

STORY LINES:
MOVING THROUGH THE MULTIPLE IMAGINED COMMUNITIES
OF AN ASIAN-/AMERICAN-/FEMINIST BODY

by

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DEDICATION

For mom and dad—

For all the poems I never wrote you

Because I couldn't find the words,

And all the dishes I never washed

Because I was too busy “studying.”

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ABSTRACT

We all have stories to share, to build, to pass around, to inherit, and to create. This story—the one I piece together now— is about a Thai-/Bengali-/Muslim-/American-/Feminist looking for home, looking to manage the tension and conflict of wanting to belong to her family and to her feminist community. This thesis focuses on the seemingly conflicting obligations to kinship on the one hand and to feminist practice on the other, a conflict where being a *good* scholar or activist is directly in opposition to being a *good* Asian daughter.

In order to understand how and why these communities appear at odds with one another, I examine how the material spaces and psychological realities inhabited by specific hyphenated, fragmented subjects are represented (and misrepresented) in both popular culture and practical politics, arguing against images of the hybrid body that bracket its lived tensions. I argue that fantasies of home as an unconditional site of belonging and comfort distract us from the multiple communities to which hyphenated subjects must move between.

Hyphenated Asian-/American bodies often find ourselves torn between nativism and assimilationism—having to neutralize, forsake, or discard parts of our identities. Thus, I reduce complicated, difficult ideas of being to the size of a thimble, to a question of loyalty between my Asian-/American history and my American-/feminist future, between my familial background and the issues that have become foregrounded for me during college, between the home from which I originate and the new home to which I wish to belong. To move with fluidity, I must—in collaboration with others—invent new stories of identity and belonging.

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Chapter One: Introduction

i.

I walk down the street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I fall in.

I am lost...

I am helpless.

It is not my fault.

It takes forever to find my way out.

ii.

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I pretend I don't see it.

I fall in.

I can't believe I am in the same place.

But it isn't my fault.

It still takes a long time to get out.

iii.

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I see it there.

I still fall in...It's a habit.

My eyes are open.

I know where I am.

It is my fault.

I get out immediately.

iv.

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I walk around it.

v.

I walk down another street.

-Portia Nelson, *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk*

I find myself here again; trapped in a triple bind I was never able to articulate. How can I reconcile my desire to write with the social implications of my writing? How do I move between being a "writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color?" (Minh-ha 6). I'm stuck. Does this mean that I will never have the privilege of being an aesthetic writer—one who writes because

one must, because one knows no other way to live and breathe and love? I find joy in the way words smile, in the way words put the pain of my wrists in the palms of your hands.

What about my *commitment*? Do I not have a responsibility to speak in the silence of the subaltern¹? But how can I—in my comfortable home with my fancy gadgets and postmodern cynicism? I neither belong to *them* nor to *you*. How can I speak without being a master? I write with my agenda and I don't know on whose terms I play. I'm grasping for something—a sign, the tiniest inclination. I've been allowed access to the language that makes you take me seriously. But I'm still a clown. I'm still cut and quartered and methodically blocked and framed. Defined. Named. At any given moment, I am the Native Informant. I am she who speaks without truly knowing the oppressions, the sufferings, the heartbreak of those I claim as my people. My sense of entitlement will destroy me.

How can I deconstruct and build with "stolen" language, when the tools I use are the very same tools that master used to pave his empire? I have inherited stolen language to move *uninvited* in a world that alienates my stories. What happens to us children of immigrants? We drift, as earth bound spirits—bound to our cultures of origin. Having once belonged *there*, having once arrived from *them*. The earth to which we are bound is intrinsically tied to our becoming. Yet, our bodies have transformed. We do not belong *there* anymore; neither, however, do we belong *here*. We have no place. Those of us who attempt to make the (re)turn to the authentic self, to an idealized national culture of origin, somehow whole and unfractured, haunt the homes of our pasts while everyone living has moved on.

Because I have inherited this stolen language that is at once mine and yet so far from it, I

¹ Here, I refer to Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

have reached a new bind. I have to make a choice, sooner or later, to either be raceless, genderless, placeless or nationless.

Or do I?

In this thesis, I explore what it means to be a Thai-/Bengali-/Muslim-/American-/Feminist, with an emphasis on the lived tensions that exist within Asian-/American identities and within American-/Feminist identities. The hyphen suggests fluidity between multiple identities where the body can move in multiplicity and difference. However, because national, cultural and religious identities are seen as fixed, the slash represents borders (physical and psychological) that are difficult for the hyphenated body to cross.

As a hyphenated, fragmented subject, I exist within multiple imagined communities—as do many others who inherit, create and struggle to maintain complex identities. This thesis examines how the material spaces and psychological realities inhabited by specific hyphenated, fragmented subjects are represented (and misrepresented) in both popular culture and practical politics, arguing against images of the hybrid body that bracket its lived tensions. Only by recognizing such tensions, I suggest, can we create material and psychological spaces wherein the culturally hybrid body may experience tension and movement as liveable.

Asian-/American identity is experienced as fragmented. Asian identities exist within specific physical and psychological locations, contingent upon different cultures, histories, religions, and sociopolitical formations. This Asian identity is then complicated as it shapes and is shaped by the attempt to embody American ideals. “Asian-American” is, therefore, a highly problematic term for two reasons. First, it homogenizes the heterogeneity of “Asians.” Second, it

fails to express the tension felt by many Asian-/Americans who experience the discontinuity of “being Asian” and “becoming American.”

Further complicating Asian-/American identity is its encounter with feminism. For example, I often feel guilty for missing political protests or community events because I work at my family’s restaurant. I work to economically sustain myself as well as to contribute to my family’s well-being. The pull between familial obligations and political responsibilities causes a rift between these two communities and a rift within myself. There are many tensions to explore with Asian-/American and American-/Feminist identities, but in this thesis I focus on the tension between seemingly conflicting obligations to kinship on the one hand and to feminist practice on the other.

I explore the tension between kinship obligations and feminist practice by situating this tension within a discussion of the hyphenated-hybrid subject’s relationship to objects within kinship and feminist spaces. As Sara Ahmed explains, objects within our reach and our orientation toward those objects define our relationships to people and communities (*Queer Phenomenology* 7). The objects in these gendered and racialized spaces shape particular relationships with family and feminism. For example, my father taught me how to cook rice in our kitchen. There are two distinct narratives operating within this kitchen space. One disrupts the gendered narrative of mother teaching daughter how to nourish the body of the family and the other reinforces rice as a racialized object.

Although elements of Asian-/American kinship may disrupt traditional (American) narratives of gender, many of my (American) feminist friends find my home space to be very restrictive and limiting—and to an extent, they are right. I have had friends—feminists and social

justice advocates—openly direct anger and outrage toward me for not severing ties with my family in order to pursue a more “autonomous” and “free” life. The implicit suggestion of my (American) feminist friends is that I should sacrifice my connections to kin in order to solidify my relationship to feminism.

What some of my feminist friends fail to understand is that my family may reject my *politics* at times, but they have never rejected *me*. Similarly, while I may sometimes reject my parents’ *politics*, I have never rejected *them*. This means that as I change and as my parents change, our shared spaces also change. Tension and conflict configures our home because walking away from the shared space of kinship is not an option. Tension may, however, be a source for growth. My intellectual travels have brought me to feminist theory and practice; my body has been politicized toward a feminist orientation. As I reach for another feminist text on my bookshelf, I continue to be transformed. As I am reorientated by feminism, I begin to challenge and engage my family in entirely new ways, but this does not relegate familial objects to distant and forsaken backgrounds. Objects like our rice cooker and Al-Quran are not forgotten. My family is, ultimately, where the spaces of my life begin and continue formation. I do not desire to liberate myself from kinship connections nor from culture or rituals, traditions, and objects that shape my familial home.

Chapter two describes what I imagine as the hegemonic matrix. Building on Sara Ahmed’s notion of orientation, I argue that we build our world through stories that help us to navigate through our communities and orientate ourselves within a larger narrative context. I utilize Vine. F. Cordova’s definition of a matrix which stands as “a description of the world, a description of what it is to be human in that world and a description of the role of humans in that

world” (61). In thinking about Cordova’s matrix, I imagine a sphere with a grid on it. The lines on the grid represent the lines of hegemony and they create various intersections. These intersections are based on psychological and bodily experiences such as race, class, gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and so forth.

On a micro-level, we are embedded in matrices shaped by our unique personal experiences and histories of arrival. These personal narratives are not, however, unaffected by macro-level hegemonic norms. On a macro-level, we inhabit—and are inhabited by— a hegemonic matrix that allows us, indeed, encourages us, to move toward a *common* center of desire. The lines that shape the hegemonic matrix are not stagnant—they constantly move to accommodate shifting norms. As the norms shift, the centers of desire also reconfigure. Hegemony co-opts counter-hegemonic movements—swallows them whole until they become another part in the master’s narrative. Chapter two explains this theoretical groundwork in order to situate my story as an Asian-/American-/Feminist.

In chapter three, I discuss the tropes and stereotypes of the Asian-American body — utilizing Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism to explore Pan-Asian ethnicity as illustrated by popular culture and Pan-Asian politics. Although the notion of Pan-Asian ethnicity has generated progressive political and social movements, it has also homogenized Asian-/American identity and, thereby, erased or marginalized large portions of the Asian community. Prominent Pan-Asian political groups are dominated by upper-middle class, heteronormative, educated male bodies of East Asian descent. Heteronormative, middle-class, male bodies are also prevalent in cultural depictions of Asian-Americans.

I argue that these dominant images of Asian-Americans bracket important differences among Asian-/American bodies, thereby occluding the lived spaces of tension and movement inhabited by Asian-/Americans. Because cultural identity is not fixed or fully-formed, the Asian-/American body is in a constant state of (re)identification. This is illustrated by the popular American teen television show *Glee*. I conclude chapter three with a close, critical reading of *Glee*, arguing that in the “Asian F” episode of season three, the Asian-/American body of Mike Chang is shaped by an American narrative of empowerment and liberation. Mike Chang’s story also illustrates the conflicts and tensions Asian-/American bodies experience as they are pulled between their familial roots and their American futures.

In chapter four, I turn my attention toward the concept of “home,” arguing that the fragmentation and placelessness of Asian-/American-/feminist bodies is rooted within what Lisa Lowe describes as a nationalist versus assimilationist discourse (97). As the decolonizing body attempts to sew itself back together, some bodies may attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture, inhabiting the margins of the center of white desire. Others may attempt to (re)turn to an untainted nationalist identity, as romanticized by many political leaders, scholars, and people within the imagined community of nationhood.

Attempting, however, this (re)turn to nationalism is impossible. The moment the colonizer body and the colonized body meet, they are both forever altered, as Frantz Fanon notes. The Asian-/American body experiences this conflict in its kinship spaces as well as in the public spaces of political movement. The notion that Asian-/American bodies must (re)turn to the culture of origin *or* reject the culture of origin fails to make room for what Lowe calls the “hyphenated body” (134). The hyphenated or decolonizing body is one that, in José Muñoz’s

terms, “disidentifies”—rather than simply assimilating to or rejecting—its cultural inheritance (19).

In chapter four, I also concentrate on the tropes and stereotypes of the American-feminist body. The homogenization of the Pan-Asian political body is paralleled in the American-feminist movement, which is dominated by upper-middle class, heteronormative, educated, white bodies that seek to bracket difference. There is a specific American body that shapes the American feminist movement. It is an autonomous body shaped by (neo)liberalism, as though it has no history of arrival in the world. Because liberation is, in a western sense, configured as resistance to public and private institutions that infringe upon individualism and autonomy, (neo)liberal feminists spurn spaces and relationships that do not fit these ideals. Feminists from backgrounds that reject individualism complicate the American feminist narrative. For example, “third world” peoples involved in pro-women’s movements have historically disrupted the American feminist narrative by decentering its sole focus on gender oppression and emphasizing the role of kinship in creating spaces of resistance to racial oppression².

In chapter five, I examine the distinctions between what Grewal describes as the global, the national, and the hyphenated subject (32). The global subject functions as a citizen of the world that travels and can feel “at home” anywhere. Through travel, the global body exerts its agency while maintaining its western superiority. In contrast, the national subject configures its identity in synchronization with borders, states and local communities, whereas the hyphenated subject is a hybrid of local and cosmopolitan bodies created in resistance to the national subject. Here, I examine western media portrayals of Egyptian women as an illustration of global

² This will be further elaborated upon in chapter five, while discussing what Inderpal Grewal calls the global body.

subjectivity. Following this, I deconstruct colonial narratives in which I, myself, have participated in hopes of reconfiguring my global subjectivity into that of a hyphenated subject.

I conclude chapter five by exploring the lived realities of political coalition spaces as well as home spaces. I argue that our fantasized notions of home distract us from how kinship may be coalitional. Here, I argue that as Asian-/American women participate in global activism, resist imperial revolutions and fight western exploitation of marginalized bodies, we need to think of ways to redefine feminist and coalition spaces and reconsider how we can engage in local, global and transnational discourses that respect the space of kinship.

In order to create a space for bodies that move fluidly across the psychological and material borders of multiple communities, Pan-Asianism and American-feminism need to reconfigure assumptions about the homogenized, global body to account for multitudes of varying lived experiences of hyphenated bodies. Hyphenated bodies are shaped by their familial histories of arrival and their travels to different places (physical, political, and imagined). These bodies cannot deny a relationship to either kin or to feminist communities. I reflect upon how these seemingly conflicting commitments might be transformed into a livable tension that generates political movement in different kinds of (private and public) spaces. Livable tension varies from person to person. There is a distinction between living in uncomfortable spaces and being in a state of constant distress.

The scholarship that informs this thesis represents a focus on intersectionality and postcolonial thought. My work represents an interdisciplinary approach to critically analyzing the Asian-/American-/feminist experience. I pull from areas of study such as literary criticism, cultural studies, philosophy, feminist theory, womanist studies, queer theory, critical race theory

and postcolonial studies. Postcolonial theorists such as Vine F. Cordova, Edward Said and Franz Fanon are crucial to my project. I borrow Cordova's language in talking about the matrix, a psychological and physical place where we build our world through stories. Said illustrates the history of Orientalism and the ways in which the production and consumption of the "Orient" define our modern associations to the *Far East*. I build my argument of home as a fantasized space of comfort from *Black Skin, White Mask*, where Fanon describes the placeness and alienation felt by a decolonizing male body.

Other scholars who have influenced my thinking are Postcolonial feminists, especially thinkers with histories of arrival from South Asia, such as Sara Ahmed, Chandra Mohanty, Trinh Minh-ha, and Inderpal Grewal. Ahmed's phenomenological work has influenced my understanding of desire, which she depicts as a function of orientations toward objects. Her work on happiness has also shaped my understanding of the happiness paradigm—a term I use to describe ideal governing feminist coalition spaces committed to maintaining the comfort and happiness of *some* feminist bodies.

Various articles by Mohanty inform my ideas on global feminism and geopolitical home spaces. I associate the prominent global feminist theme of "de-radicalizing" in order to radicalize, most closely with Mohanty's work. The first time I came across the concept of de-radicalizing in order to radicalize, it stuck to the back of my throat like a spoonful of peanut butter with no milk in sight; you have to learn the master's language in order to dismantle the master's narrative. Minh-ha's concept of the triple bind allows me to articulate, in part, the tension I feel as an Asian-/American feminist. I borrow Grewal's concepts of the global and

hyphenated body to demonstrate how to be a body that travels across geographical and emotional spaces of tension.

I have also been influenced by queer theorists such as José Muñoz, David Eng, Lisa Lowe and Judith Halberstam. From Muñoz, I borrow the notion of “disidentification” as a third alternative to assimilation (“identification”) and rejection (“counter-identification”). I rely on Eng for his Marxist-deconstructionist, queer analysis of kinship and community. Lowe’s work is central to my own work. Her analyses of the heterogeneous body, of multiplicity and of Asian American community are crucial to this thesis. Halberstam has influenced my thinking about how spaces can be inhabited in non-normative ways. Also important to my work are critics such as Giles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan. Deleuze’s concept of lines, soul and creation help inform my own theories on how bodies can potentially move within the hegemonic matrix. I deconstruct cultural images in *Glee* with a Lacanian analysis.

Because I believe in the power of storytelling and that the political begins with the personal, interwoven with my analysis will be a series of stories and poems. This mixed genre writing is largely autobiographical. I recognize that experiences are shaped differently and press us into different kinds of people, but I cannot offer a universal solution to oppression or exploitation or anything bigger than my lifelines can handle.

This is a starting point for me. I want to engage in scholarship that is nuanced yet accessible. I want to take this language that I have painstakingly acquired over years and bring it to my parents, to my aunts and uncles, to the dishwasher and cleaning person—because the lived experiences of these people have informed my own theories. As a multi-ethnic Asian-/American, I have had to straddle both South and South East Asian cultures my entire life. I have read texts

that have embraced part of me and rejected the rest entirely. This is my attempt to recognize my love for my father and my love for my mother and their unique arrivals in this world while also recognizing my commitment to feminist theory and practice in the space of the global North I currently inhabit.

By means of exploring Asian-/American-/Feminism, I hope to contribute to the scholarly dialogue on feminist theory and practice by offering an analysis grounded in my own body—a body that is seldom represented as more than a token in mainstream feminist discourse.

Chapter Two: Systems and Stories

My family stories provide a window to see what I have to say. I exist only in and as context. I am what that context has created. I did not burst full bloom into the world I confront. I do not have a ‘hidden,’ ‘inner,’ or ‘true’ self that lies waiting for discovery. I have been created by my experiences, and am recreated—over and over again—by each new experience.

-V. F. Cordova, *How It Is*

*Heaven is at your mother's feet*³

I didn't realize it was considered abnormal to still sleep in your parents' bed at age six. It didn't even occur to me until high school when all the boys and girls started talking about their futures. Their future-mom and future-dad selves would have their kids sleep in a crib in a nursery in a separate room of the house—perhaps in a separate house entirely. I wasn't clear on the details of these fantasized domestic lives. I did recognize, however, that my classmates' fantasized futures diverged from my own lived experiences and stories about home and family. Upon hearing their narratives, I wondered, *how much space do you intend to occupy?*

We didn't have much space growing up. Space was for the rich white kids in the next neighborhood down. My parents were working immigrants in America and we were nomadic. My earliest recognition of a place called home was a space we rented in the basement of my aunt's house. Our entire family shared this house—from aunts to uncles to grandparents to people just temporarily visiting the country. Every room was inhabited by three or more bodies

³ “The Prophet Muhammad said; may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him: Your Heaven lies under the feet of your mother” (Ahmad, Nasai). My father has repeated this Sunnah to me for as long as I can remember.

all the way up to the attic. Maybe it's because I was a kid, but it felt big. It felt like home. And when my parents talk about those days, their faces light up; *everyone was together, then.*

My parents had two queen-sized beds stuffed into a room. My place was the corner next to my mom. I'd sketch patterns into the wall with my finger as she sang me to sleep. But the real special times would be when my dad would tell me stories. They were always about his country and my grandfather and my family and me riding tigers to save villages. The myths I grew up on glorified Bengali national culture and history, but also created an imaginary and exotic place where I had the power to ride tigers and save villages and start revolutions. These myths were my first encounter with imagining agency as a female-body and it came at the expense of exerting my western superiority to rescue the powerless people in the ugly third world. These stories are a prelude to my tensions and struggles with feminism.

We're much older now and our bodies occupy far more space, but there are days where I still find salvation at my parents' feet. As we've accumulated parts of the American dream, our square footage serves to distance us. The western, academic language I've learned and the American rituals in which I participate pushes us further apart. Being an American student, like being the child of Asian immigrants, is very much a part of my identity. Sometimes, however, the various parts of my identity come into conflict. When I crawl into my parents' bed to sleep in my place by the corner, it's not childhood nostalgia that I'm seeking. I'm trying to reconcile the tension we feel in our everyday lives, tension created by physical and emotional space. When my mom puts her palm to my forehead, I understand she feels the same.

The Hegemonic Matrix

As members of various communities, we carry a vision of the world with us wherever we go; it is our matrix— invisible, culturally inherited, continuously in (re)formation, it helps us navigate through our spaces and relationships. We build our world through stories to gain a sense of direction; we become orientated. Sara Ahmed contends that to be orientated means “to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us find our way” (1). For Ahmed, orientation is a form of embodiment where we literally face toward or away from objects within our reach and expand to what is within our reach.

Ahmed argues that we perceive worlds in relation to the “proximity” between bodies and objects through action. For example, if we gather around a dining table, bodies observe particular behaviors depending upon the objects within our reach. In an example that shows class and cultural positioning, silk napkins could signify formal dress while paper towels could mean a casual lunch. The objects within the dining room define that space and what we do in it. We understand what bodily actions are signified by those objects through stories. Stories provide the context, as Vine F. Cordova suggests, wherein we develop these orientations. They provide, in her words, a “matrix” within which our actions and experiences make sense.

In my case, my stories arrive from my family—from my Boro Dada’s class privilege during the British occupation of India to my parents’ arrivals as immigrants in America. My family’s history with and without class privilege reveals the nuances of how power transforms as it travels across geopolitical spaces. The stories my father would tell me as a child orientated me to a feminism that attempts to be intersectional. I realize that his stories were meant to empower me, but my empowerment came at a great cost: the agency of the villagers who needed rescuing

by me. In retrospect, those memories allow me to recognize how the intersections of race, class and gender situate our bodies.

My Thai mother's orientation revolves around having never surrendered to British or French occupation, while dismissing the kinds of imperialist acts in which Thailand participated. Her pride in belonging to a people who have never been conquered shapes the space of her marriage and our family. As we negotiate having two cultural identities stemming from very different histories with imperialism, my parents experience tension between the colonized body and the colonizer body. *My people were never ruled over*, my mother tells my father whenever they exchange stories of national culture and history. I am then torn apart by distinctly different narratives and histories which shape my becoming.

The stories I have inherited from my family and the American spaces I inhabit form a matrix. The function of a matrix, according to Cordova, provides three things: "a description of the world, a description of what it is to be human in that world and a description of the role of humans in that world" (61). Matrices represent ways of being and only become visible to us when we leave the comfort of our place or encounter different matrices. I realized the invisible nature of the American matrix I operated within when I was eight. My parents decided to move our family from the United States to Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, I experienced a disorientation that made me aware of the multiple matrices grazing against each other.

As my young western body traveled to a new geographical and social space, I felt placeless. Ahmed posits that "disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one's place. . . . Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach" (160). I neither fit into the bourgeois Bengali

community (never fully understanding or committing myself to their rituals or ethics) nor into their popularized image of an American girl with porcelain skin, blue eyes and blonde hair.

Because matrices represent ways of being, class, race, gender and nationalism play an integral role in their formations. The intersections of class, race and gender orientations with nationalism create a context for bodies to move within. The national community attempts to legitimize its authority in the global sphere by gaining social and economic capital. Benedict Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (256). It becomes the first person plural, the *We* where bodies get flushed into a sea of deliberate sameness. Nations are social constructions that define material and psychic realities.

As nations define material and psychic realities, bodies that inhabit those nations create and are created by the space. Ahmed contends that “bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, that are available within the bodily horizon” (2). The lines of hegemony⁴ shape the body, but the body also shapes the space. Bodies and lines are in a state of motion that define each other and the centers of our desire. Each of us, as situated bodies, is orientated toward objects and others through physical, psychological, and imaginary arrivals of cultural history and practice.

Though some arrivals may be imaginary, they have very real social implications. Oppression and exploitation arise when we take our matrix to be Truth above all others. When we define other ways of being in opposition to or in relation to our own matrix and the collective matrices of the imagined communities of nationhood, we participate in the othering of individual

⁴ Here, I refer to Antonio Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony, *Prison Notebooks*.

and collective bodies. In this process of othering, we distinguish ourselves from those bodies while homogenizing that particular community—creating a discourse for order and authority. As we establish order and authority within a cultural discourse, we insist that bodies roped within that discourse regulate their performance in socially acceptable ways. For example, in order to receive the privileges of a middle class, white man in America, one must be able to perform the cys-gender, middle class, heteronormative male body.

The regulation of bodies takes place on both a micro-level and macro-level. On a micro-level, we are embedded in matrices shaped by our personal experiences and arrivals. These experiences and arrivals are, however, also affected by the macro-level. On a macro-level, we inhabit—and are inhabited by—a hegemonic matrix that allows us to move toward a common center of desire. My family, despite our differences, moves together across this matrix by acting out certain roles in our predominately white-American, heteronormative, middle class community. As we work together in our family’s restaurant, we nourish bodies in our community that can afford to pay for our services. In this process, we commodify others (customers) and are made into commodities (servers) in the context of an American narrative of the hardworking, immigrant family moving toward the American dream. Because we are racialized as the “model minority,” we have upward mobility in the United States *so long as we maintain that image*.

Because we attempt to move toward common interests at the macro-level, we have a center of desire motivated by complex systems of domination and power vying for national and global resources, labor and capital. In the context of contemporary American culture, the center of desire translates to white desire, where we move toward whiteness (heterosexist-capitalist-

patriarchal-recolonization⁵) within its narratives of liberation, empowerment, individualism, socioeconomic and political independence, and material wealth and power. As we move to more micro-levels of embodiment, we understand that multiple centers of desire exist—created by and because of our specific relationships to particular objects and particular communities with personal meanings.

The distinction I am making between micro and macro levels of embodiment is captured, in part, by Giles Deleuze's contention that bodies move along molar and molecular lines. He argues that the molar lines are well-defined segments that trace out a pattern of normative behaviors and rituals that people are expected to precisely follow along (173). Molecular lines curve to fit the contours of personal experiences, but still manage to get to similar endpoints. The center line of gravity is "the path of the dancer's soul," where bodies that move along this line question the very weaving of the fabric (173). The center line of gravity is what Deleuze considers to be "soul." Having soul allows one to move along the line while being motivated by personal truths, creation and elevating us beyond patterns of repetitive action. Those who travel along this line, have the potential to create a work of art or vision.

In thinking about Deleuze's line and Cordova's matrix, I imagine a sphere with a grid on it. The lines on the grid represent the lines of hegemony and they create various intersections. These intersections are based on psychological and bodily experiences such as race, class, gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and so forth. Bodies are then situated on these intersections and can move across the grid. The lines are sharp. They are like stainless steel blades that shave off difference from the body as it attempts to travel. In order for the body to move toward the

⁵ This is not an exhaustive list.

hegemonic center of desire, it must neutralize difference.

I think of the first time I waxed my eyebrows. It was my freshman year of high school and my best friend said that whenever she saw a girl with messy eyebrows, she couldn't focus on anything else. The next day, I went to the salon to have myself "cleaned up." As the woman poured hot wax onto my skin, she warned: *be sure to come in often. Your eyebrows are going to grow in different once you wax it off. You don't want it to be distracting.* That is the way the lines of hegemony work. They shave off the difference until it is no longer threatening to the whole project of cultural production and consumption. Yet, the difference remains at the root, underneath the skin, and grows in new directions of resistance.

Attempting to neutralize and shave off my identities fails to recognize how my Asian-/American body exists *only in and as context*. I am racialized, gendered, classed and sized (among other embodiments) and this determines how I move through space and the objects toward which I reach. For example, growing up in the United States, my wardrobe consisted of tube-socks, tee-shirts and khaki shorts. When I turned eleven, my dad told me I needed to reinvent my style to better conform to Muslim norms. *Good Muslim girls don't wear shorts*, he said. Here, shorts have been gendered and religiously/culturally inscribed. At the time, I desired to fit the role of *good Muslim girl*, which required that I regulate my clothing and mannerisms to move along lines of the hegemonic matrix toward my father's center of desire. These days I have queer desires that examine institutions of power and authority and question my previous desires. Yet, I still cannot reach toward shorts. My current Asian-/American-/feminist narrative (a narrative also informed by a politics and history of gender and class) says that *dignified fat girls don't wear shorts*. Those little khaki shorts from my childhood are now sized, gendered,

racialized and classed beyond my reach.

As bodies situated on the matrix, we are not always doomed to perform social norms. If we again borrow Deleuze's concept of lines and apply them to the grid and center of desire, we can theorize projects of resistance that attempt to disrupt the narrative of the status quo. Because the lines of the hegemonic matrix are constantly shifting and reconfiguring in response to resistance, the center of desire recreates itself in the vision of the resister's subject-narratives and in the face of resistance. Hegemony co-opts counter-hegemonic movements—swallows them whole until they become another part in the master's narrative.

The center grows outward across the grid; allowing some bodies to occupy the margins of the center. If we take, for example, the liberalization of the queer movement—what Lisa Duggans calls homonormativity—the co-optation of counter-hegemonic movements become most obvious (6). Judith Halberstam argues that queering space is the project of place-making that disrupts normalized narratives of time to produce queer counter-publics (13). However, queer discourse is now manufactured and packaged for the American public and centers primarily on white, upper-middle class, educated men who are efficient and effective producers and consumers.

David Eng remarks on this transformation of queer desire into homonormative desire noting that, “paradoxically, prior historical efforts to defy state oppression and provide a radical critique of family and kinship have given way to a desire for state legitimacy and for the recognition of same-sex marriage, adoption, custody, inheritance and service in the military”(3). Bodies that are willing and able to fit within these narratives of social and familial spaces are acclimated into the margins of the center of normative desires. The hegemonic center of desire

expands to assimilate *some* (but far from all) non-normative bodies; of the many other non-normative bodies who remain outside of the newly expanded center, some have resisted assimilation by reorientating ourselves on the hegemonic matrix to create new centers of desires. The original center of desire does not dissolve into the ether. The new center is constructed in opposition/resistance to the original center and creates a space for counter-publics.

In this space of counter-publics, counter-hegemonic desire rejects everything about the center it fashioned itself against. Both of these centers of desire are problematic. The hegemonic center allows institutions of power to go unquestioned. The counter-hegemonic center may delegitimize the material, physical, and psychological necessity for some people living within normative boundaries. To become a part of *either* center, we must shave off our difference. If we do not question the root of our desires, we travel along the matrix on different paths to the same endpoint which creates and sustains the regulation of bodies.

In order to disrupt the regulation of bodies, we must, as Deleuze suggests, find our center line of gravity and, as Ahmed suggests, question our orientation to certain objects of desire. The conflict between moving toward whiteness (as a good American girl) and moving toward heaven under my mother's feet (as a good Muslim girl) creates a space of lived tension that I must learn to inhabit. As my family and I travel toward the center of white desire, our bodies shave off our differences from white American families. Yet, that difference remains. There are days when I crawl into my parents' bed—not as a child, but as a body fully cognizant of what I am trying to resist, negotiate and (re)claim in that space.

Chapter Three: Asian-/American Cultural Representations

Asian American culture is more than the negation of the U.S. nation; it is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narrative and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the nation state.

-Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*

The Forever-Foreigner

He's the kind of clean-cut body you'd see glossed over the fronts of magazines—if Asian men actually glossed the fronts of magazines. He immigrated to the United States from the Philippines with his family when he was thirteen and quickly became accustomed to American rituals—wearing western consumer culture with the right kind of style. Most people see him walking by in his nursing scrubs and write him off as just another one of those “nice guy,” model minority types: a producer, a consumer, a metrosexual masculine body, and non-threatening participant in civic duty. The white heteronormative narrative pressed onto his brown body masks how he complicates and challenges the spaces that he inhabits. Pierce and I have been friends since high school—back in a time and place where both of us wanted to be medical doctors and embodied the stereotypes of competitive Asian nerds.

Our relationship developed greater depth during our college years. In high school we talked about grades and inconsequential nothings. But we'd also talk about things we'd never tell anyone else. In those quiet, frantic three a.m. text messages filled with self-doubt and criticism,

we created a new space for ourselves where it wasn't all about grades and honor chords. Yet those moments were rare. It wasn't until I started grappling with my identities that I began experiencing our relationship and shared space in different ways.

...

I try not to scrape my knife across the plate. Sometimes I forget what it feels like to eat with silverware—disconnected and solid, strangely limiting.

Pierce and I are at Applebee's again. It's somehow evolved into a monthly ritual. We find ourselves scooting into a dinky booth covered in green polyester upholstery the first Wednesday of every month. I didn't grow up with eating-out-culture, so Applebee's somehow feels special—grown-up and American.

Our conversation starts out pleasantly enough with the right *how are you*s and *what've you been up to*s. Then I begin to ask the kinds of questions you only ask when your stomach is full. I ask him why there aren't more Asian feminists, why we aren't more visible in the activist community.

He pauses, reflecting before answering, "Hm. I guess it just feels like we don't have it all that bad. I mean, no one really has a problem with us Asians."

I think of my dad who has never worked less than eighty hours a week since coming to the United States twenty-seven years ago, but still can't afford basic health insurance. I think of the bank teller who snickers at my mom because *her english no good*. I think of those patriotic Americans I knew growing up who took one look at my *funny* head scarf and told me to go back to my country because *we don't like your kind of people here*.

I wonder if I belong to his *us*. Because I'm here with him. We're sharing in this intimate

space, we're eating dinner at Applebees, but—

...

Pan-Asianism and Orientalism

Historically and culturally, Pan-Asian ethnicity has served many functions. It has been used as a vehicle for transformative political movements that practice anti-racism and work to (re)appropriate the image of Asian bodies from the western gaze. Despite its good intentions and many accomplishments, however, Pan-Asianism creates a homogenized Asian-/American identity to stand behind—flesh gets sandwich-pressed into a narrative that repeats rather than creates and bodies that bleed out between the lines get lost in the shuffle toward the hegemonic center of desire. (Re)appropriating the image of the Asian body from the western gaze mimics the reflection of the mythical body of the colonial other created by the colonizer. It becomes increasingly difficult for Asian bodies that inhabit multiple imagined communities to move between those communities with any sense of ease. Pan-Asianism is linked to the history of Orientalism.

While western cartographers created world maps with a point of reference situated in Europe, the body of land (and subsequently its people) east of that centralized area transformed into the Far East or the Orient. What defines Asia is its proximity and relation to Europe and, more recently, the United States. “Asian” functions as a reductive label used by institutions of education, government, scholars and political organizations to classify people from countries linked loosely together by geography and whose history, culture and political formations are sometimes—ideologically or literally—in conflict with each other. Asian bodies take shape through different orientations toward community, kinship, and stories which depend on varying

geopolitical locations in time and place. This multiplicity in cultural identity is not what the western gaze reveals. Instead, “Asian” becomes interchangeable with “Oriental.” Orientalism reveals the complex structures of western domination over the other—where “Oriental, like the African, is a member of a subject race and not exclusively an inhabitant of a geographical area” (Said 92).

The enlightened western body made and sustains a particular body of the *other* through the production of cultural history and practice in order to capitalize on the commodification of goods, labor and resources. Despite having a very different history of arrival from European nations, the United States utilizes the cultural production of the Orient for much the same means. The volume of colonial texts—historically and presently in circulation (e.g. *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Eat, Pray Love*, etc.) fascinated by and situated within the Orient reveals a desperate attempt to produce knowledge that maintains structures of socioeconomic and political domination. Said argues that:

Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a continued material investment. Continual material investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplies—indeed, made truly productive—the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into the general culture.(8)

The ease with which the west has erased difference to homogenize “Asian” reinforces the colonial narrative of othering. *Those* people over *there* are different from *us* over *here*. The other

is seen as something distant from oneself, something cruel and unkind, something fetishized and effeminized, something mystical and romanticized, something not entirely real. This otherness is reinscribed culturally in the narratives found in movies, television shows, books, music and even social networking sites. Within the context of the United States and neocolonial narratives, this othering is used to justify the exploitation of resources and labor of *third world*, brown bodies for the advancement of “progressive” society. With assumptions about globalization bringing in a new world order of progress and efficiency further fueled by (neo)liberal ideology and market practice, it has become increasingly easy to displace and marginalize the differences in Asian bodies.

Certain tropes and stereotypes define a “fixed” Asian body for the west. These stereotypes and tropes change with the political, economic and social climate. Some prominent stereotypes that made it very difficult for Asian bodies to move through American spaces since the 1800s have been the effeminized Asian-male body, the scheming Indian, the dragon lady, the submissive woman, and the prostitute—to list only a few⁶. Various tropes have been used strategically to maintain the illusion of danger that the other poses to the U.S. nation. Depending on whom the United States was warring with at the time, different stereotypes and tropes were used to justify invasions, exploitation, internment, cruelty, withheld legal protection and so forth.

With the tropes and stereotypes created through Orientalism in mind, Pan-Asianism attempts to (re)claim Asian identity. Espiritu posits that, “although it [...pan-ethnic identity] originated in the minds of outsiders, today the pan-ethnic concept is a political resource for

⁶ For further discussion on tropes and stereotypes, see Lynn Lu’s *Critical Visions: The Representation and Resistance of Asian Women* as well as King-Kok Cheung’s *The Woman Warrior Versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must A Chinese American Critic Choose Between Feminism and Heroism?*

insiders, a basis on which to mobilize diverse peoples and to force others to be more responsive to their grievances” (7). In the 1960s and 1970s, Pan-Asian ethnicity formed as a political reaction to the racialization and discrimination against Asians. Born in the era of the Civil Rights movement and Women’s movement, Pan-Asianism addressed issues that directly affected (some) Asian communities. The main focus was an analysis of racial oppression that sometimes included issues of class, but rarely ever focused on gender oppression. Establishing Pan-Asian identity was important for structuring and receiving economic and sociopolitical resources from government institutions and outside communities; “when the state uses the ethnic label as a unit in economic allocations and political representations, ethnic groups find it both convenient and necessary to act collectively” (Espiritu 10).

The Pan-Asian movement has many legislative and sociopolitical accomplishments from overturning miscegenation laws to creating safe spaces for lower income families. The movement took numerous cases to the Supreme Court⁷ which, ultimately, overturned many discriminatory practices. The work of Pan-Asianism was, in part, to establish an Asian body that could be protected under the law. Asians have been subject to harsh immigration laws, segregation and denial of citizenship. Because the United States often analyses race within the black/white paradigm⁸, Asian Americans (and Latinas/os) have been shuffled back and forth between those two categories of race.

Before legal protections were established, Asian bodies did not exist in the United States. In 1860, “Chinese Americans were classified as *white* in Louisiana” (Alcoff 251). By 1870, they

⁷ For examples of Supreme Court cases see *Orientalism* by Robert G. Lee and Linda Alcoff’s *Visible Identities*.

⁸ For a more in-depth discussion of the black-white paradigm, see Linda Alcoff’s *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*.

were considered Chinese. Then, in 1900, “the children of Chinese parents and non-Chinese parents were considered either white or black” (Alcoff 251). In addition to being denied equal protection under the law, Asian bodies were (and still are) perpetuated as the foreign other. In 1922, for example, the U.S. Supreme Court denied Takao Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant, the right to become a naturalized citizen. The court ruled that despite his light-colored skin and English proficiency, his Japanese “blood” made him “unamalgamable” by marriage into the American nation (Alcoff 258). Bodies such as Ozawa’s were not protected under the law because they were invisible within the discourse. Pan-Asianism made such bodies visible.

Despite, or perhaps because of, all of its accomplishments, Pan-Asianism fails to address the intersections of race with gender, sexuality, religion, able-bodiedness (and so on). The struggle for State recognition of Asians as a legally protected class, deserving political and economic benefits, required presentation of a homogenized body with shared grievances and history to those in authority. As a result, Pan-Asianism fails to adequately represent all Asian bodies and experiences. Pan-Asianism unwittingly mimics and reinforces the western gaze. Particular bodies came to represent the interests and image of the Asian community at large. The homogenization of Pan-Asianism poses a serious problem because it does not allow a space for Asian bodies to exist in multiplicity and hybridity between various imagined communities.

The homogenized Asian body is further complicated by South Asian bodies that lack visibility and representation either culturally or politically. In the post-9/11 era, South Asian bodies—which were largely ignored even within the Pan-Asian community—have become the subject of much conversation. The United States links South Asian bodies to a distorted and villainized Islam, terrorism, violence against women and general barbarism. These tropes are

used strategically to identify the State's current enemy and justify its actions of war. For example, Americans militarized liberal feminism in order to rescue Muslim women—to force upon them the gift of female-empowerment. Viewed as oppressed by their cultural rituals and spiritual beliefs, *those women over there* need to be rescued by *us women over here*.

Asian bodies are forced to occupy certain intersections on the hegemonic matrix due to political and historical narratives that continue to be shaped by Orientalism. In turn, Pan-Asianism reinforces a homogenized Asian body to legitimize Asian ethnicity in a racial discourse situated within the black/white paradigm. Within this black/white paradigm, South Asian bodies are categorized as terrorists and blackened, while East Asian bodies are whitened. This whitening of the East Asian as he moves to the margins of the center of the hegemonic matrix can be witnessed in the model minority citizen as represented in popular culture.

The Path to The Dancer's Soul

As I have previously suggested, hegemony is constantly redefining itself— dominant culture shifts as minority cultures converge and reform. The most obvious examples of the homogenization of Pan-Asianism are found in representations (and the lack thereof) of Asians in popular culture. The images found in popular culture are the ones that occupy the spaces of our lives most frequently— that define and regulate how bodies are to perform within normative contexts. By observing contemporary tropes, we are better able to critically analyze the material we constantly consume in order to understand *what* we desire and *why* we desire those things.

Like Pan-Asianism, cultural tropes of Asian bodies (perhaps unwittingly) perpetuate Orientalist notions of Asian identity. Consider, *Glee*, a television show about a high school show

choir that appeals to our underdog sensibilities. *Glee* asks us to identify with a group of teenage misfits searching for a place of belonging and sense of identity, within a festering wound of sociopolitical injustice, namely the typical American high school. Within this context, Asian-/American students find themselves on the margins of an already socially marginalized group, as members of the much ridiculed glee club, rarely given a leading role.

There are three Asian characters on *Glee*, but the two who are actively associated with Asian identity (because of their recognizable East Asian origins) are Tina Cohen-Chang and Mike Chang. Both Tina and Mike Chang are literally and metaphorically characterized as “Asian”—sharing in “Asian kisses” and “Asian high-fives”. Their actions and the objects within their reach are transformed by their touch into objects with hypervisible cultural inscriptions. Yet, as characters, they are rarely visible within the plot. Tina is originally introduced in the first season as a shy, goth-girl who lies about having a stutter; she becomes more outspoken and rebellious throughout the second and third seasons. Though her character is underdeveloped, Tina has a storyline and a place within the *Glee* narrative. Mike Chang, on the other hand, is basically silent until the second season. He gracefully sways in the background of musical numbers, emerging every so often as a stand-out dancer. He is voiceless in a place where voice matters. For numerous episodes, his body occupies a space in the choir room to fulfill a numbers requirement for glee club legitimacy mirroring how his body also occupies that space to, presumably, fulfill a diversity requirement.

Mike Chang is referred to as “the other Asian” by multiple characters on the show, including Tina. This distinct othering happens because he is both voiceless and relatively invisible juxtaposed with Tina, who does have voice. It is not until season three that Mike Chang

is foregrounded. In the episode *Asian F* of season three, Mike Chang's backstory is revealed. He first appears to us as a member of the football team—not as the star quarterback, but as one of the necessary backbones of the team. We learn that he is a straight A student, an Asian camp counselor and that he dates the *other* Asian on the show. Mike Chang is stable, dependable, steady—a picture perfect model minority, perfectly invisible, perfectly undistruptive. What he represents is an upper-middle class, heteronormative, educated, male body of East Asian descent.

The “*Asian-F*” episode explores Mike Chang's desire to be an artist and the conflict this desire creates within his family. Mike Chang's many privileges make it possible to insert his Asian-/American body into the American narrative of individual liberation and empowerment without his cultural difference being a threat. Yet, this is not a simple story of cultural assimilation. As Mike Chang moves toward white desire, the lines of the hegemonic matrix shave the differences of his body into shape. At the same time, he struggles with his obligations to family and redefines his relationship with his mother and, subsequently, his father.

During the “Asian F” episode, race is foregrounded. We are introduced to Mike Chang Senior while he explains to Principle Figgins that an A- is equivalent to an “Asian F” (a curious development considering that Principle Figgins is of South East Asian descent).⁹ Education is racialized and in order for Mike Chang to successfully function in his father's matrix—a matrix centered, in part, on neoliberal ideology and a model minority archetype—he must live up to those standards. Mike Chang senior explains the importance of an education that yields a Harvard degree. By seeking acceptance from a world-renowned American institution, he hopes to gain and secure his son's economic and social grounding in society. This validates generations

⁹ Figgins appears to be a blackened South Asian body and is therefore unable to understand the values that Mike Chang senior, as a model minority, prioritizes.

of hard labor and a lifetime of hard work.

His father is not the only one who racializes the space Mike Chang inhabits in the narrative. Tina calls Mike Chang a “fleet-footed ninja” while another member of the choir, Artie, says that he “runs like an expensive watch cheaply replicated in China.” Both of these racial expressions are meant as compliments. Tina tries to convince him that he is swift and smooth and ready to emerge as the second male lead in the school musical. Artie’s comment contains a completely different subtext. As a disabled, young, white man who has recently been given power as a musical director, Artie explains the unlikeliness of Mike Chang’s tardy arrival to the audition. Because Mike Chang is late, he disrupts the flow of the auditions. In order to reconcile his status as a model minority with the inconvenience he has caused, it must be made clear that tardiness is out of character. This line of dialogue demonstrates the prevalence of racialized objects and bodies with Asian-ified histories of arrival. The association of objects, such as watches, with Asian bodies transforms those objects into something Asian. Asian bodies that reach toward those objects (for example, timeliness) have their own transformations.

Mike Chang senior lives in a body of the foreign other, as Asian bodies have historically been excluded as legitimate American bodies.¹⁰ He is a classic archetype of stoic Asian father with impossibly high expectations for his son. Dressed in a sharp business suit with slicked back hair and no trace of an accent, a new kind of Asian male body has emerged. He is still the foreigner, still the diligent worker, still the faithful producer/consumer. Yet, Mike Chang senior has successfully assimilated to white culture. He has moved along the lines of the hegemonic

¹⁰ Lisa Lowe discusses in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* how Asian bodies have been historically excluded as American bodies through racialization, orientalism, imperialism and war. Asian bodies have always been othered, and despite attempts at assimilation, remain othered (21-24).

matrix and is now comfortably situated within a marginal layer of the center of white desire. Because of his successful assimilation as a business man, he cannot imagine his son's differently imagined future. He disapproves of his son's dancing, saying that dancing is not a career, but "something one does at a wedding."

When Mike Chang is standing in front of the dance studio mirror, he sees his father's reflection next to him. His father's expectations are literally embodied in a mirror sequence. Mike Chang attempts to reject those expectations by moving away from the mirror, but his father grabs his wrist. This scene represents what Lacan calls the looking-glass or mirror stage (Bressler 153). In the mirror stage, we literally see our image while metaphorically seeing the image of the other—in Mike Chang's case, his father. For one perfect moment, Mike Chang sees himself dancing and all is right in the world. But the other disturbs this image.

Mike Chang has a history with the other. He has arrived from the other. However, he is alienated from the other. His interactions with ethnically and racially non-othered bodies, especially the students in the glee club, carry him away from otherness and toward Americanness by allowing him to embrace an artist-identity as well as voice. In Lacanian terms, the mirror image permits us to perceive images with discrete boundaries. We become cognizant of ourselves as independent, sentient beings—separated from the other. Looking at ourselves as reflected in the glass, we see ourselves as whole and complete beings as an ideal self. This is an illusion we maintain, because unlike the actual mirror image, we are not fully in control of our faculties.

During our mirror stage, we begin to recognize that certain objects are separate from ourselves. Lacan calls these objects the *objet petit a*. The *objet petit a* is an unattainable object of

desire with no inherent value that persists for the sake of *jouissance*. When mirror-Mike Chang senior grabs his son's wrist, Mike Chang junior realizes that the mirror image of his father is something separate from himself. He then releases himself from the imaginary and psychological grip of his mirror-father. He achieves this agency and empowerment by moving his hand in a fluid dance motion. The rigid stature of his father's body is superseded by Mike Chang's own movements—as though he is no longer contained by the bones in his body or by the expectations of his father.

Though Mike Chang's rejection of his father's expectations can fit within the American narrative of empowerment through individual liberation from “oppressive” institutions, he complicates this space as he interacts with his mother. His mother is not given a name of her own, but she is given a more sympathetic representation than his father. Her body contradicts the American notion of motherhood as open, warm and nurturing; her limbs and lines are straight while she moves across the room. However, she does not exemplify the stereotype of the tiger mother either. The tiger mother is a popular Asian trope that depicts Asian mothers as overtly competitive and ambitious, oftentimes putting economic, social and academic advancement before their children's well-being. Mike Chang's relationship with his mother is far more complex.

Mike Chang's mother perpetuates a distance in physical and psychological space between child and cultural history. The scene begins with them standing on opposite sides of the room. Because Mike Chang is a transformed body (having finally admitted to himself that he wants to be an artist), they start moving closer to each other. The gap between them begins to close very rapidly. His mother says that he is braver than her for following his dreams when she could not

do the same, revealing that she, too, was also denied her dreams by the patriarch of her family. She shares his love for dance and this intimate space that they create through shared passion and mutual respect closes the distance between child and cultural history. Interestingly, Mike Chang (re)turns toward his cultural history *by moving closer to his American desires*, thus raising the question what *is* an American desire, exactly? And how it is to be differentiated from Asian desire?

When Mike Chang senior learns about the deception of his wife and son, he disowns Mike Chang junior. Mike Chang's mother disappears from future episodes and it is Tina that convinces Mike Chang's father to watch his son perform at sectionals. After seeing his son perform for the first time, Mike Chang senior is willing to accept Mike Chang junior's decision to become an artist—*so long as he applies to best schools and best programs*.

Despite our different histories of arrival, Mike Chang's struggles as he moves toward his father's center of desire resonates with me in ways that I wish were a little less profound. My experience with coming into my own as an academic activist is quite similar to Mike Chang's, although gender shapes it differently. My mother did not react well when I broke the news of abandoning my medical school pursuits. She did not speak to me and hardly looked at me for months. My father, though sharing in her disappointment, was more sympathetic to the cause—he too had rejected a future as a doctor. My desire to write created an emotional distance between my mother and I, while it closed distance between me and my father.

Chapter Four: The Journey of (Re)Turns

Sharp polarizations force one to make choices (not in order to take sides, but in order to accept responsibility) and to clarify our own analytic, political and emotional topographies.

—Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*

Home and nation can be idyllic notions held together with a loose string of memories—memories from our own past or community histories or family legacies. We are turned toward narratives of home and nation as bodies seeking to belong. Yet, just as hegemony is quick to adjust and shift to bodies transforming across the matrix, home is neither fixed nor stagnant. For many of us, there is a journey down the yellow brick road to bring us back home, to a home that no longer exists the way we imagine it to. As Salman Rushdie argues in his postcolonial reading of the *Wizard of Oz*, there *is* no place like home.

Like Rushdie, Chandra Mohanty grapples with the difficulty and importance of home for immigrant and migrant bodies. Questions of nation(ality) and belonging in terms of fragmented Asian identities, politics and geographies complicate *home*. She argues for a home “not as a comfortable, stable, inherited and familiar space, but instead as a an imaginative, politically charged space where the familiarity and sense of affection and commitment lay in shared collective analysis of social injustice, as well as a vision of radical transformation” (128). This is where my life gets messy.

I imagine myself with two opposing choices. My options, as an Asian-/American-/feminist become: 1) return to a nationalist discourse in order to achieve a state of purified, authentic Asian identity; or 2) turn away from my cultures of origin and acknowledge those cultures only insofar as they remain dormant and unthreatening to the project of western liberation for certain marginalized and oppressed bodies. Thus, I reduce complicated, difficult ideas of being to the size of a thimble, to a question of loyalty between my Asian-/American history and my American-/feminist future, between my familial background and the issues that have become foregrounded for me during college, between the home from which I originate and the new home to which I wish to belong.

Where is home?

...

The Scholars

We were like a cult—a hodgepodge of queer bodies gravitating toward a single energy force in the philosophy department. I thought of us as the lost children; some with broken homes, others with broken hearts, but what was most familiar to us all was an unkind academia. We had been shut down in conversations, called crazy women, angry people of color, illogical feminists, and products of a nihilistic, relativist postmodern generation. We were mostly illegitimized—until she found us. She always had a knack for knowing exactly what people needed, not only as students, but as people trying to get along.

I became one of the scholars after surviving African American Philosophy. The first time I saw Dr. V, her TA played jazzy riffs that floated across the tabletops as she walked through the

doors. The entrance had the desired effect: subtle, solid, cool. The space she created was challenging. Students who had often found themselves silenced and marginalized in classrooms were given a space to speak. It was the most grueling course of my academic career.

Throughout the semester, I struggled with feelings of anxiety and inadequacy and jubilation—having never been intellectually pushed so far, so fast. I had to learn to speak while being taught important lessons in listening. In that classroom, we queered traditional power dynamics as we explored the intersections of critical race theory, gender studies and postcolonial theory. It was difficult work. But I felt like I was getting closer to the kind of conversations I wanted to have, closer the kind of feminist I wanted to be.

To my utter shock, my awkward ass was accepted into their group. I didn't know how it had happened, but I was happy just to be liked by people way cooler than me. I had been warped to fourteen again and the popular kids wanted *me* to sit at *their* lunch table. In retrospect, we accepted each other because Dr. V chose us, accepted us. I developed deep and personal relationships with the scholars because of our shared love for social justice and our fierce loyalty to Dr. V and all that she represented to us. This eclectic group of misfit personalities rallied around one body. Because of her, we were scholars. Because of her, we created an activist community that was ready to organize and radicalize.

This feeling of home wasn't meant to last long for any of us. When Dr. V was stopped by campus police for "driving while black and queer" and had her heart medication confiscated, everything changed. In threatening Dr. V and making it difficult for her to return to campus, the campus police threatened our gravitational force. She couldn't be there to support us anymore. We had to be there to support her.

Organizing with the scholars to protest Dr. V's treatment by the campus police was my first experience with feminist coalition building. We had many ideas, many failures, and many successes. What I found most difficult was negotiating my obligations to my family with my obligations to our activist work. My time was usually spent either in school or at work with my family. I couldn't stay for the late assemblies. I couldn't drop everything and attend emergency meetings. I couldn't make every appearance necessary to prove that I was truly committed to the cause, that I truly loved social justice and Dr. V and the scholars.

To some of them, I was a sad kid—oppressed by the institution of family, unable to liberate myself because of my Asian sensibilities. The worst part was that I let them believe it. I fueled it, even. It was easier that way. They could accept that vision of me. I didn't want them to question my authenticity or my loyalty to the cause. At the same time, I couldn't explain to them why I remained in a space that caused me pain and frustration.

You could move out. We're here for you.

If you ever need a couch to crash on. . .

We gotchu, girl.

I didn't know how to tell them that, despite my desire to live out a romanticized notion of a *liberated* life, I couldn't just sever myself from my family. I could no sooner sever my head from my body. So, I did the only thing I thought I could do in such a position: I lied, to everyone. I lied to the scholars about wanting to leave my family in order to cement my commitment to an alternative, radical lifestyle. I lied to my family about my whereabouts when attending rallies or talks or meetings. I lied to myself that this was the only way to keep it all together.

...

“What’d you do today?” It didn’t sound like a question. I had gone to the rally we organized on campus to stop police harassment. We had worked on it for weeks. I wasn’t, however, going to tell my dad.

“Study group.” I hated how easily the lie came out.

“You not only went to the protest, you were speaking at it too.”

“Who told you that?” I didn’t know how he knew, but this did not bode well.

He declined answering my question. Instead, he said, “Your Dada spoke at protests too, you know.”

“Yeah?” I was hopeful. Maybe I’d get away with it this time.

“Then the British burned down our house and took all his land.”

Nope.

...

Feminist Divided-Consciousness

As previously noted, there is no authentic body—somehow unaffected and “natural.” Our bodies are pressed into shape by culture, politics and history. We view ourselves through the lens and lines of counter-hegemony. For people of color and decolonizing bodies, consciousness of our bodies is not a singular phenomenon. Frantz Fanon contends that colonized peoples grapple with a double consciousness. An Algerian born, French educated colonial subject, Fanon argued against home as the imperial motherland.

In his time at Lyon, Fanon wrote about intense feelings of alienation as a black man educated in a French system. Because of his colonial upbringing he was French, but as a black man, he was never *quite* French. Thus, viewing himself through the lens of the colonizer—the

colonial subject experiences double-consciousness; he sees the machinations of society through the eyes of white culture as well as through the alienating placelessness of blackness in the empire. This double-consciousness demonstrates that a return to the authentic is impossible, since there is no authentic self. As an Asian-/American, I am Asian, but not *quite* Asian; and American, but not *quite* American.

Black Skin, White Mask is situated within the experiences of a black, male body. Trinh Minh-ha writes about a double consciousness experienced by “Third World” women of color. She describes the phenomenon as “the triple bind”—for her idea of consciousness includes race and gender. Positing that women of color are challenged as historical subjects and authentic bodies—Minh-ha stresses the felt experience of having to make a forced choice, to be *either* a writer of color (genderless) *or* a woman writer (raceless) *or* a woman of color (placeless). I too struggle with a feminist divided-consciousness between the feminist language in which I articulate my ideas and my life as an Asian-/American.

The language of American feminism benefits from homogenizing diverse experiences and dismissing tension found in difference in worlds that do not capture such neat ideology. Because I choose to live and expand within the tension and conflict found in difference rather than wash over the mess with thick stokes of sameness, I am forced to grapple with issues of intersectionality. I am acutely aware of the ways in which we, as American feminists, have failed at analyzing gender-oppression in terms of race and class (and other variables). I become an alienated presence within feminist spaces, because although I’ve been educated within the discourse, I do not belong. As an Asian-/American-/Feminist, I am a feminist, but not *quite* a feminist.

Along with bracketing issues of race, gender, and class within separate social justice communities and the conflicts in nationhood experienced by hyphenated-/American bodies, (neo)liberal feminism—the feminism with shiny straight backs that line the walls of polished bookstores— stereotypes the roles that Asian women play in private and public spaces¹¹. (Neo)Liberal feminism ideologically shapes the spaces of mainstream American feminism—upholding the ideals of individualism, linear progress, capitalism, and (alleged) colorblindness. In these ideologically charged spaces, Asian women are imagined as: exotic concubines who exist solely for the pleasure of western men, submissive wives and daughters without independent identities, tiger mothers who stifle their children’s independence, backwards women in need of western assistance, domestic workers who support western accumulation of capital, and model minorities who assimilate to white norms.

The other scholars I befriend come from histories of marginalization that are distinctly different than my own. I do not experience marginalization as, for example, a black lesbian Marxist or a mixed-race transgender anarchist or a white anti-racist socialist. We share in the experience of institutionalized oppression and microaggressions as issues of race, gender, class and sexuality overlap. However, we arrive through different embodiments and from different places. My scholar-friends do not understand what it means to *me* to belong to an Asian-/American, immigrant family. The stories my father would tell me as a child allowed me to experience agency as an empowered-female body—at a cost. The people of his village had been othered and victimized—assumed weak and in need of rescuing. In his stories, the villagers

¹¹ For a more in-depth discussion of the roles Asian women play in private and public spaces, see Mitsuye Yamada (*Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism* and *Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster*) and Sayantani DasGupta and Shamita Das DasGupta (*Women in Exile*)

played the role of victim and I of hero. In contrast, the scholars were committed to stories where *I* was the victim. Suddenly, I needed to be rescued from my family to better align myself with liberation, empowerment and progress.

The assumption that I needed to better align myself with western ideals of liberation, empowerment and progress suggests I need to escape the vertical movement of cultural formation. Vertical development of culture occurs when culture develops through passing it from generation to generation. This contrasts to linear movements of culture as formed through intragenerational dialogues and practices, such as I practice with the scholars. Having to answer to the authority of my parents as an adult-woman is disturbing for many of the scholars. They believe it plays into the trope of the submissive daughter without an independent identity and it becomes their responsibility, as friends who care for my well-being, to save me.

Often times, I allow and enable these stories to go unchecked because I feel that my lived experiences are far too complicated to unpack. For example, when I go to work at the restaurant instead of participating in an event, this is seen as a coerced decision motivated by obligation and guilt. In all honesty, there is a layer of guilt—guilt at being unable to satisfy both my family and the scholars. However, my decisions are also motivated by a desire to sustain the well-being of my family—coerced only insofar as we operate within an economic system that demands my trade of labor for capital. Furthermore, the scholars and I rarely recognize how our relationships with each other shape the cultural spaces that we inhabit. As we practice out-empowering those we believe to be *less* liberated or enlightened than us, we reproduce the dominant (oppressive) discourse.

Lisa Lowe argues that a moment in cultural history is defined by *both* linear and vertical situations. Cultural identity is formed through generational, gendered and intragenerational relationships. I remember, quite vividly, going to a Desi party with my dad a year ago. I was, as per usual, awkward and uncomfortable—not knowing what to say or what to do or how to act. My complexion was too light, I did not speak the language, and my facial features were too *oriental* to overlook: I did not belong. I found myself navigating around the generational differences between myself and elders of the community as well as the different behaviors expected from gendered bodies in that space. Even more interestingly, I also had to contend with a competition in cultural proficiency with the girls within my age group.

American feminism is willing to recognize generational conflicts between Asian daughters and their parents (where the father acts as authoritarian and the mother as silent, powerless bystander). However, American feminism is unwilling to recognize intragenerational conflicts that arrive through complex desires to find home. The pervasive trope that reduces and defines Asian families and culture to the American public is the generational conflict between immigrant parents and their children. In this narrative, it is the immigrant parents who maintain cultural history, language, traditions and the “pre-modern” sentiments of the orient. Their children wish to live a liberated lifestyle which manifests in assimilationism to mainstream culture.

The trope of the oppressive family situates Asian children as victims to their parents’ oligarchy. Asian daughters must overcome the patriarchy of their fathers and the old ways of their mothers; while Asian sons must earn respect in the household and create an identity for themselves outside of their fathers’ image. This positions Asian children in the dilemma I

described earlier—of having to choose a return to nationalism or assimilation into American culture. Though it may be true that some Asian families operate under a patriarchy that their daughters attempt to resist and overcome, this is not true of all families. Some Asian families come from a cultural history of matriarchy. Others are egalitarian. Asian families are as heterogeneous as Asians and are not meant to fit within the framework of an American nuclear family.

In my case, my familial home is a site of tension and growth. Though my family may be apprehensive about my *politics*, they have never rejected *me*. I may be uncertain of their *politics*, but I have never rejected *them*. I do not desire to liberate myself from my family connections, culture, or traditions in order to solidify my commitment to my feminist values. It is important to note that tension is not always negative—tension may offer potential for change and growth. My intellectual travels have brought me to feminist theory and practice, therefore, my body has been politicized toward a feminist orientation. I begin to challenge and engage my family in entirely new ways as I continue to be transformed.

Where is home?

...

Mì khey h̄i khır dũ reā toēk

She only starts her long winded lectures when she's locked down all possible escape hatches. Like when we're driving on the highway or about to watch a movie or in the bathroom of a rest area far, far away from home. My mom is the stoic type, but when she wants to say something, damn straight you're going to hear it.

Never let them look us down.

She says this to us when we're out of line. The words bounce around the walls until our arms and legs are bound up nice and neat, shaping our shoulders to be strong and delicate. When we were younger and fought over things like toys and gumballs, dad would give *the look* and deadly nostril flare as her lead in. Back then, *never let them look us down* was simple. It meant sit your ass down and be quiet or don't color on the walls or don't rub Vicks into your sister's diaper. It only began to have complex associations when I started piecing together cultural rituals and practices to make up some kind of Asian-/American identity. In middle school, I wanted to be fixed. I wanted to be a noun so big I could fill the room with the kind of history and politics of my arrival that would let people know my experiences were real.

Never let them look us down started sounding strange and I couldn't shake it. I grew up in the post 9/11 era as a Thai-/Bengali-/Muslim-/American, not very cognizant of being cut apart by slashes and sewn together with hyphens. This meant that my cultural formations and sociopolitical situation was shaped through religious ritual, cultural practice and resistance. By disidentifying with Christianity and typical Americanness—especially in my predominantly white, evangelical high school—I was able to form a connection to certain communities and begin to have a vague understanding of how counterhegemony works. Before I even knew the word feminism, I learned about pragmatism and resistance.

...

I had to tell her. I knew it. We were in the kitchen. It was a small space that smelled like garlic and hot spices. She was chopping vegetables. I was standing around awkwardly not knowing if I wanted her to notice me or not.

“Something happened at school today.” I got a nod to show she was listening.

“Some girls pulled down my scarf.”

Ailiye na?! (What!?)

I didn’t want to look at her. I could only imagine how red she was getting and I didn’t want this to be a big deal. I had contemplated not telling her, but the consequences of holding back the truth would probably be a lot worse. “We were all standing in line in class and they pulled down my scarf and started laughing. They called me a murderer.”

Those motherfuckers! Who? Which class? Tell me right now. She pointed the knife uncomfortably close to the space above my left ear.

“I don’t want to make a big deal out of it. It already happened.”

No. You need to learn to stand up and fight. Look at you, you’re crying. Never let them look us down, understand?

I didn’t. Right then, I didn’t want to fight. I wanted her to hug me and tell me that kids are mean but I’m nice and I wasn’t a bad person. I was eleven and scared. All I could think was that she didn’t understand how difficult middle school was for me in the first place. I was odd. We just got back from living in Bangladesh for three years. I was still trying to be American enough to make some friends. That summer I had started wearing hijab because something in my bones told me I needed to—and then 9/11 happened. That’s when the curious looks turned to into suspicious ones. That’s when I, who could easily be dismissed and remain invisible in my frumpiness, had been made the center of conversation. I had to learn to defend myself. Fast. Suddenly, *never let them look us down* didn’t mean *behave yourself*. It meant fight for yourself; it meant fight for *us*, your family, your religion, your culture and your community. It meant

saying “no disrespect, but: fuck you,” to people who said there was something wrong with the way we dress and act and live, the way we form relationships and community, the way we practice our rituals and make our myths. My mom encouraged me to queer shit up long before any feminist text would.

Chapter Five: To Be a Body that Travels

“If you're in a coalition and you're comfortable, you know it's not a broad enough coalition”

-Bernice Johnson Reagon

Make Coalitions, Not War

I let the fabric sit on my lap for a moment. I fold it into a perfect triangle—corner to corner as I've done so many times in the past. My fingers work, knowing exactly what to do. It's too early in the morning to have much conversation, so we all pile into my car. My dad plays *Al-Quran* through the speakers as my sister falls asleep on my shoulder. I begin to feel anxious. Almost every Sunday it's the same routine and you'd expect that I'd be used to it by now. But I'm not. My muscles contract, my throat gets dry, I'm walking through the same moral dilemmas I had four years ago. I can't look in the mirror. I can't confront the girl who will stare back at me as though she lived in an entirely different body. I see the sad smiles on my parents' faces. They must have loved that girl too.

My family and I have been going to Project Downtown together for over a year now. It's an organization (started by Muslim activists associated with Food Not Bombs) that provides food and hygiene bags for the men's homeless coalition in downtown Orlando. I started volunteering after going with a friend one Sunday. When I told my parents about it they said they wanted to join too—to give back some of the blessings we've received. Part of me knew it was because they were happy I was spending time at the Masjid again, but I didn't care. People go hungry in the Orlando community. That kind of violence stains my hands brighter than the discomfort I may feel at my hypocrisy over performing musliminah. I'm practicing deradicalizing to

radicalize the space¹²—a space where we’re piecing together people from varying interests groups, from the umma to the activists, to form some kind of coalition.

I look at how the brothers and sisters are divided—not only during the prayer or in the debriefing circle, but also in putting together take-away lunches and hygiene bags and in organizing in general. I don’t complain. This works for us here. People are helping and loving others while still allowing the tenets of their faith to remain intact. We have two leaders: Sister J and Brother M. They work separately, but together. Both have an equal amount of power and say in how the organization functions. Sometimes the “big tent” works (Katz 580).

I play it straight. I try to keep as apolitical as possible—not because the volunteers are intolerant, but because I love this space and I love what we do in it. I believe that it is important work for the community. It doesn’t blind me, however, to the problems we encounter. The women tense up at the sight of poor, black bodies lined up the street. Their actions are shaped by the myth of the black criminal—by the fear of black male bodies as aggressive, violent, and malicious.¹³ I see how we’re distracted by our class privileges, how clean fingernails and pressed pants symbolize a dignified man. After we’ve finished distributing the food, we sit in a large circle and discuss the events of the day. We attempt to work through our problems, to talk about what we felt was successful, what we could do differently next time. I ask *why* some of our sisters seem afraid (and even disgusted) by the men we are trying to help.

I didn’t really notice that, not until you mentioned it, anyway.

Yeah, I think maybe the media portrayal of the homeless and black men scared me.

¹² De-radicalization is a reoccurring theme in global feminist theory and practice. Though the term itself is not coined by Mohanty, she essentially describes and elaborates on this concept in *Decolonizing Feminism*.

¹³ For further reading on the “myth of the black criminal” see Patricia Williams’s *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (especially chapter two).

I'm not racist, but I feel that way too—a little on edge.

What can we do to fix this?

It isn't a circle of blame. It is a circle of care and compassion and truth. We learn a lot of painful truths. Although I find myself less of a practicing Muslim these days, I learn lessons from these Muslim women—lessons on honesty, patience, and coalition building. I also learn lessons from observing the struggles of Muslim women in other parts of the globe.

Lessons from the Blue Bra Girl

They call her the blue bra girl—

Catchy as a jingle for pop rocks and cereal boxes,

The symbol of revolution.

Electric blue cuts across the landscape,

Her brown torso and sides exposed.

These parts of her body travel

Across the world onto my computer screen.

I think I might have known her,

Passing in a dream—

Where she became so small

She had to crawl between my ear and the pillow

To tell me a story.

The pundits have their way with her

And she endures a different kind of beating this time.
Speculations and rationalizations coated in assumptions
Of what she was willing to die for.
She has no name,
No face,
No history to stand behind.
Just a country of savages, we say to ourselves.
She was birthed in the revolution
in electric blue and blood.

What if she was someone we knew
So well we could lean over and kiss her?
Masked vigilante,
In the masjid or playground or grocery store?
Maybe Aqsa or Mariam or Nancy?
Draped in a black polyester blend
Niqab, eyes piercing at us—
Would they still call her the revolution?

During the Egyptian protests in December of 2011, the media went into an indulgent frenzy. The images of Egyptian officers brutally and violently beating protesting citizens were many, but none captivated the world quite like the image of the blue bra girl. Here was a woman

being stripped of her niqab and being stomped on by a group of armed men. Journalists, pundits and bloggers took this as affirmation of a terrifying, distant Middle East, where women were oppressed by barbaric Islamic sharia and government policies. Many of the American journalists showered their readers with praise of democracy and the accomplishments of the women's movement, while simultaneously denouncing the need for further feminist movements in the United States.

Shortly thereafter, *The New York Times* published an article by David Kirkpatrick titled "Egyptian Women Find Power Still Hinges on Men." This article exemplifies a body fixed within its own definitions of democracy and liberation. The article talks about a young Egyptian woman, Samira Ibrahim, who was stripped down and subjected to a "virginity test" in front of soldiers. Her father was familiar with the electrical prod marks on her body, having also been detained and tortured himself years earlier, and vowed to file a court case against the government. Rather than examining how Ibrahim and her father reconfigure their political and home spaces to combat systemic oppression, Kirkpatrick expresses contempt that she needs her father's support. There are many western assumptions at play here. Kirkpatrick plays with the idea of patriarchal domination in family spaces and contends that Egyptian women will remain oppressed until their movement no longer relies on male participation. He fails to recognize the complex and nuanced political power of familial solidarity among the colonized, because his western, white male privilege allows him to carry his assumptions to every corner of the world unchallenged.

Articles such as the one found in the *New York Times* circulated around the internet, traveling to various corners of the world and were read by a variety of peoples. The articles

written by western educated journalists were entitled to move seamlessly across transnational borders without ever having to feel out of place. These journalists assumed that their audience held the same definition of rights, liberty, equality, empowerment and freedom. The privilege of these assumptions comes from moving through the world as what Inderpal Grewal terms the “global body”—a privilege presupposed by the superiority of one’s culture over all others.

The global subject functions as a citizen of the world that travels and can feel “at home” anywhere. The global (neo-liberal) body moves through spaces under the assumption that it can travel anywhere unchanged. Through travel, the global body exerts its agency while maintaining its western “superiority.” I have been—or tried to be—this body.

When I was younger, I traveled the world as a body unchanged by the knowledge and worlds around me. My American passport legitimized my traveler-status and that was enough to move me across borders. Returning from the U.S. to Bangladesh and Thailand at eighteen, I moved through those spaces as a global body. During my senior year of high school I was exposed to elementary Marxism and feminist theory—coupled with the limited knowledge gained from AP macro-economics and American history, I thought myself quite educated. I was an empowered, liberated woman and was ready to share my glorious ideas of freedom with my woefully oppressed female cousins. Every observation and suggestion I would make was dripping with ignorance and arrogance. *Let me show you how we do it back home.*

I carried my fixed definitions of rights, equality, liberty, and freedom everywhere I went, marginalizing the kinds of empowerment and liberation my cousins sought. Despite being *awfully American*, as they would say, my cousins still accommodated me. On the way to the market where I bought *exotic* trinkets to give to all my friends back home, we passed by several

tall buildings that looked like run-down apartments. Clouds of smoke seeped through the windows as a humming sound escaped the building. It turned out that what I thought were apartments were actually sweat shops and the workers inside (mostly women) were inhaling toxic fumes as they sew together clothing. Horrified, I turned to my cousins and condemned such a despicable place. I accused them of complacently allowing their people to suffer, arguing that I would never stand for such acute injustice in my country. I suggested that they protest, to stand with the proletariat and revolutionize their worlds.

Those clothes go back to your country. What do you want my people to do, then?

...

I was nine when we settled down in a flat in a swanky part of Chittagong. Among our staff was a little boy named Jamal, not more than a year older than I—he was a trouble-maker, the cook said. He would accidentally break plates and glasses, misplace my school books and constantly tugged on my pig tails. If it were possible to have a nemesis as a nine year old, Jamal was mine. Every weekend, I would make him collect mud from the riverbank, picking out worms and bugs so that I could make little cups and spoons. One day I made the perfect spoon and commanded that he put it on the roof to dry. When he went to retrieve my creations, he threw them off the roof laughing.

I would not stop crying—hideous, self-gratifying tears. The cook came to check up on us and, after seeing all of the commotion I was making, beat the boy senseless. The moment the cook's hand struck Jamal, I knew something horrible was happening—something I could not stop but for which I was responsible. What a price for a little spoon. When Jamal finally came to,

he ran away. The next day, his father brought him back. He spoke to my dad while Jamal sat on my swing set, glaring at me. I lowered my gaze. I was ashamed. I could not understand why he stayed with us or how his father could let Jamal stay in a place where he was unsafe from a beating for upsetting the whims of a spoiled little girl. *It's not that simple*, my dad would tell me. I found out that Jamal's father could not afford to keep him at home, having recently been widowed and left with four other children to feed. His wife was killed in a factory accident; in a factory that made American jeans. *If we turn him away, what will he do then?*

It was not until some years later that I was able to meaningfully place these memories and emotions. In retrospect, I realized that I was partly responsible for the death of Jamal's mother, because I own a pair of the jeans her hands may have made. I am responsible for the horrible working conditions of the factory women, because I am a beneficiary of a state that forces them into such working environments to survive. My cousins and Jamal taught me the most important lesson I needed to learn. In order to address the suffering of others, I need to grapple with my responsibility and my preconceived notions of the *other*. To address the suffering experienced by another woman, another child, I cannot imagine *me* walking in their shoes; I must instead imagine *them* walking in their *own* shoes. This is true whether the other is kin, friend or stranger.

In contrast to the global body, Grewal describes two other kinds of subject-bodies: national and hyphenated subjects. The national subject configures its identity in synchronization with borders, states and local communities. National subjects are fixed bodies anchored to one's country. They are citizens that receive the benefits of that country, but when they travel elsewhere, their body becomes immediately recognizable as *other*. The place where national

bodies find home and belonging is their country of origin because they conform to normative practices within their cultural context. In the national body's place of home, they act as the dominator culture and force otherness onto bodies from different classes, genders and nations.

My father, for example, has an enormous amount of cultural capital in his native country of Bangladesh. He has both male privilege and class privilege— which allowed him, as a child, to escape domestic chores and manual labor, unlike his sisters (who were taught to take care of the household) and the villagers his parents employed. Because my grandfather was an active voice in the Bengali revolution, his home was burnt down and his properties were taken away from him. However, Bengalis remained committed to the psychological baggage of bourgeois culture. So, despite no longer having material wealth, the family name maintained a command for respect. As my father moved across geopolitical spaces to inhabit the United States, however, he could not carry his cultural capital with him as a global body does. Within the U.S., my father is the other: a poor, working immigrant, now responsible for domestic and manual labor.

In contrast to both the global subject and the national subject, the hyphenated subject is a postcolonial body that combines what Grewal describes as “local” and “cosmopolitan” bodies. Cosmopolitan bodies, similar to global bodies, are able to move through geopolitical spaces and feel “at home” anywhere. Cosmopolitan bodies also exist within a discourse of human rights, liberties and consumption of goods and services. However, unlike global bodies who are exclusively white or European, cosmopolitan bodies can be postcolonial subjects. Local bodies are tied to local communities within nations. As a combination of the cosmopolitan and the local, hyphenated subjects are bodies that travel the world while maintaining the history of their

local/national communities and arrivals. Because hyphenated subjects embody multiple imagined communities, they cannot entirely feel at home anywhere.

As the U.S. born child of immigrants, I have come into being as a hyphenated subject—you were born in America, but we raised you Asian. I am tied to my parents' communities of origin and their cultural and religious traditions, as well as to the communities that I currently inhabit in an American city, an American university and an American women's studies program. As an Asian-/American-/feminist, I find myself traveling between multiple imagined communities: my familial home and the family business, my activist work at Project Downtown, my community of scholar-friends, my women's studies classrooms, and larger academic communities. The strain I experience in my attempts to belong within each of these spaces derives from the persisting desire to feel "at home" everywhere (as the global body does) combined with the notion that "home" is a place that is always safe and comfortable. This is a notion that pervades American feminism, shaped as it is by fantasies of the global body.

...

Feminist Coalitions and Other Such Stories

There is a pervasive assumption in many (neo)liberal feminist circles that coalitions are (or ought to be) safe and comfortable spaces. Within women's studies circles especially, coalitions are ideally defined as a group of people committed to dismantling gender oppression and liberating the female body from the patriarchy—all while harmoniously working under the

banner of universal Womanhood¹⁴. This Womanhood transcends all boundaries, from the geographic to the psychic. She rises above the differences in nation, race, sexuality, and class. She can travel the world unchanged with unchallenged assumptions on what it means to be a Woman.

The assumptions are that feminist bodies will gather around the mantle of Womanhood, working together toward universally recognized goals of equality, empowerment and individual liberation. *This* exemplifies Said's "airy European fantasy" (Said 8)—a fantasy that overlooks how *some* bodies find safety and solidarity in feminist spaces while *other* bodies experience alienation and violence. More specifically, it overlooks how the safety of white bodies hinges on the marginalization and silence of people of color. This feminist fantasy asks us to forsake all other fractured parts of our identities and overlook the shortcomings of a movement that is willfully colorblind and disregards the impacts of disparate economic (and other) inequalities.

Feminist coalitions are structured around the happiness paradigm—the idea that regardless of how personal, messy, complicated, or difficult the work of the coalition may be, everyone will somehow leave happy; that happiness is the desired outcome. Who is capable of reaching toward this happiness? For whom is this happiness designed? Those who disrupt the happiness paradigm—either willfully or unintentionally—are held responsible for making the space uncomfortable. *You broke it*. Happiness is not designed for those of us who refuse to participate properly or commit to keeping the happiness paradigm intact. When my fat-Muslim-brown body enters into a women's studies classroom, I shift the dynamics of that classroom

¹⁴ Many womanist scholars, black feminists, and global feminists have critiqued the notion of universal Womanhood. To list a few references: bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, and Bernice Johnson Reagon.

space from *safe* to *unsafe*. My presence reveals the unconscious assumptions of whiteness in feminist theory for many students who would deny that the skin we inhabit (and that inhabits us) carries us from place to place.

The students' white privileges allow their assumptions to remain invisible. However, when bodies disrupt the narratives of universal Womanhood, whiteness and heteronormativity within feminist spaces, those disruptive bodies are thought to derail the mission of the coalition. We are contextualized and historicized bodies—yet bodies that play with this idea of inscription¹⁵ are undesired. We pay lip service to the dangers of privilege, but in a world permeated by American feminism, none of us can fully escape falling back into those stories—no matter how untrue to our experiences they may be. It is as though we are coated in thick layers of mud where intense years of scrubbing leave our skins raw. But there are still places we missed where the mud clings on. The ideas of universal Womanhood and solidarity have coated our skin so deeply and for so long, that it becomes a necessary, daily, conscientious struggle to un-learn¹⁶ them.

I think of Project Downtown as part of my feminist activism, though I am cognizant that other members of the community and volunteers may not share in my perspective. In this particular coalition space, I do not engage with gender issues like I would in women and gender studies spaces. Because I am building coalition with a religious organization, stories of gender are told through an Islamic narrative. In this space, we can have intense, honest dialogue on issues of race and class. However, there's an unspoken rule that in order to preserve some level

¹⁵ See Judith Butler's *Subversive Bodily Acts* for a refined discussion on gender inscription.

¹⁶ I borrow bell hook's term "un-learn" which appears (and is discussed in length) in *Teaching to Transgress*—especially chapters 2, 8 and 12.

of comfort for everyone involved, I must play my gendered role as *good Muslim girl*. When my American-/Feminist body enters into the Project Downtown space, I shift the dynamics of that coalition from *comfortable* to *uncomfortable*.

In “Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects),” Sara Ahmed argues that feminists experience alienation from happiness. She states: “When we feel happiness in proximity to the right objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. You become alienated—out of line with an affective community—when you do not experience happiness in the right things” (“Feminist Killjoys” 1). Ahmed is speaking about feminist alienation from non-feminist spaces. Her analysis of feminist alienation speaks to the anxiety and tension I sometimes feel when living and working among those I love, but whom I may disagree with politically. As a feminist, I cannot align myself in the right ways toward those objects my parents believe to be the right ones: I no longer wear the hijab; I do not wish to be married; I am not studying to be a doctor; I do not speak softly. The anxiety I sometimes feel when joining my family at Project Downtown is contagious. I can see from the sad smiles on my parents’ faces as they reflect back at me my own sadness in the backseat of the car, that I am a killjoy.

This alienation from an affective community may also occur, however, *within* feminist communities themselves. As feminists, we share unhappiness functioning within narratives of patriarchal domination, oppression, and exploitation. However, we arrive at feminism with different cultural and personal histories; we tell different stories, and we love in many different ways; some walk in with more privileges than others. What happens to feminists who are not aligned to the right objects *within* feminist communities, who do not experience happiness in the right *feminist* things? What happens to feminists, like myself, who are unable or unwilling to

align ourselves with the notions of universal Womanhood that permeate feminist communities? We are *willful subjects*—subjects who “[refuse] to look away from what has already been looked over” (6). This refusal to look away disrupts the safety and comfort of a coalition space. It reveals the ways in which multiple matrices and multiple stories graze uncomfortably against each other within our shared space.

Why do I remain in spaces that cause discomfort and emotional pain? Why do I continue participating in Project Downtown when it is an unsafe space for my feminist politics? Why do I continue engaging with feminist theory and progressive communities that often exclude the stories of poor people of color, of kinship, and of “third world” brown bodies?

We are building feminism

With bricks red as a fresh wound—

Baked clay caked on hands

To hide the kind of secrets our

Palms tell about us when we look hard enough.

Each one of us carefully shapes a brick,

Lovingly puts it in place to tell our story,

To make a home

So everyone can have a room of our own

To do the kind of work we need to,

To create the kind of world we want to.

But our work is in building
A building that keeps building—
Because every brick we lay gets broken,
Just like a jaw in a bar fight,
Like your grandmother's porcelain tea set
Introducing itself to your linoleum tiles.

Demolition leads to (re)creation—
We are building feminism.

This is Where the Sidewalk Begins

In the past, I have struggled between the discourses of nativism and assimilationism. Working within a nativist paradigm, I have—in José Muñoz's terms, counteridentified with (rejected, defined myself in opposition to) organizations and communities that do not accept my "Asian-ness." I have tried to make that journey of (re)turn to my place of origin, to a place I might have belonged once.

Because non-inclusive spaces refused to carve out a place for my stories as an Asian-American, I rejected those communities. In high school, for example, I counteridentified with the predominantly white, evangelical culture that permeated my school by forcing myself to perform as "Asian" and a "good Muslim girl". Pointedly, I othered myself, ensuring my every reaction was seen as dissent. *If you're going to alienate me, I'm going to alienate you.* However, counteridentifying caused tremendous pain for both myself and others. I was quick to lash out,

quick to declare myself better than the rest of *them* in order to mask how vulnerable and powerless I felt. Furthermore, I could not fit comfortably within the bracketed spaces allotted to being “Asian” and a “good Muslim girl.” I played a role that did not satisfy my psychological or psychic needs, a role shaped by resentment over being marginalized.

My attempts to identify with—to assimilate or conform to dominant American norms—were also failures. Trying to bracket my Asian-ness and “get over” the problematic nature of non-inclusive organizations and communities was difficult. When I met the scholars, I found a community that rejected hegemonic culture. I found friends who could relate to the experience of being marginalized and othered by popular demand. We nursed our wounds together and became stronger. Yet, as welcoming and loving as they were toward me, I could never truly belong here either. I could not fit comfortably within the bracketed spaces allotted to being a scholar. I could identify with the scholars (become an American activist/scholar) only insofar as I was willing to counteridentify with my family; and this was an assimilationist demand that I could not meet.

Through these and many other painful lessons, I have come to understand that nativism and assimilationism, counteridentification and identification, are not my only options. From postcolonial feminists such as Mohanty, I have learned that “third world” feminist activists are radically transforming their political landscapes by de-radicalizing. Like these women, I might use the limited power and resources I have to infiltrate communities, organizations, and institutions and change policies and attitudes from within. In de-radicalizing, one can play her designated role in order to get a foot in the door. Instead of riding on the back of a Bengali tiger to rescue other women, I might inhabit a Trojan horse alongside those other feminist warriors, waiting to strike at the right moments.

De-radicalizing in order to radicalize had proven itself to be quite difficult—I have failed at it on numerous occasions. I participated as a big sister in the Young Women and Leadership Program (YWLP) for a semester. YWLP is an organization aimed at teaching middle school girls concepts of autonomy, competence, and leadership. It is a feminist organization that resists branding itself as feminist in order to do feminist work with conservative school districts. I loved working with the girls and believed in the organization’s mission, but I was not ready to survive in the YWLP coalition. I had such high expectations for the organization that when I encountered racism, classism and sexism (mirrors of our worlds) from members of the community, I was unprepared. It was a level of distress that I could not handle. So, I walked away. YWLP taught me an important lesson in de-radicalization. It is not always going to be comfortable inside a Trojan horse.

A strategy related to Mohanty’s “de-radicalization,” is what José Muñoz calls “disidentification.” Muñoz argues that disidentification is not an apolitical middle ground between counteridentification and identification. For Muñoz, “disidentification is a strategy that resists power as being a fixed discourse...[and] negotiates strategies of resistance with the flux of discourse and power” (19). By disidentifying, I can use tools, like irony, to make visible that which is invisible. It is important to make a clear distinction between the public majority and that of the individual that disidentifies (the “minority subject”). As Muñoz contends, I believe that disidentifying is an act of survival, reclaiming agency and resistance. As I attempt to engage the merging spheres of my feminist activist community with my familial home, I hope to intensify resistance and difference. When encountering racism and classism and sexism within well-meaning organizations, I can push at the invisible barriers of comfort and safety; including

stories of critical race, class struggles and gendered spaces from a personal history that demonstrates how these tensions and conflicts are all connected.

By de-radicalizing and disidentifying, I allow myself to exist in a liveable space of tension. Once we relinquish the idea of home and coalition as safe and comfortable spaces, we can begin to conceptualize our actions in those spaces in different ways. Bernice Johnson Reagon critiques white feminists' conceptualization of coalition spaces as "home" (*Coalition Politics: Turning the Century*). She argues that there's a difference between political coalitions and home spaces, where the challenge becomes conceptualizing community differently. I agree with Reagon that coalitions are filled with tension and conflict and there is a need to theorize about political community differently.

However, we also need to reconceptualize home. The romanticized vision of home as a fixed place of comfort denies the reality of lived tensions I experience in my home spaces. As Mohanty defines home, it is "not . . . a comfortable, stable, inherited and familiar space, but instead . . . an imaginative, politically charged space where the familiarity and sense of affection and commitment [lies] in shared collective analysis of social injustice, as well as a vision of radical transformation" (42). My political coalitions are not separate from my home—I live within them, I become within them. Nor is my familial home distinct from a coalition. Like a coalition, we have common goals: we are dedicated to the economic, cultural and psychological survival of our familial community as well as our community in a larger context. We support one another and share political strategies: my father gave me stories of my female-empowerment while my mother encouraged me to fight injustice and oppression. And, yet, we experience tension as our identities come into conflict. As first-generation and second-generation

immigrants, we have different desires and different visions for what a better world would look like. For my parents, it looks like socioeconomic stability. *When you aren't worried about where your food comes from, you can help other people*, they say. As for me, I am still working through my vision.

Both the familial and feminist homes I have inherited are places of my becoming. Both of these sites are uncomfortable and unstable, but they are also imaginative and politically charged. Together, they enable me to invent new stories and to re-visit old stories from a new angle. As Cordova reminds me, my stories open up a window upon myself and my world and I am “recreated—over and over again—by each new experience.” The stories we tell (both those we inherit and those we invent for ourselves) shape the world we inhabit and determine how we will move through the hegemonic matrix.

Asian bodies have racially specific stories that determine how they move through American spaces. Feminist bodies have gender specific stories that determine how they move through patriarchal spaces. For the Asian-/American-/feminist body, our stories are more complicated. The desire for unconditional belonging and tension-free homes distracts us from the complexity of our lives. The idealized notions of belonging and home that sometimes permeate both nativist conceptions of home and assimilationist desires to belong, obscure hyphenated bodies that need to travel between multiple imagined communities.

As I travel from home to school, from the place of my inherited Asian-ness to the place of my inherited feminism, I cannot simply pack my suitcase and stamp my face onto two different passports without fracturing my identity in unsustainable ways. To move with fluidity, I must—in collaboration with others—invent new stories of identity and belonging. My stories

are the only thing I have and I do not own them—not in the way you own a house or a car or knick-knacks. As I am constantly (re)created in a world in which I move uninvited, I am pulled like salt water taffy between fingertips. I fumble, I fail, I get stuck between your teeth. But perhaps with patience and practice, new stories and haunted pasts, I could live with it all.

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