholars note, the testimony can serve the survivor's as much as the historian's needs. For example, in his work with Holocaust survivors, Dori Laub has written persuasively about the symbiotic relation between telling and surviving: "The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life."[22] In addition, Laub emphasizes the importance of the testimony as a forum where truth can emerge dialogically for trauma survivors. In his view, an event without a witness is an event that did not happen from the standpoint of history, so it is crucial for a survivor to "reclaim his position as a witness" (70).

Laub's understanding of the testimony as a forum for personal mourning as much as historical witnessing is by now quite familiar, and it may even be said to constitute the dominant paradigm in trauma research, especially pertaining to the Holocaust. Profoundly informed by psychoanalytic concepts of repression and melancholia, this model typically regards the testimonial subject as someone who has never completely worked through the traumatic experience, who unbeknownst to him- or herself is still living out the ramifications of the trauma and must therefore be prompted to revisit the moment of its occurrence, relive the event through its telling, and thereby repossess the act of witnessing. In this model, the testimonial subject is first and foremost a trauma victim, a haunted psyche for whom the past impels and perhaps even swallows the present. It is likely that many comfort women survivors bear out this experience.

Still, in comfort women scholarship, a directly antithetical paradigm has presented itself. Instead of privileging the past as the buried temporality to be retrieved, and instead of identifying the testimonial subject as a psyche persistently lodged in the traumatic instant, a number of scholars are highlighting an opposite set of factors vis-à-vis comfort women's memories: the priority of the present, the presentism of historical reconstruction, and the social and political (and not merely private or dialogical) dimensions of remembering. For instance, writing in reference to WWII in Asia more generally, T. Fujitani, Geoffrey White, and Lisa Yoneyama maintain that historical memories never surface in isolated environments but are "always shaped by relations of power"; as such, "memory work continually figures and refigures the past as a method for present purposes, particularly within contemporary social and cultural struggles."[23] On the comfort women issue, Hyunah

Yang further argues that "truth is *produced* within a dynamic political context rather than simply discovered."[24] Focusing on the social, gender, and international power relations—what she unflinchingly calls the "Japanese hegemony"—that underwrite comfort women discourse in 1990s South Korea, Yang traces the ironic circuit by which male Korean reporters rely on Japanese archival documents to construct what they perceive as "the *objective* truth" while institutionally marginalizing the women survivors as mere "informants" on that history, at times even using the preestablished historical record to then judge the truthfulness of the women's testimonies (53). For Yang, the multilayered power relations surrounding the production of historical truth about, for, and in East Asia today emphasize how former comfort women continue to be "trivialized and exploited" (67). Likewise, Chungmoo Choi calls attention to the ways comfort women survivors, though now given public voice, remain "caught in conflicting national agendas" between Japan and South Korea.[25] And Ueno Chizuko, similarly analyzing the power relations operative in comfort women discourse, contends that the comfort women issue obliges historians to accept a "paradigm shift" from "positivist historiography" to a relativist one that acknowledges "the politics of memory."[26]

These alternative approaches to historical memory and the survivor testimony all share a significant redefinition of the notion of "truth." Contrary to Laub's psychoanalytic understanding of truth as that which is structured by interior mechanisms of repression and arrived at through testimonial dialogue between survivor and listener, comfort women scholars foreground the *present* social and political conditions around the reconstruction of historical events that remain widely and deeply contested. The debate about the comfort system's historical veracity, for example, is still very much alive in Japan. As recently as 2007, Japan's then prime minister Shinzo Abe flatly denied any use of coercion on the part of the wartime military in its recruitment and treatment of comfort women. Although the international furor aroused by this denial led Abe to retract his statements and offer a formal apology, the episode fueled a substantial contingent of Japanese neonationalists and revisionist historians who continue to cast suspicion and sometimes ridicule on comfort women testimonies. In this volatile situation of competing truths, comfort women scholars have been compelled to rethink the relationship between memory and history, testimony and truth. This divergence of comfort women scholarship from trauma studies, I would suggest, stems in large part from the comfort women issue's specific historiographic trajectory.

Unlike the Holocaust, the sexual enslavement of comfort women did not receive immediate recognition as a form of genocidal atrocity after the war.[27] As several scholars have pointed out, the main obstacle to postwar redress was not one of public ignorance or official censorship, that no one knew or spoke the facts, but that no social or legal authority was willing to endow the women with the status of war crime victims or victims of human rights violations.[28] Instead, after five decades of institutional silence on all sides (including the American and South Korean

governments), self-witnessing, public testimony, and political reparation all erupted in a highly condensed time frame. For the women survivors, then, there has been an extraordinary temporal proximity between politics and memory, between what is consciously enacted as a collective end-driven enterprise and what is publicly performed as a supposedly private act of remembering. As a result, their testimonial and political discourses have been almost exact contemporaries of each other. Given this historiographic path, many scholars justly look upon the women as not merely trauma victims but social and political agents who actively participate in our global present's production of history's truths. It is within this context that Yang cautions against the impulse to "freeze the identity of comfort women as international victims, 'existential' comfort women."[29] And it is against this backdrop of comfort women survivors' emphatic self-presencing and concerted political activism that *Gesture*'s portrait of K appears exceptionally singular, dematerialized, interiorized, even nostalgic.

On the topic of testimonial truth, however, an additional complicating factor presents itself, one that cannot be adequately explained with theoretical recourse to the presentist and political dimensions of historical memory. This is the role of creative agency—of fiction—in comfort women testimonies. As several scholars have observed, many of these testimonies contain not just memory lapses but outright contradictions and inaccuracies. Yoshimi, for one, shies away from interpreting these as creative acts and explicates them instead as a possible consequence of the women's lack of education.[30] Certainly, it is not a light matter to claim that fiction plays a part in comfort women testimonies, for such a claim could all too easily be seized by detractors as evidence of the women's dishonesty as well as the speciousness of the entire history they are testifying to. Yet, in her collection of interviews with former comfort women, Dai Sil Kim-Gibson details one testimonial encounter—a series of interviews she conducted with Park Oak Yeun in a South Korean sharing home in 1995—that unambiguously points to a survivor's deliberate and strategic use of fiction in an autobiographical narrative.

In the first session, Park began her story in familiar style, with narrative features that have come to form the standard scaffolding for comfort women testimonies: she described her parents, her childhood, and the moment of her "recruitment" by a deceitful Japanese official. Park also mentioned in passing that she was unmarried at the time of her leaving home, hence implying she was still a virgin. In the next session, Park continued her story of the postwar years, of getting married and having a son. At this point in the text, Kim-Gibson suddenly interrupts her transcription with a nervous thought: "Something told me that [Park] was picking and choosing her story, sometimes making things up."[31] This suspicion prompted Kim-Gibson to verify Park's testimony in a Korean oral history book. What she found there, to her shock, was that Park had previously testified to having been married at the time of her capture. In their next meeting, Kim-Gibson confronted Park, "I am confused. Tell me which is true." The latter then replied, "Well, now I

understand better what we [survivors] are trying to achieve, I can sort out what is important to tell, and what isn't. I didn't think my marriage added anything to our case. So in the beginning, I told the interviewers about it but now I kind of skip it. Besides, it is difficult for me to talk about my husbands." "Husbands?" Kim-Gibson asked, incredulous. "Yes," Park responded, "husbands. I was married twice" (131–32).

Despite her initial alarm, Kim-Gibson in the end comes away from this experience with the insight that comfort women's stories are "neither neutral nor objective," that "oral history is a subjective recollection of the past" (8). More pointedly, she elaborates on the conditions of global capital and cultural power that elicit, shape, and in turn consume these women's testimonies. The sharing home where Park lived with several other survivors was constantly overrun with interviewers and journalists, activists and tourists from all over the world, some willing to pay, all eager to hear. Facing this frenzy, the women readily reciprocated, having "firmly established" a formula for entertaining the guests, serving up tales of horrific suffering and cathartic drama for the visitors' edification (118). As Chungmoo Choi too comments in this regard, comfort women testimonies have become "highly formulaic, with an intense focus on the repetitive sexual acts and abuses, which may be in danger of serving voyeuristic curiosity."[32] Both Kim-Gibson and Choi draw attention to the forces of an international consumer market that now produce new modes of objectification of the women as well as commodification of their narratives. If we locate the element of occasional fiction in comfort women testimonies within this global capitalist order, we can appreciate its function as a form of discursive agency, a means by which the women gain some control over the international discourse about themselves precisely by commodifying their own life stories.

Ultimately, I believe the distinction of comfort women testimonies exists beyond their exemplification of the presentism or politics of historical memory. Since every comfort woman testimony now takes place within the context of a collective trial and memorial, what every woman who chooses to give public testimony must negotiate is not just her personal life story but also those of other victims. The example of Park Oak Yeun's tactical use of fiction profoundly illustrates this point. This does not entail that truth is unattainable in a relativistic world, or that atrocity survivors have absolute license in fabricating the past before an international tribunal. Park may well be in the minority, but her example suggests that, at least for some comfort women survivors, the group narrative can take precedence over individual ones, and that the political goal of securing redress can override the imperative for personal authenticity. To some extent, the burden of collectivity applies equally to those women who testify with absolute accuracy to their own lives, for in the public sphere, they are bearing witness not to the veridical content of their separate autobiographies but to the historical reality of a group identity—"the comfort women." This situation demonstrates a peculiarity of the belated war crime witness, when the accused is not an individual but a government and the accuser is by definition not a unique victim but one member of a persecuted group. Indeed, the

more witnesses and the less singular each testimony, the more persuasive the overall testimonial power. This circumstance demands that there be no primary witness among comfort women survivors, only mutually corroborating ones. In Park's case, temporary subordination of individual identity to group politics may well represent a means of not only participating in the ethical discourse of human rights advocacy but also accessing this discourse's international power. That is to say, the women themselves may well strategically existentialize themselves as "comfort women" out of political pragmatism and ethical principle as much as a desire for cultural and political self-empowerment.

This desire is not to be perceived with cynicism or contempt. The testimony, as I underscored at the beginning of this section, is the primary genre through which comfort women survivors have emerged as important social and political agents in the world in the past two decades. As such, the testimony has served myriad functions for the women: as a venue for speaking out, a means of amplifying individual voices into a collective movement, and a route for accessing international institutions of cultural and political power. Yet, conversely, the testimony constrains the women within its own discursive limits. We can better grasp this point by contrasting the role of the witness in testimonial discourse to Michel Foucault's concept of *author-function*. In this well-known formulation, Foucault shifts the definitional emphasis of authorship from expressive genius and authenticity of the self to sociohistorical conditions and discursive modes of circulation.[33] In this model, comfort women testimonies may be considered a discourse structured by not so much the female speakers themselves as the legal, governmental, and cultural institutions that elicit their speech and determine their place as history-verifying subjects. The women, in other words, serve the comfort women discourse as witness-functions.

The women's current global visibility and vocality is contingent on their capacity to inhabit this testimonial discourse, which derives its unique legal validity and cultural force through an explicit relation to truth. From a Foucauldian perspective, the line separating the testimony and the novel lies not in their distinct content or ontological status—that the former consists wholly of truth, the latter of imagination—but in their divergent purposes, social modes of circulation, and sociopolitical sites of application or intervention. Professional writers, of course, often cross this line between history and fiction, testimonial and novelistic authorship, especially in the genre of autobiographical fiction or creative memoir. Those who occupy the role of historical witnesses, by contrast, are rarely granted such discursive mobility, and when they are caught hybridizing their life stories with fiction, they risk jeopardizing not simply their own credibility but an entire collective history. Invention thus troubles testimonial witnesses much more severely than autobiographical writers, even when, as in Park's case, a personal narrative moves outside the legal framework of the courtroom into the extralegal arena of a

consumer market and shifts discursive register from a testimony proper into what Pamela Thoma calls a "cultural autobiography."[34]

Diasporic Adoptees and Transnational Specters

Given the veridical expectations surrounding comfort women testimonies, a not dissimilar set of constraints can face the creative writer of a "comfort woman book," despite clear differences between testimonial and novelistic modes of authorship. While most readers do not measure novels by the standards of survivor testimonies, many will nonetheless wonder about, particularly concerning representations of historical atrocities, a fiction writer's relationship to his or her historical subjects and the fictional text's epistemological relation to the history it represents. These questions may again be cast in Foucauldian terms: what are the author's claims to knowledge of the historical subjects, and what kinds of knowledge is he or she (re)producing about them? Unlike comfort women survivors, Chang-rae Lee has neither firsthand experience nor personal memory of the historical events. As a creative author venturing into the terrains of comfort women's history, Lee must negotiate at least three types of distance: a generational one, since he was born in 1965; a diasporic one, since he grew up in the US and is predominantly an American writer; and a gendered one, which acquires interpretive significance vis-à-vis representations of sexual violence.

First, regarding generational distance, Marianne Hirsch has usefully proposed the concept of *postmemory*, "the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right." Hirsch likens inherited memories to "larger-than-life ghosts" that can "crowd out" a child's memories of his or her own childhood. Second-generation postmemory is not, she argues, "an identity position, but a space of remembrance, more broadly available through cultural and public, and not merely individual and personal, acts of remembrance, identification, and projection."[35]

Hirsch's concept, however, does not apply straightforwardly to Lee or other contemporary Asian American writers who have attempted to "remember" the comfort women in their novels.[36] None of these Asian American authors of a growing body of "comfort women fiction" are themselves children of former comfort women. They enter this history much as most Americans—belatedly, as adults, not as those who grew up in the shadows of parental experience or cultural knowledge, but as those who, because of an ethnic identification with Korea or Asia, decide to fictionalize comfort women as an intellectual, aesthetic, and/or political project.[37] Still, one component of Hirsch's model does shed light on Lee's narrative method. The postmemorial writer, she notes, is particularly sensitive to the gap between the historical subject of trauma and the writing subject of that trauma, so that the

narrative produced is oftentimes marked by a quality of "identification-at-a-distance," a distance that the literary imagination "struggles to overcome" but acknowledges as fundamentally unbridgeable. "The challenge for the postmemorial artist," she explicates, is "to find the balance that allows the spectator to enter the image, to imagine the disaster, but that disallows an overappropriative identification that makes the distances disappear, creating too available, too easy an access to this particular past."[38] This describes exactly Lee's presentation of K's death.

Or rather, his lack of presentation, for the actual scene of her death is a narrative absence in the text. As K was left alone in the infirmary with the lieutenant who would become her executioner, Jiro turned back to look at her one last time through the window before letting himself be led away by a sentry. The next paragraph is at once an analepsis and a prolepsis: "When I finally finished administering to the commander and returned to the infirmary, there was no one there," he said matter-of-factly (303). Then, instead of moving the narrative forward and bringing the reader along in Jiro's search for K, the older Hata moves us backward and tells, in slow time, how his younger self, in this most costly moment of his evil's banality, had obediently attended to the ailing commander, injecting him with medicine and sitting with him for "nearly an hour" until he fell asleep. This was the near-hour it took for K to be led away by a group of soldiers to a clearing in the woods, to be raped by them, and finally to be killed and dismembered. This scene occurs off-stage in Hata's overdue narration, a scene without a witness, with "no one there." Jiro's eventual arrival at the clearing some time later is hence already preechoed by Hata. "Then they were all gone," he says, before describing his "medic's work" in gathering the pieces of K's body (304–5).

Two features are noteworthy in this passage. First, we perceive in Lee's handling of K's death some trademark signs of Hirsch's postmemorial artist: a balance is struck between allowing the spectator to enter the scene and "imagine the disaster" and disallowing "too available, too easy an access" into the instant of rape and dismemberment. Hata's delayed arrival parallels Lee's, and his readers', historical belatedness in confronting the comfort women's past five decades after war's end. Like Hata, we come upon the scene of the crime only when everyone has gone from it, and like him, we re-member the comfort women only by gathering fragmentary historical evidence piece by piece. In this absent scene that would otherwise have served as the novel's narrative climax, Lee underscores not only his generational distance from the comfort women but also our temporal distance from their past. Withholding the most traumatic instant, he avoids sensationalizing sexual violence. In this respect, his text conspicuously lacks the lurid episodes one finds in, say, Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*, the other prize-winning Asian American novel on this history.

Moreover, in this passage Lee firmly marks his novel's departure from comfort women testimonies, for which the scene of gang rape would have formed an obligatory centerpiece. Indeed, this is the scene that seems most *gestured* at by the

novel, and K the *life* to which the title points but does not bear truthful witness. We can thus read this gestural aesthetic as Lee's indexing of his generic as well as generational distance from Korean comfort women. He may invoke an ethnic identification with them via Hata's Koreanness, but he riddles his text with temporal gaps around precisely those historic acts of sexual violence that constituted the comfort women as such. As he explains in an interview, he first "wanted to write a book that was told from the point of view of a 'comfort woman'" and even "wrote three-quarters of a book in that vein," but after more than a year of fits and starts he began to feel what he had written "didn't quite come up to the measure of what [he] had experienced, sitting in a room" with the women survivors; he began to feel "there was nothing like a live witness."[39] *Gesture*, then, reflects Lee's decision to abandon not just the narratological technique of inhabiting the comfort women's psychology but the epistemological impulse to know their history from an insider's perspective, one that would have erased the distinction between victim and witness. Furthermore, by referring to himself in corporeal terms here—as a "live" body "sitting in a room"—is he perhaps indicating a recognition too of gender difference? In the biopolitical regime of the military camp, his biological life as a male body would not have rendered him so briskly coincidental with the comfort women. This biopolitical dimension arguably stands to trouble any effort by a male writer to represent the comfort women's trauma via some omnipotent act of sympathetic imagination. In *Gesture*, this gendered biopolitical difference comes most hauntingly to light in that postmortem scene after K's death, in which the body Hata gathers up piecemeal is finally and definitively marked by aborted female reproduction.[40]

Were Hata one to let K's ghost rest, we would have a novel that leaves the comfort women's history in Asia, as a distinctly Asian past. But Lee imparts to Hata the desire to revive the dead, to save the unsurviving, and this desire emerges in the novel's American frame as the theme of adoption. After establishing himself in Bedley Run, Hata decides to adopt a female child of "like-enough race," as he ambiguously puts it (73). Although he offers the adoption agent a theory about fathers and daughters and Oriental "harmony and balance," we know, behind his relief at being assigned a girl from Korea, that he has wished all along not for a Japanese daughter but for someone like K, not so much K resurrected as K reincarnated in purer, virginal form. This adoption fantasy may be read as another symptom of Hata's criminal repression, another obliquely calculated move of his unconscious to repair his loss of and appease his guilt over K.

At the same time, Hata's attempt to recover the Korean female victim in America may also be read as a diasporic allegory of Asian America's fantasy to "adopt" the Asian past of comfort women. Curiously, cultural memory scholars often use the language of adoption to characterize the relationship between present and past. For example, Hirsch defines postmemory as an "intergenerational act of adoption," a child's "adopting the traumatic experiences" of the parents,[41] while Mieke Bal describes memory work as an act whereby "the past is 'adopted' as part of

the present."[42] When the trope of adoption is employed to outline models of cultural memory, the familial hierarchy must be reversed. In *Gesture*'s diasporic narrative, this reversal functions in disguise: Hata is in fact the hopeful adoptive father, but the things Lee adopts into his American text—the Korean comfort woman and the postwar orphan, the history of Korea's multiple colonizations—lie decidedly in a remote geography. Nor is he forgetful of this diasporic gap, for again he signals it via the ironic results of Hata's adoption scheme.

Significantly, the girl of "like-enough race" who arrives at Hata's door is Sunny, whose name evokes at once the Japanese empire of the sun and the Americanization of it via the suffix *-ny*, the initials of Hata's newly adopted state of New York. Sunny's name, unlike K's, thus enfolds an additional layer of neocolonial relations in post-WWII Asia—the US military's occupation of Japan and eventual installation in South Korea. If Hata had imagined a child of pure blood, he confronts instead a multiracial child, a "product," he speculates, "of a much less dignified circumstance, a night's wanton encounter between a GI and a local bar girl." Sunny, we discover, is part African American, with "some other color (or colors) [running] deep within her" (204). Hata's dream of the pure Asian adoptee is intervened upon by history, specifically that of America's postwar ascendency as a global imperial power. The figure of Sunny thus mocks his every expectation. As much as he may try to fix Asia in the moment of his WWII trauma, the ensuing history impinges on his present. There is no returning, Lee implies, to a pure history of Korean comfort women, especially from the position of neoimperialist America. The multiracial adoptee suggests that (Asian) America's attempt to derive authentic knowledge about comfort women may simply replicate Hata's nostalgia for Asia to remain the static site of revivable memory. At best, this effort ends in a runaway history, just as Sunny runs away from Hata. At worst, it reproduces the colonial structure underlying the comfort system, just as Hata disturbingly refers to his adoption of Sunny as making her "live with [him] in comfort" (128) in his "orderly, welcoming suburban home in America" (73). Unbeknownst to Hata, it is this neocolonial attitude of paternalism and control that makes him most American.

Lee's meta-marking of his text's Americanness permits us to probe a current line of fracture between Asian Studies and Asian American Studies and their competing knowledge claims about comfort women. Laura Hein, for one, a historian of twentieth-century Japan, attributes the internationalizing of the comfort women issue in the 1990s to the Asian diaspora's reconceptualization of the debate. She contends that Asian Americans' relatively recent but immensely zealous interest in the topic is primarily motivated by a desire to consolidate their own ethnic identity: "Remembrance of the military comfort women is one of the tools by which their specifically Asian American diasporic identity is being constructed."[43] In Hein's note of skepticism toward Asian Americans' "use" of comfort women as "tools" for their own ends, we detect an implicit charge of illegitimacy. Her disdain becomes more pronounced when she recounts the ways Asian American women naively celebrate

comfort women's suffering so as to share in an "imagined community of ethnicity and gender." In her view, then, Asian America's encounter with comfort women has fundamentally been a self-interested enterprise not free of "savage irony" (358–59).

In the shadow of this criticism of diasporic "adoptions" of Asian causes, we may indeed read *Gesture* as above all an Asian American text with Asian American concerns; certainly, Lee deploys diasporic alibis aplenty. Yet the broad strokes of Hein's argument cannot account for the self-undercutting gestures of Lee's text, which composes the comfort woman figure as a point of unknowability rather than a source of ethnic knowledge. In fact, K's spectral status intimates that ethnic identification in the novel is more uncanny than consolidated, more melancholic than self-validating. Along this line, Kandice Chuh defends Asian American writing by insisting that "epistemological choice" is always "self-interested," and that the comfort women issue acts precisely as a "flashpoint for Asian American studies because it speaks to the operations of . . . gender, sexuality, race, class, empire, and nation."[44] For Chuh, Asian American literary appropriations of the comfort women's history can help further Asian American Studies's promotion of social justice, and what for Hein is the naïve cultural egotism of identity politics signifies for Chuh the possible starting place of a progressive critical practice.

My reading of *Gesture*, though, does not accord completely with either Hein's or Chuh's position. On the one hand, critics like Hein who are cynical of Asian American identity-based interests in Asian traumas cannot but miss the complex negotiations between Asian and Asian American histories in a self-referential text like *Gesture*. For better or worse, Lee's novel exemplifies the growing entanglement of discursive claims on Asia by Asianists as much as Asian Americans, authors and critics alike. On the other hand, although I agree with Chuh that Lee astutely stages an American vantage point that critiques its own neoimperialist position, this critical self-positioning, I believe, is insufficient to addressing the larger political and ethical challenges presented by the comfort women issue. In this regard, Laura Kang is instructive in stressing the burden of Americanness for Asian Americans, and in warning against the erasure of geopolitical power in the name of ethnic identification. She is quite right to argue that *Gesture*, no less than other Asian American comfort women novels, depends on and contributes to "a particularly *American* grammar and regime of representation and knowledge-production" that locates the comfort woman figure as "ex-centric to the national borders of the United States" even as the US is affirmed as "the enabling locus of such re-memberings."[45]

Ultimately, on Lee's transnational partitioning, it seems that the comfort woman *cannot but be dead*, or else a ghost haunting the house of Asian America. In his novel, the living comfort woman can only occupy the historical space of the camp and the historical time of the war; in excess of this milieu, she materializes only as a sign of the gothic. This gothicizing of the comfort woman deprives her of temporality, of a place in history beyond the time of her victimization, and it leaves

the reader with an eerie sense of an event without survivors—or, more exactly, an event with one male witness but no female survivors. K's words of futility to Hata are revealing of Lee's attitude: "There's no escape. . . . This time won't end. It will end for you, but not for me" (301). Despite K's poignant fantasies about the future, the novel fails to address a global reality in which the comfort woman not only outlives the period of her trauma but survives to bear public witness to herself and others in our present. In Lee's diasporic memorial, the comfort woman asks for nothing but to be killed mercifully. Unlike Sunny, K is an incarnation of the past that fails to run away, a past that Hata as much as Lee makes stay through spectralization.

Asian American writers who aim at a transnational scope must guard against this ghosting of the Asian survivor, at least as a complacent stopping place, for this aesthetic of gothic alterity threatens to encipher the Asian subject as inexorably other to Asian America. I mean "other" here not simply in the cultural sense of the exotic but, more importantly, in the temporal and existential sense of that which is dead, departed, and hence available for representation or revival by the living. Indeed, a rhetoric of radical otherness is already much in evidence in the criticism on Lee's novel, as critics repeatedly invoke the language of "difference," "absence," and "impossibility" as compulsory aesthetic strategies. *Gesture* is deemed to have revealed such axiomatic insights as "the unavoidable aporia of academic study," "the limitations of representation and academic discourse" and of "our critical practices"[46]; "the ethical crisis [that] comes from precisely the impossibility of ever becoming an 'objective' witness to the Other—to ethnic, racial, and national traumas," with the novel's conclusion exemplifying "an internal critique of our desires for liberating and recuperative actions"[47]; and a Derridean theory of "onomastic intertextuality" in which "K is the name of an impossible, hence aborted, association."[48] Literary scholars consistently affirm Lee's self-destabilizing gestures, but the cost of this deconstructive bias is that his novel comes to be upheld as a model text only so it can teach "us" about "our" own disciplinary, epistemological, ethical, or psychic limits. It is only within such a deconstructive and self-referential discourse that Chuh, for instance, can resignify "comfort" as "discomforting knowledge" targeted solely at Asian American Studies and its internal practitioners, and then define "justice" as an interpretive act of appreciating the gap between name and life, sign and referent, "any term of identity" and "irreducibly complex personhood."[49] Strikingly, on Chuh's terms, Lee's novel may be said to confer a much larger share of "irreducibly complex personhood," and thus much more "justice," on Hata than on K. In this self-referential academic and aesthetic framework, the comfort woman becomes necessarily inscrutable, a cipher that must be othered, phantomized, "disarticulated." It is perhaps not accidental that *Gesture* uniquely lives up to these theoretical expectations, since Lee, of all the comfort women novelists, is the only male writer as well as the most academically institutionalized one, hence arguably the one most compelled and best positioned to apply such deconstructive techniques of alterity.

To be sure, Lee faces a double bind right from the outset. An aesthetic of knowledge on which the comfort woman survivor takes center stage as pedagogical protagonist would risk a fictional recuperation that perversely celebrates historical atrocity for its consoling effects or enlightening moral lessons. Without a doubt, Lee takes pains to avoid this pitfall. Alternatively, the intense horror of the comfort system seems to demand an aesthetic of alterity, particularly for a postmemorial male writer who imagines the atrocity from a place of neocolonial power. This aesthetic, though, can result in a disquieting rebanishing of the comfort woman. As in *Gesture*, she comes to survive only as a specter gestured at, a victim whose afterlife's main purpose is to define a narrative space for others' remorse or remembrance. The comfort woman's current literary life appears bound by these two poles of pedagogy and alterity, heroic survival and victimized ghostliness. Surely neither alone is adequate to meeting the substantial political and ethical challenges raised by the comfort women issue.

These challenges include not just the moral cliché that human beings are capable of immense wrongs against each other, or the Arendtian insight that wartime atrocities can be banalized by ideology and rhetoric, but the concrete political lessons provoked by the comfort women's historiography—that all the international tribunals and legal codifications of universal rights in the twentieth century can nonetheless fail to encompass or protect certain vulnerable groups, and that the act of claiming human rights itself inevitably takes place within institutional contexts where gender, race, and nationality still operate to determine relations of power. From the perspective of juridical history, the comfort women represent a salient case of international law's incipient gender bias, for they constituted a group that fell through the cracks of legal codes explicitly articulated as universal measures. As Jane Freedman points out, the Geneva Convention defines a refugee as one "persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion"—but fails to make any reference to gender. "It can thus be argued," she writes, "that whilst the Geneva Convention and other international agreements on refugees and asylum supposedly offer protection to all on a gender neutral basis, the procedures for granting protection have often been undermined by deeply gendered practices which fail to offer protection to women because their persecution is not recognized as such."[50] With the postwar situation of comfort women, colonialism and racism compounded issues of gender. Of the fifty or so military tribunals set up in Asia after the war, only the War Crimes Tribunal in Batavia (present-day Jakarta), conducted by the returning Dutch colonial forces, prosecuted sexual slavery as a war crime. Yet, even there, authorities concerned themselves only with cases of Dutch comfort women while those of Eurasian, Indonesian, and Chinese women were dismissed. As Yuki Tanaka writes, "Due to racial discrimination against the Indonesian and Indo-Dutch women and sexual discrimination against women in general, the Dutch military authorities were unable

to see the serious criminal nature of the comfort women issue except in so far as it affected Dutch women and girls."[51]

In this light, the pitfalls of *Gesture* can still constructively lead us to, not a rejection of humanist discourse altogether, but a theoretical model of what I call *negative humanism*—a linking of the specific history of the comfort system to an ongoing global articulation of human rights, a transnational humanism that remains mindful of its own historical lapses and blind spots even as it continually seeks to actualize its ideals in practice. This perspective will direct our eye, not to humanity's advances and triumphs, but to human history's long trail of violations and failures, the ever-recurring instances of life not safeguarded in our species' self-governance. As such, it can complement a biopolitical world history that gives prominent consideration to the comfort women's belated recognition, a history on whose terms the women will no longer embody "our" gothic other or limit point, their history remote and their trauma beyond the pale. Rather, they will instantiate humanity at its core, historically exceptional yet politically prototypical and potentially repeatable. An aesthetic of negative humanism does not guarantee a humanist politics, of course, but it can help us imagine a historical consciousness and an ethical paradigm of universal responsibility in which race, nationality, and gender no longer stand alibi to innocence.

Walter Benjamin is often quoted for his line that, if history's victors remain victorious, then "even the dead will not be safe." But we would do well to recall the beginning of this line: "Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."[52] Benjamin's thesis, not without optimism, suggests not simply that the dead have never been safe from historical revision but also, conversely, that the dead have never ceased to have the potential to be made safe through historical reclamation. If Arendt reclaims humanism for us as a critical philosophy in the wake of twentieth-century history's sweeping destruction, Benjamin reminds us that the living must be vigilant to the dead as always capable of re-enlivenment—and Lee's example alerts us to the danger of whom we declare dead with self-assurance. The unsurviving flash up to confront us each time a survivor testifies, and these testimonies reconstruct not so much the true stories of the living as the historical afterlife of the dead as they are summoned to impinge on the present, a present as much theirs as ours. If we are in the habit of thinking of the testimony as a guardian of the past and of historical fiction as the past's reconstruction shot through with the present, we may now see the testimony and the novel reciprocally constructing a future we hope to one day rendezvous with.

Notes

[1] Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life* (New York: Riverhead, 1999). Hereafter cited in text.

[2] Kandice Chuh, "Discomforting Knowledge, or, Korean 'Comfort Women' and Asian Americanist Critical Practice," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 16.

[3] Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 90.

[4] Hamilton Carroll, "Traumatic Patriarchy: Reading Gendered Nationalisms in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 3 (2005): 593.

[5] Mark C. Jerng, "Recognizing the Transracial Adoptee: Adoption Life Stories and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," *MELUS* 31, no. 2 (2006): 45.

[6] Young-Oak Lee, "Transcending Ethnicity: Diasporicity in *A Gesture Life*," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12, no. 1 (2009): 66.

[7] Chuh, "Discomforting Knowledge," 8, 7, 13, 15.

[8] Laura Doyle, "Toward a Philosophy of Transnationalism," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009): 3, 5, http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9vr1k8hk.

[9] See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's reading of the "racial shadow" in *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 77–117.

[10] Carroll, "Traumatic Patriarchy," 593.

[11] See Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982); *An Artist of the Floating World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986); and *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

[12] Sigmund Freud, "Recollection, Repetition and Working Through," in *Sigmund Freud: Collected Papers*, vol. 2, ed. Ernest Jones, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth, 1953), 370.

[13] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1971), 4.

[14] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 287.

[15] Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 4.

[16] Hannah Arendt, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," in *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 130.

[17] In an interview, when asked whether K was pregnant at the time of her death, Lee tellingly shifts the question of narrative truth from her to Hata: "In my mind he did find the perfect form—that she was pregnant, that she had hid it, and that from all indications maybe herself didn't believe she had had it. But I did intend for him to at least think that he had found something perfect. I don't know if I want to come down and say that there was actually something there. . . . In some ways it's more important what the character believes he sees. I know that you could say, 'it's either there or not.' For me, it is more interesting if he believes he's seeing something—that, in fact, it is there for him." See Chang-rae Lee, "Introductory Comments on *A Gesture Life*," *Literature, Arts, and Medicine Database*, NYU School of Medicine, March 20, 2001, http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/poems/a.gesture.life.html.

[18] Anne Anlin Cheng, "Passing, Natural Selection, and Love's Failure: Ethics of Survival from Chang-rae Lee to Jacques Lacan," *American Literary History* 17, no. 3 (2005): 563.

[19] See the chapter on "The Emergence of the Issue" in Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II*, trans. Suzanne O'Brien (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 33–40.

[20] Edited collections in English include Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women: Testimony* (London: Cassell, 1995); George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995); Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Parkersburg, IA: Mid-Prairie, 1999); and Sangmie Choi Schellstede, ed., *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 2000).

[21] Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 100.

[22] Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 63, emphasis original.

[23] T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, and Lisa Yoneyama, introduction to *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*, ed. Fujitani, White, and Yoneyama (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 1–2.

[24] Hyunah Yang, "Revisiting the Issue of the Korean 'Military Comfort Women': The Question of Truth and Positionality," *positions* 5, no. 1 (1997): 56, emphasis original.

[25] Chungmoo Choi, "The Politics of War Memories toward Healing," in Fujitani, White, and Yoneyama, *Perilous Memories*, 397.

[26] Chizuko Ueno, "The Politics of Memory: Nation, Individual and Self," *History & Memory* 11, no. 2 (1999): 133, 143.

[27] Aside from the cultural silence, a more disturbing political and legal silence descended on comfort women after the war, when governments and international courts of justice

failed to recognize their status as a distinct persecuted group. At the Tokyo Trials, for example, no Japanese leader was tried specifically for participation in sexual slavery. See Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*; Yuki Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during World War II and the US Occupation* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Laura Hein, "Savage Irony: The Imaginative Power of the 'Military Comfort Women' in the 1990s," *Gender & History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 336–72.

[28] Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 33; Ueno, "Politics of Memory," 136; Hein, "Savage Irony," 340–43. During a Q&A, Steven Cerf also pointed out to me a parallel historical silence that faced gay Holocaust survivors, who were classified as criminals by Nazi decree Paragraph 175 and who did not gain recognition as war crime victims until this law was finally repealed in 1994. Belinda Kong, "Narrating the Comfort Woman: Trauma and Fiction in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*" (talk presented at a faculty seminar, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME, April 2008).

[29] Yang, "Revisiting the Issue," 66.

[30] Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 99.

[31] Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken*, 126.

[32] Quoted in Laura Hyun Yi Kang, "Conjuring 'Comfort Women': Mediated Affiliations and Disciplined Subjects in Korean/American Transnationality," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 28.

[33] See Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113–38.

[34] Pamela Thoma, "Cultural Autobiography, Testimonial, and Asian American Transnational Feminist Coalition in the 'Comfort Women of World War II' Conference," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 21, no. 1/2 (2000): 33.

[35] Marianne Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 8–9.

[36] See Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman* (New York: Viking, 1997); Therese Park, *A Gift of the Emperor* (Duluth, MN: Spinsters Ink, 1997); Kiana Davenport, *Song of the Exile* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

[37] Lee speaks about how he first learned of the comfort women issue thus: "I was immediately drawn to the comfort women by a couple of newspaper articles I saw. I didn't really know about them at all, which kind of shocked me. Knowing something about recent Korean history—annexation and colonization by the Japanese—I thought that this would be something that I would've heard and read about. Yet I hadn't heard about it and this was the late 80's or early 90's." See Lee, "Introductory Comments."

[38] Hirsch, "Projected Memory," 10.

[39] Quoted in Dwight Garner, "An Interview: Adopted Voice," *New York Times Book Review*, September 5, 1999, 6.

[40] Elsewhere, though, Lee recasts the cause of his narrative shift in more troubling terms:

> Originally, I wanted to write a book that was focused on [comfort women] and written from their point of view, but this character of Hata, this medic who just appeared in a room somewhere in a scene, presented himself. I thought, Well, that's actually, in terms of moral quandary, much more complex. Being a victim is not that morally complex, it's just horrible and it's just a terror. But I was intrigued by someone who had been part of this experience, but then went on a) to survive, and b) to construct a life of prosperity and happiness. Thinking about that, that's where he came about.

See Lee, "Introductory Comments." Lee's comments here erect a dichotomy between comfort women as "simplistic" victims and the perpetrator as "complex" survivor, problematically assigning greater moral interest and aesthetic value to the war criminal.

[41] Hirsch, "Projected Memory," 6, 9.

[42] Mieke Bal, introduction to Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer, *Acts of Memory*, vii.

[43] Hein, "Savage Irony," 355.

[44] Chuh, "Discomforting Knowledge," 20, 10.

[45] Kang, "Conjuring 'Comfort Women,'" 32, 33, 44.

[46] Chuh, "Discomforting Knowledge," 20–21.

[47] Cheng, "Passing," 572.

[48] Christian Moraru, "The Other, the Namesake: Cosmopolitan Onomastics in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," *Names* 55, no. 1 (2007): 31.

[49] Chuh, "Discomforting Knowledge," 20–21.

[50] Jane Freedman, *Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 75–76.

[51] Tanaka, *Japan's Comfort Women*, 83.

[52] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 255.

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