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*Racial “Affliction”: (De)constructing Racial Formations through the
Asian American Horror Film*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This project intends to analyze the 2013 vampire film *Afflicted* and the 2013 ghost movie *I am a Ghost* in attempts to consider the role of temporality in constructing racial structures in Asian American horror films. My analysis of the racialized figures within the two films and the ways in which their bodies engage with the horror components of these films uncovers how Asian American subjects evoke fear, challenge normativity, and resist and reconfigure repressive, hegemonic structures, such as narrative and the imaginary of modern, homogenous time. Through the analysis of these two films and the techniques utilized that intentionally collapse temporal, spatial, and bodily boundaries, these films are significant in that they provide a site to deconstruct, expose, and link the (re)emergence of past and present Asian American racial formations. In other words, I argue that it is through such cultural sites like that of the horror film wherein which historical and contemporary methods of queering Asian Americans and production of monstrous and deviant Asian American subjects become temporally, spatially, and conceptually blurred.

The thesis of Stephanie H. Chang is approved.

Victor Bascara,

Purnima Mankekar

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Introduction

In the September 2008 edition of the horror, fantasy, and sci- fi film reviewing online journal, *Cinefantastique Online*, Wes Craven explains the origins of his 1986 horror classic, *Nightmare on Elm Street*. “It came to me in a dream,” he initially jokes, to which he quickly amends:

No, it was a series of articles in the *LA Times*, three small articles about men from South East Asia, who were from immigrant families and who had died in the middle of nightmares- and the paper never correlated them, never said, ‘Hey, we’ve had another story like this.’ (These stories) struck me as such an incredibly dramatic story that I was intrigued by it for a year, at least, before I finally thought I should write something about this kind of situation.¹

What Craven does not recognize when reading the *LA Times* articles is that the death of these “Southeast Asian immigrants,” as he so labels them, were not random nor sporadic. Rather, these sudden deaths were psychosomatic manifestations of intense violence and trauma faced by Southeast Asian refugees specifically during moments of war, histories of imperialism and colonialism, and dislocation.

In attempt to resolve these inexplicable deaths and irreconcilable bodies that highlighted the violent, unsettled histories of US empire, Craven’s “dreamt up nightmare” appropriates these narratives and displaces the traumas onto fictional and cinematic white, young bodies residing in sterile middle class homes. In doing so, these moments of haunting, trauma, and horror are not only viciously disconnected from its context, but become temporally and spatially recast and

¹ Steve Biodrowski, “Wes Craven on Dreaming Up Nightmares.” *Cinefantastique Online*, October 15, 2008, accessed March 30, 2015, <http://cinefantastiqueonline.com/2008/10/wes-craven-on-dreaming-up-nightmares/>.

reimagined. By “adopting” such experiences to the big screens, Craven loops these traumas into a disturbing moment of erasure that not only establishes the link between notions of monstrosity, horror, and Asian American bodies within a nationally celebrated cinematic memory, but brutally reduces these overwhelming, unarticulated violences in to the supernatural and pure fantasy.

Within his film, Craven constructs cinematic, fictional fear through the distillation of the horror of material violence produced through US globalizing projects and experienced by Southeast Asian refugees. As Freddy Kruger, the nightmare- visiting monster who murders suburban teenagers in their sleep, comes to embody such trauma, *Nightmare on Elm Street* becomes a site that figures the Asian American body as a space to not only read such trauma and horror but also wherein horror, monstrosity and deviance is produced and derived. In lieu of such an example, the formation of the Asian American subject can be traced within various forms of nationalized imaginaries, such as the horror film.

This act of deriving horror and monstrosity from bodies of color, and specifically that of the Asian body, is not just limited to Craven’s work. Rather, it is undoubtedly a convention present in other horror films as well, whether it be through vaguely racialized figures (*Dracula*, *Night of the Living Dead*) or literal portrayals of Asian subjects and bodies (*Hellraiser*, *The Twilight Zone: The Movie*, *The Grudge*). But how might such horror film conventions be exposed, resisted, and challenged through Asian American produced, directed, acted, and written horror films? How is horror, disgust, and terror reframed in such contexts?

This project intends to rescript conceptions of monstrosity and Asian American bodies by considering the work of the Asian American horror films as alternative sites that renegotiate national imaginaries regarding horror, monstrosity, deviance and the Asian American subject.

By exploring how Asian American bodies are racially, sexually, and gendered queer within horror films, this project aims to expose how the framing of Asian American subjects within such films collapse historical and contemporary moments of queered racialization. Furthermore, because Asian American horror films are platforms that employ the usage of the horrific supernatural and the monstrous fantastic, the critique of such horrific (im)possibilities disrupt and renegotiate the temporal, corporeal, and narrative boundaries of racialization.

Queering the Horror Film

In her seminal text, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol Clover explains that once a horror movie has been watched, it will “never let you see any movie ‘straight’ again.”² This queering of cinema by the horror genre is further complicated when horror is considered alongside a racial framework. This project analyzes this relationship between horror films and racial formations through the analysis of two Asian American horror films, the 2012 ghost movie, *I am a Ghost* and the 2013 vampire film, *Afflicted*. By considering the role of horror in constructing queered, racialized, and gendered embodiments of Asian American subjects, I intend to demonstrate how critiques of the genre ultimately produce queered narratives that truly will “never let viewers see ‘straight’ again”.

Due to the horror genre’s focus on bodies, violence, and the supernatural, as well as film’s ability to visually capture the relationship between the three, Asian American horror films are critical in that they simultaneously reproduce and challenge how Asian American bodies and subjects are made to be reviled, abhorred, and feared. By considering such constructions of

² Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992), 20.

Asian American bodies, these formations not only expose the ways in which Asian American racialization is gendered and queered, but can also create an alternative space for renegotiating Asian American subjectivity. Thus, my analysis of the racialized figures in *I am a Ghost* and *Afflicted* and the ways in which their bodies engage with the horror components within these films uncovers how Asian American subjects evoke fear, challenge normativity, and resist and reconfigure repressive, hegemonic structures, such as narrative and the imaginary of modern, homogenous time.

Through the analysis of the two films *I am a Ghost* and *Afflicted* and the techniques utilized that intentionally collapse temporal, spatial, and bodily boundaries, these films are significant in that they provide a site to deconstruct, expose, and link the (re)emergence of past and present Asian American racial formations. In other words, I argue that it is through such cultural productions like that of the horror film wherein which historical and contemporary methods of queering Asian Americans and production of monstrous and deviant Asian American subjects become temporally, spatially, and conceptually blurred.

Time- Subject Interpellation

Nightmare on Elm Street opens with a terrifying scene: After fashioning the iconic pair of blade-laden gloves, Freddy Kruger stalks a blond teenager in a dark, dank boiler room. As he chases her around, threatening her with his sharp blades, the teen suddenly wakes up terrified, but alive and unscathed. To the relief of the teen and the viewers, the sequence is understood to merely be a nightmare. However, the reprieve is short lived- she is soon viciously murdered when she falls asleep that night as Freddy, once again, enters her dreams. It is then the audience realizes it is

through sleep that Freddy operates, and the once seemingly innocuous space of dreams is now the dangerous conduit in which the monster comes through.

As *Nightmare on Elm Street* reveals through its manipulation of the cyclical patterns of sleep, temporal structures are critical in constructing the monster, the victim, and horror in horror films. Within *Nightmare*, it is during the moment when human subjects are the most vulnerable (i.e., unconscious and asleep) does Freddy find his power as a supernatural being. In other words, human and monster are clearly delineated and marked as different entities occupying distinct temporal structures.

This process of subject interpellation through temporality is critical not only to horror films, but in the formation of racial structures as well. Thus, in order to consider the relationship between horror film, Asian American cinema, queer of color critique, and Asian American racialization, this project will utilize an overarching framework of temporality. By applying a temporal framework to this project, I intend to not only blur the conventional, cinematic time structure through the analysis of the horror film, but also challenge the temporal boundaries utilized to racialize and contain the Asian American subject.

The framework that I am primarily interested in applying to my work is the theory of immiscible time as theorized in Bliss Lim's text, *Translating Time: Cinema, Fantastic and Temporal Critique*. Modern structures of time have been mechanized, Lim elaborates, as a form of "time discipline"³ in which time is utilized to produce specific subjects along racial, gender, sexual and class boundaries. Modern time, or "progress", is considered to be the proper, civilized, the ideal, while the prehistoric is attached to racialized figures that are considered

³ Lim, 10.

anachronistic, out of sync and un-existing. However, Lim counters such modern temporal forms are illusory⁴ and that:

The persistence of supernaturalism, of (the) occult, modes of thinking encoded in fantastic narratives (and) the existence of multiple times that fail to coincide with the measured, uniform intervals quantified by clock and calendar...often discloses the limits of historical time, the friction of secular historiography's encounter with temporalities emphatically at odds with and not fully miscible to itself."⁵

In other words, the fantastic possesses the ability capable of breaking down modern forms of time discipline because of the ways in which the supernatural occupy multiple structure of times. Thus, the supernatural and fantastic elements of horror movies render such films to be a critical site in exposing the insistence of the existence of multiple times, which can then subsequently rupture these specific "time- disciplining" racializing processes.

At this point, it is perhaps useful to consider Lim's title of her work: *Translating Time*. While such a title may imply that her intentions are to "translate" these immiscible times into a unified, "comprehensible" modern temporal structure, it is rather the act of non- translation that her work focuses on. Supernatural, horrific narratives are one such critical space that express such a sense of temporal untranslatability, as they "demonstrate traces of untranslatable temporal otherness in the fantastic as immiscible times- multiple times that never quite dissolve into the code of modern time consciousness, discrete temporalities incapable of attaining homogeneity or

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 2.

full incorporation into a uniform chronological present.”⁶ This particular role of “immiscible time” in hegemonic, capital structures are further explained by Lim:

People dwell in more than one world and one time. Thus, instead of considering enchantment solely as a function of capitalist contradiction, I would rather say that diverse modes of being are intermingling. Social inequities are translated into the code of the occult, and conversely, the history of labor secularizes the phantasm as figure... Neither translation can produce a wholly miscible solution.⁷

It is critical for these untranslatable temporal moments to retain their incomprehensibility in order to expose and rupture these modern temporal structures. Ghostly hauntings, supernatural violence and horror erupts and are displaced onto bodies of color within these films, particularly because of the ways in which fantastic and supernatural potentiality opens and exposes these temporal and spatial boundaries. The critique of such depictions can deconstruct these structures of temporality, and subsequently, racialization of these queered subjects of color.

The way in which Lim inquires into the role of cinema in challenging temporality is the act of as she refers to as “temporal critique.”⁸ Through this particular framework of temporal critique, this project intends to read the potentiality of Asian American horror film in order to investigate the ways in which the portrayal of monstrosity and horror can work to deconstruct disciplining, hegemonic temporal structures.

⁶ Lim, 12.

⁷ Lim, 137.

⁸ Lim, 2

Formulating Fear in the Horror Film

In order to fully grasp the formation of the Asian American subject within horror films, it is also critical in considering the ways in which the sense of horror within these films is simultaneously evoked through the production of racial, sexual, and gender deviancy alongside temporal disciplining. In the classic horror film text, *Paradoxes of Horror*, Noel Carroll describes the production of horror as such:

The horror genre [which] is essentially linked with a particular affect- specifically, that from which it takes its name... The genres that are named by the very affect they are designed to provoke suggest a particularly tantalizing strategy through which to pursue their analysis... works of horror are designed to elicit a certain kind of affect. I shall presume that this is an emotional state, which emotion I call art horror.⁹

As Carroll explains, the *sense* of “art- horror” is ultimately “determined by a sense of danger and impurity,”¹⁰ or its ability to evoke both fear and disgust. Horror is therefore founded on a fear of the non-normative and deviant, and when the horror fails to produce a sense of either, it becomes unthreatening and no longer horrific. In other words, constructions of horror, monstrosity, and deviance within horror film are a highly deliberate and intentional cinematic practice.

Carroll's assertions then become particularly poignant when it comes to racialized horror in that his statements present very specific conditions for the subjects that are feared and

⁹ Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or. Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990), 29.

¹⁰ Carroll, 29.

rendered threatening. Carroll explains that figures that are “physically and cognitively threatening (are) both disgusting and menacing” and it is interstitial characteristics of monsters, or characteristics that are “categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless”¹¹ that produces such notions of “disgust and fear.” Again, this very specific, relationally formed conception of horror is important in that it relates notions of race, sex, gender, and class and queered embodiments to conceptions of fear and deviance. Messy, unexplainable, non- normative, monstrous, and queered Asian American subjects (like that of the dying, Southeast Asian refugees) can then be considered alongside such constructions of horror within cinema: how might such fictional figurations within horror films prompt the racialization of Asian Americans to be read as contradictory, dissonant, and feared?

Carroll’s notions are further supported by Barry Keith Grant in the introduction to the 1981 horror critique anthology, *Planks of Reason*. In it, Grant focuses on the inexplicable draw of horror, that being, a sense of “being pulled toward that whirlpool of fears just below the surface which have been stirred up, [allowing us] to be aware of what these fears are, how they have been evoked in us, and what they imply for us and for the text.”¹² Grant further explains that the sense of horror is derived from “the unknown, the rejected and repressed, but not re-owned.”¹³ In other words, Grant’s text works as a point of connection between Lim’s and Carroll’s assertions: racialized subjects produce fear because of the ways in which they and the trauma surrounding such subjectivities have been marginalized and erased from national consciousness, which then produces a sense of unknowing. Thus, as expressed within *Nightmare on Elm Street*, when unarticulated traumas return and emerge, a sense of horror is produced.

¹¹ Carroll, 30.

¹² Barry Keith Grant, *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), xii.

¹³ Grant, 12.

Fearing the Asian American Body

While it is important to consider the work of the horror genre as a whole, it is also critical in recognizing the various components of horror film that also facilitate a reading of Asian American racialization. In her text, *Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film*, Isabel Christina Pinedo expands on both Carroll's and Grant's sentiments as she further elucidates on what happens within the narrative when such repressed subjects begin to emerge. She writes:

1. Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world.
2. Horror transgresses and violates boundaries.
3. Horror throws into question the validity of rationality.
4. Horror resists narrative closure.
5. Horror produces a bounded experience of fear.¹⁴

These conditions described by Pinedo are important in that she explicitly reveals how the process of racialization can be read alongside moments of horror. In other words, by analyzing monstrous figures within horror films and the how they specifically engage with the components of narrative, it can expose the ways these bodies “evoke fear”, “question reality”, “violate boundaries” and resist traditional narrative style and structures. Racialized bodies, specifically Asian American bodies, have been made to embody national fears on a wide scale: threats of miscegenation, invasion, terrorism- essentially, the threat of destroying the homogenized cultural, territorial, and ideological spaces of the US. Observing the fictional parallels of such

¹⁴ Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 17.

moments of racialization are critical in that it exposes and challenges such hegemonic structures that produce such feared, racialized subjects.

With a focus on the reemergence and refusal of racialized bodies to remain repressed, Pinedo, Carroll, and Grant's work directly highlight the potentially resistive properties of the horror genre, which similarly relate to the theorizations of Lisa Lowe in the text *Immigrant Acts: Asian American Cultural Production*. Lowe describes the ways in which Asian American cultural productions are also able to reject and reconstruct traditional narrative forms that are significant in interpellating subjects as properly performing bodies for the nation, specifically through the parameters of gender and race.¹⁵ As horror films that reveal the work of such traditional forms, *Afflicted* and *I am a Ghost* are noteworthy cinematic works that can expose and resist this act of interpellation through its employment of both horror and Asian American film techniques, that, to rephrase Pinedo, disrupt and challenge the boundaries of normativity.

Robin R. Means Coleman explores in *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to the Present* the ways in which these tropes of horror, specifically the structure of violence, are complex because of their seemingly contradictory nature. She explains:

Just as [the complexity of horror genre] can contribute the most rousing, heroic, and imaginative narratives, it can also generate films featuring chilling, abhorrent, unspeakable violence... [and] it is not simply the bloodshed that makes a horror film a horror film, rather it is the nihilistic context in which this violence occurs... However, what is observed here is that in many instances violence in blackness and horror function together to provide important discursive inroads, such as violence as exhibiting a sort of return of the re/ oppressed. Here, violence, be it gratuitous or declarative, will

¹⁵ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1996), 98.

not overshadow the revelatory Blackness narratives that horror has to offer.¹⁶

In other words, while the violence is certainly “chilling, abhorrent, and unspeakable,” it is perhaps because of the way it “violates boundaries,” it then functions as a language of the silenced, the marginalized “re/ oppressed.” In other words, the depictions of violence within these films are not one dimensionally constructed. Rather, violence is a nuanced and significant metaphorical trope that exposes often violent return of erased and occluded narratives from hegemonic narratives. Should Coleman’s assertions be read alongside that of Lowe’s and Pinedo’s, it can then be presumed that violence within *Afflicted* and *I am a Ghost* not only exposes how Asian American bodies are racialized, but in the critique of such representations, function as a resistive communication channel for the oppressed. In other words, while the violence done upon these bodies may be vicious and horrific, the role of such violent occurrences within such films act as a particularly articulate outlet for reading the eruption of queered and time- disciplined embodiments within the movies.

Violence is expressed in a multitude of forms in both *I am a Ghost* and *Afflicted*: body mutilations, body transfigurations, killing, torture, reanimations. It is the various methods violence is depicted within the film that these following chapters will explore, particularly through an examination of body horror, camera angles and lighting to track the subject formation within each film. Through these critiques and interpretations of violence, this projects aims to ultimately expose how such tropes demonstrate a shifting embodied sense of temporality within the film.

¹⁶ Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 5.

Queered Racialization

As expressed through the previous discussion of canonical horror film scholarship, it is through such tropes utilized within horror films that has allowed such movies to be read as a space in exploring the production of deviancy, monstrosity and queerness. While early horror film scholarship has consistently utilized queer to mean deviant forms of sexuality, this project intends to stress a queer of color framework where in which it will insist that deviancy, monstrosity and queerness produced in horror films are not merely productions of non-normative and monstrous sexuality, but are intersectionally constructed through the lenses of race, gender, sex, and class.

Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* further elaborates on this relationship of sexuality, race, gender, and class. Through a paraphrase of Chandan Reddy's "Homes, Houses, Nonidentity: Paris is Burning," Ferguson explains that racialization, or "racist practices, articulates itself generally as gender and sexual regulation, and that gender and sexual differences variegate racial formations."¹⁷ As he explains throughout his text, liberal capitalist structures in need of a cheap, differentiated labor source and a homogenized image of the nation built on these intentionally constructed differences produce subjects/ non- subjects, citizens/ non-citizens, normative/ queer figures by relationally regulating race, gender, sex, and class. Ferguson posits that a queer of color critique is therefore necessary in order to expose these contradictions to challenge the normalization of the nation state¹⁸.

¹⁷ Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Ferguson's assertions can be specifically applied to the formation of the Asian American figure, particularly if read alongside Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*. Lowe explains that the inconsistencies between the needs of the state and the demands of capital produces queered, deviant, racialized Asian American subjects. She argues that the Asian American subject have been primarily determined by histories of immigration, and through the contradiction of the US requiring a labor source yet also simultaneously attempting to construct a unified national narrative, Asian Americans became racialized, gendered, and classed. Thus, Ferguson's reading heavily corresponds with Lowe's, in that they both find it is through these contradictions of capital and state that produced queered, racialized Asian American figures.

This intersection that Ferguson and Lowe draw between race, gender, sex, class enables me to investigate the queering and subsequent production of the monstrous and deviant Asian American figure. One such historical instance of the queering of the Asian American is discussed in Nayan Shah's *Contagious Divides*. As Shah explains, the public health sector was a primary method of racializing, gendering, and queering Asian American (specifically, Chinese) communities in the 19th and 20th century. An "agile and expansive regulatory mechanism in nineteenth-century American cities,"¹⁹ the public health sector can therefore be read as an early example of a structure of capital and nation-state constructing the figure of the deviant and monstrous Asian American. Through the racialization, gendering, and sexualization of the human body, health, sanitation conditions, and community formations, the public health sector simultaneously defined normative, "proper" citizenry while marking the Chinese American (communities) as deviant, monstrous, and inassimilable in to the state.

¹⁹ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco Chinatown* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2001), 3.

Throughout the text, Shah cites multiple primary sources that illustrate the ways in which Chinese bodies and their living and health conditions were rendered horrifying. For instance, a specific passage Shah describes is an 1880 Board of Health report on the “living conditions in the Chinese quarter.”²⁰ The document describes these seemingly “horrific and inhumane conditions” as such:

In a room 6 X 10 feet ten Chinese men and women huddled together in beastly promiscuousness... [These rooms] are absolutely without proper ventilation, and it seems unaccountable how human beings can live in them for a single night.²¹

Shah goes on to explain:

These descriptions emphasized the sheer physicality of the ‘sickening filth’ and ‘slime’...reiterated the animality and inhuman living density of the Chinese residents. In a boardinghouse where two hundred ‘Chinamen’ lived, the report described ‘its inmates [as] having a ghastly look and [they] are covered with a clammy perspiration. On the other side the rooms appeared to be filled with sick Chinamen, and ranged around the walls are chicken- coops filled with what appeared to be sick chickens.’ The equation of Chinese men with sick animals heightened perceptions of intolerable, horrific living conditions.²²

This “horror” Shah investigates demonstrates a specific process of racial production, in that the racialization is produced simultaneously alongside sexuality (“beastly promiscuousness”),

²⁰ Shah, 35.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Shah, 35.

gender (“ghastly Chinamen”), and citizenship (“animality and inhuman living density”). The contradiction of these Asian workers - necessary for capital, but detrimental to state building- therefore rendered these Chinese communities as horrific and queer because of their seemingly dangerous threat in rupturing the state. Thus, Shah’s work reveals the ways in which these (past) communities were consequently managed and the ways in which queerness linked to bodies, disease, and un-incorporatable difference.

Ferguson’s critique can also be applied to contemporary Asian American communities wherein which the US market began to demonstrate dramatic economic and political shifts following the 1965 Immigration Act. This particular act reinscribed the ways in which Asian Americans have been queered. As Chandan Reddy’s article, “Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family: Reviewing the Case for Homosexual Asylum in the Context of Family Rights” argues, sexuality is manipulated, as in the case of the San Francisco Chinese Americans, in order to create specific subjecthood for Asian Americans. By examining the figure of the “gay Pakistani immigrant,” Reddy explores the influence of neoliberalism on immigration policy which has subsequently shifted the ways in which Asian American figures become bounded by gender, sex, and class.

The article highlights the ways neoliberal and multicultural economic and state policies emphasized Asian immigrants’ individual responsibility for shouldering social, political, and economic worker protection in face of an equalized racial playing field. In this particular political and economic moment, certain subjects that were previously unable to be assimilated were granted supposed “pathways” to incorporation. The 1965 Immigration Act produced a seemingly benevolent maneuver in replacing exclusionary laws by allowing families to reunify in the US. However, by producing this model of family reunification, the economic market was

able to attract low-wage workers, and therefore benefit the state economically, while continuing to exploit recent migrants in order to further produce an ideal, homogenized state. And as previously politically and socially barred subjects, Asian American began to be incorporated into these economic (neoliberal) and social multiculturalist/ postracial structures wherein which they could seemingly no longer be rendered queered and racialized in such an explicit way as they were in those early communities as described by Shah²³.

However, Reddy emphasizes that these “new” pathways of incorporation only continue to produce queered, non-normative, and deviant subjects in order to fit this multiculturalist and neoliberal agenda. One such way to fit this agenda, as he explains, has been to align Asian American immigration/ migration and community formation alongside notions of normative family structures in order to continue managing sexuality, gender performance, and class structure within these communities. By producing the notion of heteronormative family structures, minority subjects are rendered queered by the ways in which they can or cannot fit into these kinship structures. In other words, by not being able to fit into this normative (i.e., model minority) family structure, they can be rendered sexually queer (homosexual), gendered non-normative (unable to fulfill familial roles) and, subsequently, racialized as deviant. Thus, while the conditions under which Asian American subjectivity has been produced have changed, these contemporary legal demarcations still contest notions of legitimacy, as Reddy explains,

The state has emerged as a central locus by which certain ‘nonnormative sexualities’ have sought to make it a terrain of freedom, destigmatization, and normality. In doing so, sexuality has once again become, quite powerfully, organized

²³ Chandan Reddy, “Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family: Reviewing the Case for Homosexual Asylum in the Context of Family Rights,” *Social Text* 23 (2005): 105.

around questions of legitimacy and illegitimacy, intensifying the... attachments to legal figures and subjecthood, and displacing many of the diverse knowledge and practices of sexuality whose aims and modes of existence are in excess of or relatively autonomous from concerns about legal ratification.²⁴

Mirroring both Shah and Ferguson's work, Reddy considers the ways in which sexuality, gender, and citizenship align with contemporary notions of racialization. However, in comparison with the early immigrants in Chinatown, contemporary Asian immigrants are now inducted into citizenship through specific conditions as drawn up by new (neo) liberal state-building agendas. Thus, legitimacy is *still* translated through such notions of cleanliness, health, and phenotypic difference, but such conceptions are now coded through conditions of liberalism, such as family and kinship. Thus, as suggested by the quote, demarcating queerness in contemporary Asian American communities is still funneled through "traditional" beliefs of deviant sexuality, gender expression, or racial, but adapted in order to promote multiculturalist state building.

Drawing on these frameworks, my project intends to track how these historical and contemporary moments of queering the Asian American subject are intentionally and continue to be directly linked. While narratives of racial, gender, sexuality, and class equality and progress exist, I argue the Asian American horror films have become a primary site wherein which historical and contemporary forms of queering continue to emerge and not only messily inform the racialization of Asian Americans, but simultaneously muddy and contest such hegemonic structures and discourses from which they arise.

²⁴ Reddy, 108.

The Work of Asian American Cultural Productions and Asian American Film

The relationship between cultural productions and that of the figuration of the Asian American subject is further elaborated on in Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*. Lowe explains the contradictory state of the Asian American subject is occluded and erased from the national imaginary and narrative in the name of constructing a homogenous nation. These moments of queered racialization violently erupt into culture. Cultural productions not only embody these occlusions, but in doing so, effectively challenge, contest, reveal, and destabilize these specific, oppressive discourses, formulations, and structures.

Asian American horror films are significant cultural productions in that through the utilization of monstrous, horrific, and violent tropes, they not only rupture dominant/ national cultural discourse regarding temporality and the structure of narrative but are also able to expose the historical conditions of the production of the deviant, monstrous, and queered Asian American subject. Thus, while these films have no explicit connection to the public health sector or contemporary asylum policies in regards to Pakistani immigrants, the presence of the Asian American monster within these films cannot be disconnected from these historical and contemporary contexts. In other words, the renderings of deviancy and the pathologization of the Asian American figure within these films are direct evocations of past and present queering of the Asian American subject.

The importance of Asian American film as a specific type of Asian American cultural production, is elaborated on within Glenn Mimura's text, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema*. Mimura begins the text by discussing where Asian American cinema is located in terms of Film Studies and Asian American Studies. He states that this particular cultural production is obscured in

both fields, thus, he finds it important to “to grasp [Asian American cinema’s] discourse as an object of analysis, we need to examine it simultaneously with dominant cultural activity that limits and shapes its conditions of visibility.”²⁵ It is this absence of Asian American in both sectors that Mimura bases his text, as he argues the “Ghostlife” of the Asian American film is the “persistent, habitual, ‘ghostly’ return” of Asian Americans in “public or collective memory.”²⁶ In other words, the Asian American film itself is a haunting, a manifestation and “return” of the repressed, and that the Asian American films are to be critiqued within the social, historical, political, and economic contexts from which they emerge.

Mimura’s primary interest in complicating representations and absences in Asian American film due to his intention to “challenge and demystify the... conception of modernity,” and “to revise ‘master discourses’ from the point of the ‘margin’”²⁷ directly relates to my project and the work of Asian American horror films. My objectives in critiquing *Afflicted* and *I am a Ghost* are similarly interested in considering how these films renegotiate temporal and racial discourses in regards to Asian American racialization, horror films and horror film critique. By considering ways in which Asian American subjects have been queered, I intend to revise such “master discourses”, such as those concerning modern, homogenous time, familial and kinship structures, and horror film conventions.

Ultimately, Mimura does not want to focus on the definition of Asian American film per se, but is interested in “challenging the dominant myths of nation, but also represent alternative identities, histories, and geographies.”²⁸ In terms of this project, I, too, am not entirely interested

²⁵ Glenn Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xv.

²⁶ Mimura, xvii.

²⁷ Mimura, xvi.

²⁸ Mimura, xxi.

in identifying specific genres or kinds of movies. Instead, it is my aim in utilizing horror films in further complicating and destabilizing, rather than defining, the genre and conventions of Asian American film.

Chapter Breakdown

I will be focusing my research primarily on two Asian American horror films: *Afflicted* (2013) and *I am a Ghost* (2013). While the two films are entirely different in plot, characterizations, and filming technique, these films are useful in tracking potentialities of queered, supernatural, Asian American subjects in Asian American horror films. In my first chapter, I will analyze the vampire film, *Afflicted*, in order to read for a fictional take on historical queering of Asian American bodies. This will be primarily achieved through the analysis of visuality and manipulation of the visual within the film through body horror, lighting, and camera angles.

My second chapter explores *I am a Ghost*, a 2013 ghost film by H.P. Mendoza. I argue that this film is critical to my project in the way it tracks contemporary queering of Asian Americans, particularly through the dissection and deconstruction of normative family structures. I intend to produce an analysis of repetition, lighting, and disembodiment within the film in order to trouble the conception of normative/ naturalized kinship structures as well as to expose the ways in which Asian Americans are racialized through such discourses.

By analyzing these two films in tandem, it not only provides a tracing of the ways in which Asian Americans have been queered and rendered deviant, monstrous, and horrific, but how both contemporary and historical moments of racialization are related and relationally inform one another. Asian Americans *continue* to be racialized in reflection of state political and

economic needs, and this needs to be further exposed and deconstructed through the analysis of such crucial sites like that of the Asian American horror film.

Chapter One: Afflicted (The Vampire Film)

In 2013, the film *Afflicted*, an independent, “found- footage” styled vampire movie directed by Derek Lee and Clif Prowse, won the award for Best Canadian First Feature Film at the Toronto International Film Festival. Functioning as the directorial debut of the two filmmakers, *Afflicted* was recently released on April 4th, 2014 to a wide theatrical and video-on-demand distribution after amassing awards at other film festivals, including the Maria Award for Best Special Effects, the Best Motion Picture at the Catalonian International Film Festival and the Best Director, Picture, and Screenplay at the Austin Fantastic Fest in 2013. As its many accolades suggest, the movie utilizes effective and extensive filming and makeup techniques that render *Afflicted* a strong first effort of the directing duo.

The movie tells the story of two best friends, Derek Lee and Clif Prowse (played by the directors themselves) who embark on a year-long tour around the world. Lee and Prowse decide to record the trip in its entirety in order to post the footage online for family, friends, and random individuals to follow, which thereby effectively sets up the found footage style of the film. During their stopover in Paris, Derek has a late night tryst with a woman named Audrey that ends with him in an unconscious and bloodied state. Following the incident, he finds himself endowed with superhuman powers as his body begins to experience dramatic, physiological changes. The friends soon realize that the transformations are borne of no mortal illness and it is in fact caused by a strain of vampirism. The film follows the two men as they race to find the cure to Lee’s condition.

While its usage of found- footage filming techniques and narrative emphasis on science and biology renders the film a powerful modern take on the vampire myth, it is perhaps the racial composition of the movie that marks this particular interpretation as noteworthy. Casting the

monster as a Chinese Canadian character undoubtedly complicates the subject matter and produces a unique cultural space to probe into the relationship between horror films, Asian American diaspora, racialization, supernatural monstrosity and the genres' ability to renegotiate Asian American film.

While *Afflicted* may not explicitly be marketed as Asian American, the film is crucial in that the ways in which it racializes and queers Derek mirrors the methods of how Asian American communities were queered in the early 20th century. By highlighting Derek's decaying health, appetite for human blood, and mounting sense of inhumanity through the usage of extensive, transformative makeup, manipulation of lighting, and the employment of found footage point of view shots, the film emphasizes Derek's monstrosity through his body and physical markers of difference. In doing so, the film exposes a parallel reading of Derek's descent into monstrosity with his racialization. Thus, within the film *Afflicted*, queered racialization is conducted through the metaphor of vampirism, which not only shows how the persistence of race to remain "undead" is contained through the control of the visual, but in doing so, is also able to produce a resistant subject that reconfigures structures of time and narrative.

Body Horror- Reconfiguring the Eye

The violence within this film takes a very specific form, that being, through the manipulation of the visual. A crucial scene in which the viewer is made privy to this connection between vampirism, racialization, and the visual begins a few evenings after Derek's run-in in Paris where in which the men are admiring Derek's changing body. After performing a few

superhuman stunts, Derek suddenly feels incredible discomfort within his eye socket. He assumes the pain is caused by ill-fitting contacts, and clutches his eye in attempt to quell the agony. However, as he continues to rub his eye, the discomfort is quickly revealed to be that of a much more serious source- vitreous fluid oozes from his socket, until finally, the eyeball pops out and tumbles into his hand. Terrified, Derek looks up into the camera, and once he does, the viewer realizes that in place of his old, “human” eyeball, a creamy, white eye has taken its space, its iris a small black speck in the middle. The painful process is unfortunately repeated on the other side as sticky, vitreous fluid begins to flow again, and ultimately leaves Derek transformed and clad with two milky white spheres in place for eyes.

While it may be clear the ways in which this particular scene evokes a violent horror imagery, the milky eyes also symbolize Derek’s waning sense of vision and ability to see. In the film, vampirism manifests in ten day cycles. In other words, every ten days, Derek’s “human-ness” fades and his consciousness is eradicated as he fully transforms into a rabid, starving vampire. Additionally, it is also critical to note that during these transformations, Lee is being fully captured through a camera held by Prowse. Thus, Lee’s loss of vision is two- fold: the vampirism not only forces him to lose the ability to process as he once did as a human, but he also loses direct control over the camera. In fact, right as Derek’s eyes begin to hurt, he begs Clif, “Can you just- can you just turn it off? Turn off the camera. Clif, just- look, I don’t want to be a dick, but turn off your camera. It’s something wrong with my- ah!”²⁹ However, despite Derek’s clear unwillingness to be filmed, Clif pays no heed to his discomfort, and continues to capture Derek’s transformation on video, and with an even steadier hand than before. Thus, if Derek’s disease was to be read as a metaphorical rendering of his otherness, his marginalized,

²⁹ Derek Lee and Clif Prowse, *Afflicted*, (Canada: Automatik Entertainment, 2014).

racialized self, Derek loses sight of his humanity and his ability to see as his deviancy; his curse, his affliction, overcomes him. In other words, his humanity is directly linked to his vision- the less he can see, the less human he becomes. And the less human he becomes, more control (through the camera) of his ability to see (his humanity) is inflicted upon his non- consenting body.

This particular motif of the eye as a marker of deviancy is utilized in historical imagery depicting Asian Americans as well. As seen in early comics of the 1930s, Fu Manchu is racialized and rendered evil either through his lack of eyeballs or the shape of pointed and slanted eyes. As evidenced through this particular example, the eyes within Asian American representations have not only been a primary physical marker of “Asianness,” but also one of simultaneous (and inherent) evil. Thus, it is perhaps no coincidence that within this film, the eyes are emphasized when tracking Derek’s descent into vampirism. Interestingly, an early version of the movie poster features a camera with a red eyeball, clad with an Eiffel Tower as a pupil in the center of a camera lens. While the poster highlights the importance of the camera within the film, it still centers the eye as the most important aspect of the movie, since the eye is critical in embodying Derek’s transition and evoking horrific, racialized imagery.

Waning Life, Waning Light

The second half of *Afflicted* depicts Derek in pursuit of Audrey, the woman who infected him in Paris. After making a promise to Clif, whom he ultimately kills and eats, to find Audrey and therefore a cure, he is finally able to confront her at the end of the film. The scene begins with him getting situated in a dark, abandoned basement in which they agree to meet up- he paces,

and also places his camera on some nearby rubble to capture the fight. Finally, Audrey arrives. The two engage in a tense battle, which culminates with Derek pleading for Audrey to end his life. She finally concedes, and fiercely stabs him with a stake to the heart. A beat later, Derek reanimates. While this is the fourth reanimation within the film, the viewer and Derek finally are forced to come to terms with the fact that he is indeed immortal, and nothing that he can do can change it: Derek is doomed to live out his life as a vampire forever. After this realization, Derek admits defeat and Audrey leaves. The scene transitions into the final shot of the film, where the viewers find a derelict Derek filming a farewell message to his family. Derek is situated in a dark basement- there is no light source (except from that of the camera), and it is unknown whether it is day or night. After he completes his confession, he turns to a strung up figure behind him, who appears to be Derek's next victim. Derek then plays audio of a tortured child crying out for help as he asks the man, "IS THIS YOUR PHONE?"³⁰ After Derek affirms his suspicions- the man is the one who hurt the child- he unties his victim, to only then viciously attack the man and consume him a few seconds later. Following this scene, the movie then cuts directly to black, and the viewer is left to assume that Derek is ultimately subjected to a life of murder. However, it is interesting to note that there is one loophole that Derek is afforded. Following the fight between the two vampires, Audrey states, "You can't chose not to kill, but you can choose who you kill. It makes a difference."³¹ As evidenced by her words and the concluding scene depicting Derek's kill, Derek's victims are all deviants, a host of criminals in need of punishing, and similarly doomed to "darkness" themselves.

While, arguably, the control of the visual is vested to Derek in full by the end of the film in the form of camera control (he is the only individual handling the camera and producing the

³⁰ *Afflicted*, 2013.

³¹ *Afflicted*, 2013.

footage by the conclusion of the movie), his vision remains limited as he is cast into darkness as cinematically, the lighting within the film becomes scarce. This stylistic choice is mirrored within the plot- though he is ultimately enlightened after the confrontation with Audrey and made privy as to why he was afflicted (“You were dying. I thought I was being kind,”³² she says, explaining that she changed him in order to give him immortality), he is not freed from the darkness, i.e., a life and status of deviance, monstrosity, and seclusion. As Derek changes and becomes subjected to his life of vampirism, he falls farther *into* the darkness, an isolated individual that only draws in other such deviant minds and bodies, and cursed to forever live out his plight as an eradicator of vice, a somewhat unwilling vigilante ridding the world of other forms of disease. As early American propaganda depicted vermin- consuming Chinese and subsequent transmitters of disease, the parallels between such historical imagery and that within the film is undeniable. In this way, the characterization of Derek evokes, yet again, imagery in which is consistent with early renderings of Asian American in the 20th century reflecting feelings of the Yellow Peril. By the end of the film, Derek is fully rendered as an undead subject- his humanity, as represented through his access and ability to see light, is lost forever.

As these particular evocations of racialized horror expresses, this film is particularly adept in utilizing horrific imagery that relates to historical imagery of queered, monstrous Asian subjects. As discussed earlier through Nyan Shah’s work in *Contagious Divides*, such descriptors of deviance (particularly rendered through body horror) was consistently utilized in attempts to racialize these early Asian American communities and subjects. As Shah explains in his work, it was through seemingly dramatic and almost bestial differences of the Chinese body

³² *Afflicted*, 2013.

that produced the sense that Chinese American subject were to be feared, reviled, and similarly partitioned as Derek is in the film.

Hence, while *Afflicted* takes place in an unidentified contemporary moment, this film is particularly significant in providing a link between the early forms of racialization to that of the present. Therefore, by considering such films like *Afflicted*, it can be presumed that the queering of Asian Americans are not temporally isolated- rather, current forms of racialization rely on such a past. Thus, such sites like that of the Asian American horror films expose such temporal eruptions.

The Victim of Affliction: The Role of Found Footage and the Non- Contagion

Ultimately, it is his vision, his eyes, that reveal his status as a human/ non- human, dead/ undead subject. Thus, the particular stylization of utilizing found footage is useful in that it tracks the changes within Derek's ability to see- not only are the viewers able to inherit a specific perspective to the film, but are also afforded yet another way in marking Derek's shifting subjectivity. Furthermore, the found footage style has a multitude of other implications. Perhaps most importantly, found footage provides a more realistic rendering of this particular horror mythology of vampirism. Throughout the film, there is no myth that is elucidated in order to explain the origin of the vampirism; rather, the film structures it through a framework of disease, of a contagion- the "illness" is linked to biological causes. If that is the case, who then does the contagion affect? After all, this curse is revealed not to be contagious: Lee does not turn his victims through his attacks, and instead, it is death that he inflicts on them. The stipulations

of this “affliction” are revealed in the dialogue between Audrey and Derek following the final showdown:

Audrey: This is not a disease. There is no cure. You must kill. Don’t you think I would have cured myself? Don’t you see I would have ended my life if I could?

Derek: I can’t kill somebody every ten days.

Audrey: Ten days? Your eyes are changing already, you need to be feeding every four to five days.

Derek: No, no...

Audrey: If you do not choose to feed, you will become something worse. You will lose control, you will lose everything. You need to feed every day, every single day. And you will not stop.³³

Feeding only because of Audrey’s warning that he shall turn into something even worse should he not do so, Lee’s vampirism ultimately has only one true victim: himself. Lee’s affliction, his deviancy, his queered self, is not a contagion at all, and instead, the only threat in which he must contain is the threat of his own death. Derek’s racialization through vampirism is only horrific to him, and he must forcibly partition himself off from society in attempts to contain his own form of doomed deviance. Shooting the film through the perspective of the found footage only heightens these distinctions.

But what does it mean that Derek is condemned as racialized subject? To consider the words of Coleman, this “doomed deviance” is certainly complicated- these various visual

³³ *Afflicted*, 2013.

representations are indeed “chilling, abhorrent, and unspeakable.” However, while this is true, it is through these specific figurations of a monster, are we able to identify just how these representations demonstrate a “language” of the oppressed, i.e., Derek, a Chinese Canadian subject.. Ultimately, because of these various visual manipulations’ importance in the tracking of Derek’s shift from dead to the undead, human to monster, the critique of these tropes then exposes a potentially resistive point within the text that specifically challenges hegemonic structures of time.

The Fantastic and Temporal Re-Structuring

While these various horror film tropes evoke a violent partitioning of Derek into a queered subject who partakes in deviant and “dirty” deeds within the film, it is also productive to consider how they are also useful in framing Derek’s monstrosity as a critical figuration of subjectivity to rupture the structure of narratives and temporality. The film opens with a farewell party bidding the two best friends goodbye as they embark on their year-long journey around the world. While the opening scene is filmed in a whimsical manner, framing the young twenty-somethings in a jovial and spirited celebration, the purpose of the trip is soon revealed- Derek has been diagnosed with a cerebral arteriovenous malformation (AVM), which puts him at risk for vessel rupture, hemorrhage, and death. Therefore, this trip functions as a “last hoorah” before Derek’s health worsens. In spite of the protests from his family, Derek not only embarks on the journey, and announces he will adamantly reject all medical care should something happen on the trip.

As demonstrated by these first scenes of the movie, it is established that Derek is an already doomed subject marked for death. Because of his AVM, he will, presumably, die soon. This status, however, does not change once he becomes a vampire. While Derek does indeed gain immortality through his transition from human to vampire, what he gains is an immortal existence that renders him into the liminal space of undead-ness. Thus, Derek's relationship to death is a tenuous one- as a fully human subject in the beginning of the film, he is at the brink of death. And although he can never die as a vampire, it is his humanity that is at risk of being extinguished. In other words, Derek must ultimately trade his humanity for life and existence.

The way in which Derek's subjecthood is constructed within the film is very specific to his status as a Chinese Canadian. As Grace Kyungwon Hong explains in "Existentially Surplus: Women of Color Feminism and the New Crises of Capitalism," race has become explicitly linked to notions of life and death due to a shift towards a speculation based-economy after WWII. Hong writes that, because of this shift, "certain populations are not destined ever to be incorporated into capitalist production as labor," thus leading to creation of surplus subjects, which are, as Hong explains, subjects that, "are valueless, unprotectable, vulnerable, and *dead*. It is to be racialized, gendered, and sexually nonnormative in ways simultaneously old and new."³⁴ And while Hong also notes, "In this era, race, gender, and sexuality as identity categories do not automatically situate one as alienated from moral subjectivity,"³⁵ I argue that *Afflicted* is one site in which even "non-diseased," "non-afflicted" racialized subjects are rendered "valueless, unprotectable, vulnerable and dead," or raced subjects already marked for death. Thus, the metaphor of Derek's diseases (both AVM and vampirism) tracks how Derek's queering as a

³⁴ Grace Kyungwon Hong, "Existentially Surplus: Women of Color Feminism and the New Crises of Capitalism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18 (2012): 92.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 93.

subject simultaneously documents the ways in which his race- or deadness/ undeadness- is contained and controlled by the film, specifically through body horror, lighting, and camera angle manipulation.

Vampires as Ghosts: Life, Death, and Reconstructing Temporalities

Derek's relationship to life and death not only informs the ways in which he is racialized, but also determines how Derek becomes a subject bounded by his temporality. In the film, Derek's begins as a human subject limited in time and transforms into a vampiric figure with unlimited time. Through these supernatural transfigurations, Derek's embodiment of temporality can then be read to rupture the institution of modern, homogenous time because of his embodiment of a multitude of temporalities. This references directly back to Bliss Lim's work as Derek serves as what Lim refers to as a "supernatural element," which Lim explains, "is often rationalized as a figure of history or disparaged as an anachronistic vestige of primitive, superstitious thought... it is emphatically at odds with and not fully miscible to secular historiography's encounter with temporalities."³⁶

In other words, as Derek shifts from a modern, human subject, to that of a monstrous figure, his unique embodiments within the film disrupts notions of modern, homogenous time. Modern, homogenous time is defined by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* as "an idea... in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross- time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar."³⁷ This sense of time expresses a consistent, singular time structure in which all subjects of the "modern

³⁶ Lim 2.

³⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 24.

nation” experience. Anderson explains that conceptions of time began to shift as nation building projects began. These projects required a homogenization of the masses, which caused conceptions of time to also be made uniform since, as Anderson explains, “The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.”³⁸ As Anderson posits, time then becomes a specific modalities in which the contestation of nation building can take place.

To return to the work of Lisa Lowe, she elaborates on Anderson’s theories and discusses the importance of cultural works in dismantling the hegemonic conception of time in *Immigrant Acts*. Again, she discusses that cultural productions are a site in which contradictions of capital and state erupt- thus, they wield the power to disrupt nationhood on a multitude of levels, including the structure of time³⁹. Lim also elucidates about theories of time in *Translating Time*, as she explores the ways in which subjects within cultural productions are affected by conceptions of empty, homogenous time. She states:

Colonialism and its aftermath underpin modern *historical time* and how, in turn, a view of time as homogenous, epitomized by ideology of progress, served as a temporal justification for imperialist expansion... imperialist discourse depended on a temporal strategy in which radical cultural differences brought to light by colonial contact were framed as primitive or anachronistic.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid, 26.

³⁹ Lowe, 26.

⁴⁰ Lim, *Translating Time*, 12- 13.

In other words, Lim then explains that the supernatural, “an anachronistic vestige of primitive, superstitious thought,” is then useful for disrupting these specific structures of time when they appear in modern film, which is, as Lim explains, also a “clockwork apparatus belonging to the regimes modern homogenous time.”⁴¹ The presence of supernatural figures in film, therefore, “insist[s] on the survival of the past or the jarring coexistence of other times.” Thus, the specific form of the fantastic film (or for this paper’s intent and purpose, the horror film) is a productive space in deconstructing modern, homogenized time due to the way supernatural tropes and figures are able to renegotiate conceptions of time. Thus, Derek functions as one such example of a character whose subjectivity is able to provide this contestation- through his different embodiments of time (human to non-human, dead to undead), he functions as a figure which directly challenges the construction of narrative, time, film, and nation building through his “insistence” of the existence of different formations of temporality.

Because of the characters’ subversive nature and ability to rupture such hegemonic structures, Derek, while clearly a vampire, can also be read as a ghost. Kathleen Brogan explains in *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* that the ghost in American literature is a figure that “re- creates ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past in the service of the present.”⁴² Thus, it is clear that the ghost is also one such supernatural figure that can not only refigure temporality, but also refigure constructions of race. Brogran’s reading of the ghost can also be considered alongside Grace Cho’s explanation in *Haunting of the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, in which she paraphrases from Avery Gordon, stating, “Ghosts

⁴¹ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 11.

⁴² Kathleen Brogan, *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 4.

or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well- trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us.”⁴³ Hauntings, then, “are unexamined irregularities of everyday life... a phenomenon that reveals how the past is in the present.”⁴⁴ By reading these two texts in tandem, it can then be posited that ghosts are figures which may relay erasures, and therefore, disrupt conceptions of time and race. Thus, as a figure that “reveals how the past is in the present,” Derek is a character, a ghostly (vampiric) subject in which through its critique potentially recuperates specific conditions of racial, temporal, and narrative construction.

Politics of Seeing and Resistance - Contesting Race in Asian American Horror

As demonstrated by these various components of the film, the construction of Derek as a racialized subject is complex and difficult to fully categorize. Thus, I find that Derek’s character exists, as he does in the film, in a liminal space as a resistant character and one that reproduces the tropes of racialization. Admittedly, I found that these critiques of the ways in which Derek is situated within the film only add to this complex matrix of Derek’s representation and positionality as an Asian American monster- though productive in reconceptualizing racialization within the film, can be read to perpetuate problematic conceptualizations in Asian American films. In other words, the earlier discussion situating Derek as a resistant character that possess the ability to rewrite homogenous structures of time and narrative perhaps come into contradiction with the way horror is constructed within the film. What does this contradiction

⁴³ Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 31.

⁴⁴ Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 30.

reveal? How might this reconfigure the analysis of this film and the general understandings of *Afflicted*? What does it mean that this bounded and severely stunted character is also able to resist?

These questions only continue when considering the ways *Afflicted* corresponds with its relationship to Asian American film. Coleman discusses in *Horror Noire* one of the primary conflicts when having these sorts of discussion. Within her text, Coleman explores the difference between the “Black Horror Film” and “Blacks in Horror Films” by stating:

Black horror films are informed by many of the same indicators of horror films, such as disruption, monstrosities, and fear. However, Black horror films are often ‘race’ films. That is, they have an added narrative focus that calls attention to racial identity... Black film is about black experiences and Black cultural traditions- a Black cultural milieu and history swirling around and cultural traditions.”⁴⁵

Perhaps, then, through Coleman’s standards, *Afflicted* cannot be considered an Asian American film. Arguably, normative notions of “Asian American cultural traditions” and “Asian experiences” are rarely, if ever, evoked within the film; Asian American themes in the film may not even appear explicit. Furthermore, this film has never been featured in the Asian American film festival circuit, nor is it receiving press or support from this particular network- typical characteristics of other such films within the genre. Thus, I ask, how might *Afflicted* be considered an Asian American (horror) film? While I attempted to unpack this through observing the ways in which Derek’s Asian American-ness is contested through temporality,

⁴⁵ Coleman, 7.

body horror, camera angles, and lighting, it is particularly interesting in considering the two films, *Afflicted* and *I am a Ghost* in tandem in considering the role of the undead, supernatural, and horror in contesting the parameters of Asian American film.

Chapter Two: I am a Ghost (Haunted Homes)

Released in 2012, *I am a Ghost* is director H.P. Mendoza's first foray into the horror film genre. As a prolific Filipino American playwright and director, *I am a Ghost* is a highly surrealist film in which Mendoza intentionally troubles temporality, narrative and familial structures through the usage of such horror tropes like haunted homes, troubled souls, and ghostly manifestations. As a director known for such work like *Colma: The Musical* in which Asian American themes consistently emerge, *I am a Ghost* proves to be yet another particularly probing site of Mendoza's work as the film demonstrates the collisions and parallels of horror and Asian American racialization.

Similar in structure to *Afflicted*, *I am a Ghost* is produced through the perspective of Anne Ishida, an Asian American (specifically Japanese American) actress, cast in the film's main role. This particular choice in casting not only presents the film with a focus on the monster, but in doing so, subsequently provides the viewers a visual representation of the construction of both normative (the family) and that of the non- normative (the ghost), particularly in the context of the film. Thus, my intention in reading this film is to not only to consider how Emily becomes produced as a queer subject, but also the how such formulation of her character explores and exposes the ways Asian American subjectivity is queered. This chapter will analyze the usage of repetition and (dis) embodiment as techniques utilized within the film to produce Emily as a deviant and queered figure that is fearful and feared. In doing so, I aim to foreground the contemporary moment's insistence and disciplining role of family and kinship structure in the production of Asian American subjectivity, and the ways in which such structures and discourses are destabilized through the manipulation of temporality.

Queered Family Structures

It is through this particular queer of color framework that *I am a Ghost* deconstructs and exposes the conception of normative familial and kinship structures. Chandan Reddy argues that since the passing of the 1965 Immigration Act, normative familial structures have been critical to the incorporation of Asian American subjects into the state and economic structure⁴⁶. Within contemporary formations of Asian American communities, it is such (neo)liberal heteronormative structures, like that of the family, that determines the assimilability of Asian American subjects. The central cause of haunting within *I am a Ghost* is the unsettled family unit- it is the main structure that haunts the protagonist while is itself also the haunted. Thus, while the plot of the film may be situated within a pre- '65 moment, *I am a Ghost* undoubtedly troubles the conception of normative familial and kinship structures through specific framing and characterizations of its protagonist Emily.

I am Ghost opens with a young woman named Emily who appears to be caught in a cyclical routine of performing such day to day activities like cooking eggs, making her bed, cleaning the living room, and eating lunch. While it is presumed that Emily has been stuck in this cycle for quite some time, it soon becomes clear that she does not remember nor realize that these daily actions are a continuous routine on an exaggerated repeat. Instead, she carries on every day, unknowingly performing the routine. Emily is seemingly isolated in a Victorian style home, until one day, she is confronted by a disembodied voice claiming to be a medium named Sylvia. Sylvia reveals to Emily that she is a ghost and that Emily is trapped in the home because

⁴⁶ Reddy, 110.

of her unresolved death (which is presumed to be a murder). Sylvia states that she is there to help Emily to let go of her haunting and cross over to the afterlife.⁴⁷

After several unsuccessful attempts, Emily is seemingly able to cross over. However, after having completed the ritual, it soon becomes clear that Emily is unable to depart her purgatory- her home- and is instead confronted with multiple manifestations of past/ present/ future selves performing her daily routine. Frustrated that the crossing over did not work as she intended, Sylvia forces Emily to make another devastating realization: Emily's murder was a suicide and, in order to achieve release, she must recognize the troubled, mentally ill, "monstrous" self within her. While initially terrified at the thought, Emily finally concedes and metaphorically releases the torment from within by unlocking the previously untouched attic. However, this, too, proves to be a ruse. By following Sylvia's orders, Emily unintentionally releases a monster in the form of a naked, starch-white demon, who then unleashes a violent hell so that Emily is condemned to the home and damned to forever relive the moment of her suicide. The movie ends with Emily, huddled and rocking in a corner as the lighting begins to dim, muttering "I am a ghost. I am a ghost."⁴⁸

While the action in *Afflicted* takes place cross-continentially because Derek is forced to continuously be on the move, *I am a Ghost* tracks a physically trapped and temporally contained protagonist. This spatial grounding of Emily is significant in that the importance of the home and the actions performed within is highlighted. For instance, when considering the opening montage of the film, the types of movements and memories depicted suggest the household where in which Emily is bounded is a normatively constructed space. However, these actions are undoubtedly read as suspect and peculiar. Because viewers are presented with images in a

⁴⁷ H.P. Mendoza, *I am a Ghost* (United States, Gravitas Ventures, 2013).

⁴⁸ Mendoza, 2013.

tragic and maddening sort of manner, it is presumed that Emily has been forced into repeating this grotesque performance of heteronormativity. Thus, while actions that Emily commits are seemingly ordinary, it is through the bounded repetition that the horror of the situation and Emily's non-normativity begin to emerge.

It is significant that it is the family structure and its role within the home that determines Emily as a non-normative and queered subject. Furthermore, it is not the *presence* of family that marks these distinctions, rather it is the conspicuous absence of Emily's family that produces Emily's queered subjectivity instead. Thus, there is only one scene in which the family is featured, and proves to be highly crucial to the film. It begins with a shot of Emily handling various figurines and pictures in the corner of her bedroom. She is sitting in front of a dark wall and is cast in a soft, light streaming in from the window as she contemplates the picture in her hand: it is that of a family, presumably Emily's, posed in an early twentieth century stylized photograph. The picture shows four subjects; an Asian American father, a white American mother, and two children. During this scene, Emily is framed in a tight close up, and is depicted as stroking the image of the young child, kissing the picture, and fondly gazing at the family. Though important, this moment in the film is rather fleeting, and is soon transitioned in to the next scene of Emily sweeping the kitchen.

While this scene is brief, it is critical in considering the ways in which Emily's family is central to the film. *I am a Ghost* takes place during an unspecified contemporary moment, which contrasts the ways in which Emily's family is grounded temporally in the past. And although the family remains static and frozen within the photographic space, it is this very partitioning of Emily from her family that concisely foregrounds the importance of the heteronormative structure of family within the film. Because Emily is a non-normative subject, she is removed

from the photograph and instead, relegated and framed within the home to conduct her hauntings. In other words, Emily's non- normative status is highlighted through her temporal irregularities and dual embodiments, and the hyper- normativity of the setting serves to highlight the non- normativity of Emily's status and her ghostly self.

These particular temporal embodiments of Emily and her parents highlight Emily's queered subjectivity. Despite her manual and affective labor in attempts to normalize herself, Emily cannot join her family (both in the physical and "spiritual" realm). In other words, Emily's inability to reach her family marks her sexually, racially, and gendered deviant and monstrous, and therefore relegated to the purgatorial space that is her home.

Repeating Embodiments

As demonstrated by the first half of the film, this explicit rendering of Emily as a queer, deviant, and monstrous figure is represented through the repeated movements, motifs, and actions throughout the film. The temporal structure of the first half of the film shifts, however, once Emily crosses over. Following the seemingly successful crossing over with Sylvia, Emily's previously depicted routine- eating breakfast, making the bed, sweeping- is broken as Emily suddenly comes into consciousness regarding her status. As she moves freely throughout the house, Emily begins to see the "memories" of herself performing the repetitive tasks of her previous routine (frying eggs, eating dinner, making the bed, etc.) Emily revisits the rooms of her home, confronting the imprints of herself throughout, and starts to outwardly express the "craziness" and "absurdity" of the situation. Eventually, Emily begins to dialogue with Sylvia as her recognition of her ghostly and undead status begins to set in. While walking through the

home and observing the “imprint” Emilys, she ponders, “So are you telling me that these are nothing more than reflections of myself? They aren’t real people? Are you telling me they can’t hear me? Are you telling me they can’t hear anything?”⁴⁹ As she finishes her question, “conscious” Emily waves her hand in front of an “imprinted” Emily walking towards her, to which the “imprinted” Emily suddenly reacts by unexpectedly whipping around, and making direct, threatening, and foreboding eye contact. The “conscious” Emily is horrified and cowers silently as the moment passes and the “imprint” Emily moves on to mop the floor, continuing on her routine.

This utilization of self- induced fear and the terror serves to highlight the complex monstrosity of Emily, which not only further emphasizes her queered subjectivity, but highlights the divergence between her and her family. Furthermore, the solitude of Emily is accentuated when compared to the figure of Sylvia, whose disembodied presence is critical in the manifesting of Emily’s haunting as well. In direct contrast to the multiple manifestations of Emily (the imprinted Emilys, the naked, white man), Sylvia is never seen in the film. She is merely a female voice that directs Emily’s actions. In other words, she is the disciplining force attempting to bridge the multiple temporalities together- that being, rupturing the routine and linking Emily to the present, to the once forgotten past, and condemned future- in order to piece together the normative family structure that once existed in the household. And unlike Emily who is fractured into multiple embodiments and temporalities, Sylvia is stable, normative, and fully in control of her own self.

⁴⁹ Mendoza, 2013.

In order to understand this relationship of embodiment and temporality, particularly within the horror film, it is useful to consider Bliss Lim, once again, and her work *Translating Time*. She states:

The fantastic is a genre whose forked worlds- two radically different orders of events, or experiential forestructures- are represented as concrete places within the film frame. This is why mise- en- scene in fantastic cinema is so frequently invested with significance; both filmmakers and viewers know that setting, light, color, and the look of the figures onscreen literalize the otherness of that world in comparison with the world of everyday life.⁵⁰

In other words, Lim explains that it is the reliance on mise- en- scene, or more specifically, the cinematic components and character embodiments, that are crucial in understanding the distinction between that of the supernatural/ fantastical temporality and that of the realistic. Thus, when considering *I am a Ghost*, it is significant that it is only Emily and the naked, white monster (a subconscious extension of herself) that are depicted in a full corporeal form, while Emily's family and Sylvia remain either invisible or absent from the film. This contrast between the "figures onscreen" further emphasizes the supernatural and the "real". Emily and the white, naked monster are the supernatural elements of the film, and therefore occupy a space (the house) wherein which temporality is non- linear, formless, and manipulated. The "non- supernatural" elements of the film, that being Sylvia and Emily's family, are then glaringly occluded from this space.

⁵⁰ Lim, 122.

Lim's assertions are further supported by the ways lighting is utilized within *I am a Ghost*. As depicted within the aforementioned scene, fear and horror is produced through the ways in which the two Emilys are contrasted and framed differently. Within the scene, the "imprinted" Emily is aligned left, and shot with a medium angle, while the "conscious" Emily is held in the center amongst a wide angle. Lighting is also critical in this scene, wherein the "conscious" Emily is cast under a bright, yellow light and the "imprinted" Emily is framed in a more natural, soft light. Such framing in the scene not only effectively produces a severe contrast between the two, but also highlights the "conscious" Emily's fear of herself as past erasures and forgotten memories begin to emerge. Furthermore, it is critical to note that the "imprinted" Emily is also carrying a pail and a mop, implying the action of erasure, of sterilization. These items not only demonstrate the "imprint" Emily's hand in expunging the past, but also her helplessness as she is forced into this repetitious existence devoid of the power of recall. Thus, it is with these specific creative choices that this scene fully encapsulates Emily's terror and fear, particularly towards herself and the realization of her plight.

As the scene between the two Emilys suggest, lighting is significant component in tracking the changing subjectivity of Emily. Throughout the film, a soft, natural light streaming in through the windows is employed in framing the Emily and the house. However, as the film begins to reach its terrifying end, the lighting intensifies, becomes harsh, and eventually begins to darken as Emily is sequestered into the space of the home. By the conclusion of the film, Emily is plunged directly into darkness. By considering how lighting is utilized within this context, it further supports Lim's assertions in that it clearly exposes the ways in which mise-en-scene is utilized in marking Emily's growing realization of her supernatural and queered subjectivity whose race, gender, and sexual performance are considered non- normative and

monstrous. The tracking of Emily and her attempts into normalization are then highlighted by the literal usage of light- her ghostly self attempts to find the light (i.e., normativity), but presumably never does. Therefore, the light remains outside of the home, time remains in fractals, and Emily is forever cast into the darkness.

Queered Discipline

Jasbir Puar and Amit S. Rai explain in “Monsters, Terrorists and Fags: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” that monstrosity is intersectionally produced through the lenses of sexuality and race which then subsequently disciplines the subject who is demarcated as such. She states,

According to Foucault, the monster can be both half an animal and a hybrid gender... and we believe... an analysis of monstrosity is framed within a broader history of sexuality. And this is because monsters and abnormal have always also been sexual deviants. Foucault tied monstrosity to sexuality through specific analyses of the deployment of gendered bodies, the regulation of proper desires, the manipulation of domestic spaces, and the taxonomy of sexual acts. As such, the sexualized monster was that figure that called forth a form of juridical power but one that was tied to multiform apparatuses of discipline as well.⁵¹

⁵¹ Jasbir Puar, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” *Social Text* 20.3 (2002): 119.

As Puar makes clear within her text, the production of monstrous and queered figures act as a form of sexual and racial disciplining. Thus, if we were to apply Puar's assertions to Emily, it then becomes clear that Emily is undoubtedly disciplined throughout the film. While the ambiguous ending of the film complicates Emily's subjectivity as a (ghostly) monster, the horror, fear, and terror arises not so much from Emily's ghostly status; rather, it is her inability to fit within these narratives of normative kinship and familial structures that produces the scares instead.

Another critical way in which Emily is disciplined in to her status as a queer figure is through the ways in which she is framed as a mentally ill subject. As Reynaldo Illeto states in his work, "Cholera and the Origins of the American Sanitary Order in the Philippines,"

What needs to be pointed out in an alternative history is that fine, humanitarian objectives mask other dimensions of colonial health and welfare measures: the 'disciplining' of the populace, the supervision and regulation of more and more aspects of life, and the suppression or elimination of what the state perceived as forms of resistance, disorder, and irrationality. The participation of natives in colonial health and sanitation matters implicates them in the process."⁵² (114)

Quite similar to the work of Nyan Shah, Illeto argues that in the past, the medicalization and pathologization of subjects has been as significant way of asserting heteronormative protocols onto the bodies of colonized subjects while simultaneously identifying and marking subjects who are found un-incorporable. I argue that Emily was one such figure, marked as deviant through the framing of her as a mentally- ill medical subject. Within *I am a Ghost*, the focus on the

⁵² Reynaldo C. Illeto, "Cholera and the Origins of the American Sanitary Order in the Philippines," in *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies*, ed. David Arnold (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 114.

demonization of mental illness and a psychotic, mystical, and monstrous subject aligns with what Ileo describes as the process of disciplining. Thus, Emily was disciplined into a queer and monstrous figure, wherein which she is ultimately silenced because of the ways in which her illogical and frightening self is found to be uncontainable into a normative medical/ biological framework.

A significant way in which her pathologization as a mentally ill and horrific figure is depicted was through the film's primary narrative arc of Sylvia's attempt to define Emily's subjectivity. Throughout the film, Emily is an undefined entity- while her background and past traumas are somewhat explained (Sylvia reveals that Emily was diagnosed with multiple personality disorder), the validity of such an accusation is never verified, and Sylvia remains an unreliable character. Why and how Emily's haunting exists is never fully revealed (particularly as the viewers are lead to realize that Sylvia is not quite who she seems), rather, Emily's cursed state is constructed through silences. Furthermore, the main premise of the film is to uncover the "truth," or the invalidation of the "forgotten/ suppressed, the dissonant, disorderly, irrational, archaic, and subversive."⁵³ In other words, Sylvia intends to interpellate Emily as a subject through breaking her curse. This is clearly demonstrated within the last half of the film, as the two race to figure out the reason for Emily's haunting. Even though the reason is seemingly discovered, and the man in the attic is released, they are still unable to define Emily and as the viewers realize that Emily's ghostly state not only remains unchanged, but is in fact, reproduced. Such framing of Emily as a deviant, queer monster not only as a ghost, but also a mentally ill individual, only acts to further strengthen such distancing of Emily from her family and "normative" performances of race, sex, and gender.

⁵³ Reynaldo, 125.

Emily's Tragedy

It is through this complex subject formation conducted through the lens of mental health, shifting temporalities, multiple embodiments, and spatial and temporal grounding that Emily is ultimately produced as a monstrous and queered figure within the film. Similar to *Afflicted*, I argue that these particular conditions and depictions expressed within *I am a Ghost* directly expose the ways in which racialized figures are rendered non- normative and monstrous. By considering the ways in which Emily was produced as deviant, the representations of these films reveal how Asian American horror films are sites that evoke these contemporary conditions of connecting familial structures to notions of normativity and (proper) racial performance. Ultimately, Emily is queered because of her inability to fulfill such conceptions and therefore becomes the monster and ghost within the film.

However, while Emily's plight is certainly tragic, it is also critical in considering the ways in which such a portrayal embodies multiple existence of temporal structures that reveal the disciplining nature of normative kinship and family making practices. Lim emphasizes that visuality, repeating motifs, and manipulated embodiments are critical channels that allow the supernatural/ the anachronistic to exist. Thus, by considering Emily's monstrosity through these various lenses, these erased violences produced through attempts at normalizing kinship structures erupt, as demonstrated by the various components within this film.

Conclusion

More so than any other of Mendoza's other works, *I am a Ghost* has generated a steady following online. Within the website for the film, there exists a section wherein which fans can post their thoughts regarding the ambiguous plot and the ending. From theories ranging from Emily's haunting as a form of repressed sexuality to Emily as a fictional rendering of Emily Dickinson, such deliberate a maneuver in including audience participation relates heavily to Carol Clover's theorizations in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, in which she posits that the deviancy and monstrosity in horror films not only queer the characters, but subsequently queer the audience as well.

By considering the audience within the already complex matrix of queered embodiments, horrific violence, and supernatural action within the genre of horror, the potentiality of Asian American horror films to rupture the cinematic (and other such hegemonic) structures is further heightened through the unique matter of audience participation. While my project has primarily considered the ways in which characters are interpellated through different mechanisms within the films, it is also necessary in considering the role of the audience and how such time disciplining and queered embodiments are displaced on to their bodies as well.

The relationship between the horror film and time is clearly illustrated through *Afflicted* and *I am a Ghost*: within *Afflicted*, time is documented and displayed through time stamps noting the elapsed time, technology such as that of the DSLR capturing the footage of the trip, and through a deliberate contrasting of Old World settings with a modern framework of disease and affliction. On the other hand, *I am a Ghost* emphasizes repetition, costuming, and set design to highlight the temporal moment in which the film is set. Undoubtedly, as these depiction within these films highlight, time is not only important in producing the horror within the film, but also

emphasizing the ways in which Derek and Emily, as queered, racialized bodies and subjects, are contained within the film.

But what are the implications for the audience of such films? How are the individuals who watch such horrors and violence become part of- or disconnect from- such temporal structures? How is time compressed or fractured through such virtual modes of participation? How do horror films become queered through viewership? Such questions are the next step in this project, particularly as horror movies continue to become a particularly contentious and critical genre not only within the film industry, but for such fields like that of Asian American Studies as a particularly significant site wherein which racialization, queerness, embodiment and temporality can erupt into a perfectly nasty, terrifying, and unresolvable tale.

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