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Generic Asians:
Surplus and Sensation in Anglophone Popular Culture

by

Shanjie Hu

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Film Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Colleen Lye, Chair

Professor Weihong Bao

Professor Mark Goble

Summer 2022

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Abstract

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Professor Colleen Lye, Chair

Asian American literary and cultural studies have long proceeded from the premise that the absence of Asians in American media requires corrective representation. This dissertation, “Generic Asians,” asks what it means to think about Asianness at a contemporary moment when Asian cultural productions have been spectacularly successful, and claims to under-representation are increasingly implausible. Reading a range of internationally successful texts—from Kazuo Ishiguro’s, Ruth Ozeki’s, and Charles Yu’s novels to Ang Lee’s films—I show how Asians have permeated Anglophone popular culture by mobilizing every genre of Oriental stereotype. The globalization of contemporary Asian Anglophone mass culture during the current era of U.S. decline has unfolded through a process of uncanny remediations by both Asian American and Asian diasporic artists working primarily in English. In adapting imperial genres, new Asian artists transform what I call the “generic Asian”—the Oriental stereotypes of British and American imperialisms—into the sensational surplus of contemporary culture. The rise of Asia has occurred not through the representation of Asian bodies, but through the mass dissemination of generic forms.

“Generic Asians” presents an account of contemporary Asian Anglophone cultural production that locates its aesthetic origins in British imperial dreamscapes. It links the heterogeneous oeuvres of popular Asian Anglophone writers and filmmakers by revealing their shared repurposing of British genre fiction ranging from historical romances and melodrama to detective novels and science fiction. As Victorian and postcolonial scholars have shown us, mid-nineteenth-century British writers disseminated these popular genres, with their Orientalizing characters, to fuel imperial expansion. More recently, Asian American scholars have demonstrated how twentieth-century U.S. writers and filmmakers marshaled the same genres to popularize tropes of Asian alterity—from “yellow peril” to “model minority”—in negotiating American power. This dissertation argues that, in our post-1970s era of U.S. economic stagnation and the accumulation of capital in a so-called “rising East Asia,” emerging Asian Anglophone artists recapture these same imperial genres to imagine new forms of Asian subjecthood and subjection. I unfold this process as itself a story of inscrutability: Asians pervade contemporary cultural production not only by representing typical Asian bodies and characters, but by adapting canonical Anglophone literary genres. Even as Anglophone culture remains the stage upon which hegemonic transition is performed, I show how

the rise of Asian Anglophone cultural production proliferates generic Asianness both as stereotypical character and as literary genres.

As new technologies secure the progressive globalization of popular media, “Generic Asians” analyzes how emergent East Asian powers recirculate hegemonic cultural forms to reconceive who—and what—now constitutes the “Anglophone.” I re-evaluate Orientalist discourse through the genre of the *East Asian Anglophone*—an underexamined category despite how our sense of global futurity now hinges on China’s economic rise. The postcolonial paradigm in global Anglophone studies must be adapted, however, for places like Japan and China who are not only subjugated by Anglo-American powers, but are themselves imperial and colonializing nations. In being imperial and colonizing powers themselves. By focusing on ethnically Japanese and Chinese Anglophone artists, my dissertation reframes East Asian tropes with centuries-long Orientalist archives. I look specifically at internationally successful Asian artists—the Nobel-winning Ishiguro and the Oscar-winning Lee—to examine how the transaction between economic, cultural, and racial capital is negotiated on the world market. These auteurs’ globality, I argue, often appears to precede or even eclipse their Asianness. As with capital itself, the language of flexibility surrounding generic Asians and genres of Asian diaspora reconceives ethnic identity in our current moment—away from an older discourse of U.S. assimilation, and toward one that emphasizes the heterogeneity of Asian racialization in a more global context.

Far from a deadened typology, generic Asianness is constituted by its labile categorical flexibility, transforming in the work of Ishiguro, Lee, and others into a racial trope that now exceeds its initial reification. By remediating older Anglophone genres, new Asian artists further pervert them by flaunting not only the genericness of their Eurocentric narratives, but also the genericness of their racial stereotypes. Alongside its more obvious economic threat, Asia’s aesthetic production has begun to loom large on the cultural map, torquing and undoing Anglophone genres from inside out. While my chapters examine increasingly speculative and multi-mediated representations of Asian racialization, these examples are not simply decontextualized rejections of Victorian realism, but, I argue, a series of contemporary iterations that tests the genre’s initial Eurocentrism by using the logic and tropes immanent to realism’s form.

*In memory of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick;
And for my parents.*

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Introduction

Generic Theory

Is Kazuo Ishiguro an Asian American writer? At a Modern Language Association conference in the late 1990s, a panel on Asian American literature drifted off track when a presenter was asked to “explain” Kazuo Ishiguro. “Though none of the panelists had made so much as a passing reference to any of [his] work,” recalls Tomo Hattori, “the session dissolved into a free-ranging discussion on the definition of Asian American literature, and Ishiguro’s name became the test of that boundary.”¹ A British novelist of Japanese descent, Ishiguro might appear to be an odd, even inappropriate, figure around which to draw the map of Asian American literature. Yet this scene, which functions as a passing anecdote in an essay responding to the disciplinary restructurings of the 1990s, is indicative of broader shifts in the grounding of Asian American studies as a field both then and now.

Emerging from the cultural nationalism of the 1960s, Asian American studies’ conception of Asian American identity has since undergone a series of transformations, responding to changes in patterns of immigration and social mobility in the U.S. as well as the progressive globalization of both Asian bodies and capital. While Hattori does not dismiss the incident out of hand—indeed he continually returns to Ishiguro as a “curious enigma of Asian American borderline culture”—his essay ultimately leaves the status of Ishiguro himself an open question.² That is, while Hattori notes the fixation with Ishiguro as telling, he does not elaborate on what exactly it *tells* us. One of my aims in what follows is to explore how Ishiguro’s literary corpus plays a crucial role in the still unfolding story of contemporary Asian America and its futures in global Anglophone literature and film.

“Generic Asians: Surplus and Sensation in Anglophone Popular Culture” argues that the vexed writing and rewriting of Asian America both illuminates and fits uncomfortably within the broader category of the world or global Anglophone.³ This dissertation works to bring these contiguous fields into direct dialogue, historicizing their conditions of emergence by contextualizing

¹ Hattori circles around this anecdote about Ishiguro’s status in Asian American literature in an essay that is otherwise largely about the status of Maxine Hong Kingston’s canonically Asian American novel *China Men*. For Hattori, Kingston’s Ah Goong in *China Men* serves as an “emblematic and explanatory figure” that tests the limits of what he calls “model minority discourse” (216)—that is, the cultural nationalism that still dominated Asian American studies during the late 1990s. Tomo Hattori, “*China Man* Autoeroticism and the Remains of Asian America,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 31.2 (1998), 218.

² Ibid., 216. While Hattori reads the controversy over Ishiguro’s Asian “ethnicity” as bearing on the definition of Asian American literature, his essay only goes so far as to read Ishiguro’s English butler in *The Remains of the Day* as a “model minority” figure because of his allegiances to a national culture and its system of values.

³ I am particularly indebted to conversations with Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, in addition to her scholarship on contextualizing the emergent field of the “global Anglophone” in the longer histories of postcolonial and Victorian studies, and especially as a potential renomination of the postcolonial by another term. See Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, “Introduction: South Asian from Postcolonial to World Anglophone,” *Interventions*, 20.3 (2018): 309-16; Srinivasan, “Keyword: Postcolonial.” MLA Annual Convention, 6 Jan. 2018, New York Hilton Midtown. See also other essays from Srinivasan’s special issue of *Interventions* titled “From Postcolonial to World Anglophone: South Asia as Test Case,” especially Akshya Saxena’s “A Worldly Anglophony: Empire and Englishes” and Gaurav Desai’s “Response: Postcolonial, by Any Other Name?” For other foundational scholarship that helps frame the global Anglophone in terms of the (post)colonial dissemination of English-language texts and discursive practices, Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015); Aamir Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

the contemporary cultural productions they aim to theorize and describe. In the current institutional revisionings of these fields, Asian American studies frequently ends up the subordinated term in a tripartite structure, caught somewhere between scholarship on the postcolonial and the global Anglophone. Even as Asian Americanists have turned to global Anglophone and diaspora studies for new life—pushing their inquiries beyond U.S. borders—certain postcolonial literary and media scholars are conversely including Asian Americanist histories within their conception of their respective fields. These dynamics are being played out at the level of academic hiring, but they are also indicative of larger geopolitical transformations in the post-1970s era of U.S. economic stagnation and the accumulation of global capital in a so-called “rising East Asia.”⁴ This is the world historical backdrop against which my arguments here unfold, as I track the shifting contours of Asian Anglophone literature and film, media and academic reception, and institutional forms and disciplinary logics.

This dissertation asks how this story of our changing world order—a story about the simultaneous erosion of American cultural hegemony and the spread of English in Asia and among Asians in a growing diaspora—has transformed Anglophone cultural production and Asian self-representation. “Generic Asians” argues that the answer to this question begins with the popular genres of the nineteenth-century British empire—historical romance, sentimental fiction, melodrama, detective novels—and ends with their uncanny remediations by twenty-first century Asian writers and filmmakers.⁵ In my first chapter, I explore how Ishiguro’s generically eclectic body of work exemplifies this trajectory. Next, I follow the arc of popular Taiwanese American director Ang Lee’s filmic oeuvre—which similarly ranges in genre—as a cinematic counterpart to Ishiguro’s Asian Anglophone literary fiction. Lee’s career on the world stage echoes Ishiguro’s, evolving from a minor artist of supposedly “ethnic” narratives to a major auteur of “universal” Anglophone themes. Key to this development, I argue, is Lee’s identification of the inter-medial flexibility of popular genres—from novel to script to screen.⁶ When Lee responds to adapting Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) for film by saying “I understood it in my heart,” he’s voicing more than a personal attachment; he’s asserting the affective resonance of Austen’s sentimental novel across nineteenth- and twentieth-century global contexts.⁷ The sentimental excesses of imperial genres allow Lee, Ishiguro, and other contemporary Asian Anglo-American writers to draw out new meanings for Oriental stereotypes that the nineteenth-century texts overlook.

⁴ For influential accounts of this periodization, see Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994); Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005* (London: Verso, 2006); David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: and the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a foundational work that heralds the postwar economic threat of Japan, see Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan as Number One* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁵ I am especially indebted to Jed Esty’s scholarship on the recycling of popular narrative forms and genres from the late 19th century British empire to the 20th century American one. See, in particular, Jed Esty, “After the West: Conrad and Nabokov in Long-Wave Literary History,” *PMLA* 137.5 (2022): 1-16; Esty, *The Future of Decline: Anglo-American Culture at its Limits* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2022).

⁶ For an authoritative history on the mediation between literary and film genres, see Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Pub, 1999). In the context of film theory, Altman’s study is exemplary in grounding his understanding of film genres in a longer genealogy of literary genre theory, from Plato and Aristotle to the present. Key to Altman’s intervention is his meta-generic framing of genre theory itself—that is, of genres as arising from an active theoretical endeavor to differentiate between schools of thought, and how this categorical impulse persists today even as critics move toward more interdisciplinary and intermedial scholarship. Because literary scholars still largely associate Altman’s approach to genre theory with his essay on “A Semantic/Syntactical Approach to Film Genre,” (*Cinema Journal* 23.3 [1984], 6-18), it is useful to note that Altman himself revises his argument in that essay toward the end of *Film/Genre*.

⁷ “In conversation with Ang Lee,” *Harper’s Bazaar UK* (Jan 18, 2013).

If British imperial genre fiction once famously produced and proliferated Oriental stereotypes, then contemporary Asian artists now seize the very core of stereotyping—the art of genericness—as a figure of Asianness in its own right. The generic, glimpsed in the modifier “genre” (as in “genre fiction,” for example), is that which rewards formulaic expectations and wish fulfillments, as well as that which is generally devalued because it implies surplus.⁸ When you have multiples of something, it becomes “generic”; or, something becomes “generic” through its excessive reproducibility. My term “generic Asians” may be understood not only as the surplus bodies of Asian migrant or factory workers, but also as the sensationalized Oriental stereotypes of imperial fictions, whose sly transition from minor (peripheral) trope to major “centered” character now threatens to unravel the organizing logic of these Eurocentric genres. Far from a deadened typology of the last millennium, generic Asianness is constituted by its labile categorical flexibility, transforming in the work of Ishiguro, Lee, and others into a racial trope that now exceeds its initial reification. By re-mediating older Anglophone genres, new Asian artists further pervert them by flaunting not only the genericness of their Eurocentric narratives, but also the genericness of their racial stereotypes.

Alongside its more obvious economic prominence, Asia’s aesthetic production has begun to loom large on the cultural map. Yet the modality of this rise is distinctive—not a supplantation of Anglophone genres so much as a torquing and undoing of them from inside out. At the center of this undoing is a figure or figuration that remains hidden in plain sight—a style, if you will, of generic disappearance. This returns us to the elusiveness of Ishiguro’s relevance to Asian American studies. Ishiguro’s ethnicity is important to the study of contemporary Asian American writing only incidentally; what is more important is how his writing engages and negotiates a longer history of global vernacular and cultural forms through the writing of generic Asians.

I. Generic Crises

In the wake of 1965 U.S. immigration reforms, the critical definitions and generic forms of Asian America have grown even more fragmented and plastic.⁹ As many scholars have already noted, the growing transnationalization of contemporary Asian American existence places increasing

⁸ So many strains of genre theory and historiography have contributed to my conceptualization of “Generic Asians” that the very term “genre” has at times seemed to turn in on itself, dissolving the norms and boundaries that define particular genres, per Jacques Derrida’s famous “law of genre” (“The Law of Genre,” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge [New York: Routledge, 1992], 221-252). Given the provisional taxonomical nature of any individual genre at any given time, my approach to genre in this dissertation is not only organized around certain *qualitative* expectations of narrative fulfillment and aesthetic form, but also around *quantitative* issues of relative scale. For work on genre and specifically popular “genre fiction” that is both known and degraded for its mass reproducibility, see Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1982); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁹ See Min Hyoung Song’s discussion of a new cohort of Asian American writers following the 1965 immigration acts, whose work collectively tests and reframes prior notions of pre-1965 Asian American ethnic identity and cultural life. In particular, Song emphasizes the formal and generic eclecticism of these contemporary Asian American writers, whose work “span genres, forms, and even mediums, ranging from fiction and poetry to life writing, creative nonfiction, and comics” (25). While Song notes that his book focuses on work “restricted to print culture in order to make the scope manageable,” it also actively invites scholars to take seriously the inter-medial quality of contemporary Asian American literary production. Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

pressure on the invented pan-ethnicity of an Asian *America*.¹⁰ Despite the evolution of Asian America as an expanding diasporic category, this dissertation nonetheless cautions against subsuming “Asian American studies” under the disciplinary banner of the “global Anglophone.” Such a recategorization, I argue, risks deferring or eliding the political tensions of nationalism and race that continue to animate the cultural production and reception of Asian-inflected texts in the Anglo-American world. The contemporary generic Asian of this dissertation thus necessarily straddles both American and postcolonial Anglophone conceptions of Asiatic “racial form,” emerging at the intersection of individual nations and global empires at a moment of U.S. hegemony in transition.¹¹

I began with an anecdote regarding Ishiguro’s controversial status in Asian American literary studies at the turn of the twentieth century because he is not only an exemplary *Asian* Anglophone figure, but a *global* Anglophone auteur as well—one who can help us think through the generic questions of transnationalism and diaspora. Ishiguro enters this dissertation not as an historical anomaly or literary outlier, in other words, but as a representative case study for both the ongoing redefinition of Asian America as a transnational formation, and for ongoing formal experimentations within Asian American literature. Indeed, the very premise of asking a panel of Asian American literary scholars in the late 1990s to “explain” Ishiguro suggests the categorical interchangeability of Asian Americans and what we might call “generic Asians,” such as Ishiguro, who are recognized in the Anglophone world primarily through their ethnic, rather than national, difference. Since then, the intimacies between Asian America and the global Asian diaspora have become increasingly difficult to ignore and, indeed, to parse—both in the international circulation, translation, and reception of Asian-authored English-language literature, as well as in the American college classroom, where Asian American citizens and international Asian students frequently interact. Even in the course of writing this dissertation, the contours of Asian American literature—always already an elastic category—have only grown more heterogeneous and contested, much like those of Asian America itself.

While the twenty-first century has seen an unprecedented flourishing of Asian American literary and cultural production, the field of Asian American studies has, during that same period, undergone a series of institutional crises. It is no accident too that literature has so often mediated these crises, which have largely centered on the politics of representation. When the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) gave its fiction award to Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s novel *Blu’s Hanging* in 1998 (the same year as Hattori’s essay on the state of the field), the decision sparked immense controversy and what has come to be viewed as the field’s “crisis of representation.”¹² Upon

¹⁰ Following the transnational and post-identity turns of the 1980 and 1990s, Asian American studies has undergone a series of a paradigm shifts, whether in the form of new additive histories, critiques of old institutional histories, or alternative heuristics that take on non-human ontological or affective objects. While Asian American study built itself around the inclusiveness of a heterogeneous and invented pan-ethnicity, turn-of-the-century scholarship finds itself, as Rachel Lee describes it, “relishing the fragment,” “plastic transformations,” and “weak ethnicity” of Asian racialization. See Rachel Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 8-9.

¹¹ Colleen Lye’s concept of “Asiatic racial form” articulates a theory of American Orientalism in which Asian American racialization is expressed not as biological essentialism, but through historically situated literary and aesthetic forms. See Lye, “Racial Form,” *Representations* 104.1 (2008). For scholarship on the relationship between novelistic form and Asian American racialization, see especially Jinqi Ling, *Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Christopher Lee, *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (Stanford University Press, 2012); Yoon Sun Lee, *Modern Minority: Asian American Literature and Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹² The *Blu’s Hanging* controversy marked one of the signal moments of this “crisis,” and mobilized some of the most important critiques in the field of Asian American studies. For varying perspectives on this event and its relevance for

receiving the award, Yamanaka—a Japanese American novelist living in Hawai‘i—was immediately called out for what was viewed as the offensive sexualization and stereotyping of Filipino men in her novel otherwise largely focused on a Japanese family. While these protests resulted in the subsequent rescinding of the prize and nearly led to the dissolution of the association itself, the debate surrounding Yamanaka’s status as an Asian American writer is symptomatic of broader changes in the representational status of ethnic American literature during the late 1990s.¹³ Placed side by side, the mutually troubling positions of Yamanaka and Ishiguro—one Japanese American and the other Japanese British—regarding the definition and institutionalization of Asian American literature underscore critical overlaps between ethnic and national identity in the formation of this category.¹⁴ For while the problem of *Blu’s Hanging* involves the demeaning misrepresentation of one particular type of Asian American, the question of Ishiguro’s place in Asian American literature is about the misrecognition of a diasporic Asian Anglophone figure for a typical Asian American one. Both can be viewed as crises of representation for a field increasingly uncertain as to the boundary definitions of Asian America—of who can or cannot seemingly function as a representative “generic Asian” in contemporary American literature.

That these crises of representation are fought over the terrain of literary representation is all the more telling, given how the categorizing impulse to define distinct “genres” of ethnic identity interact with the aesthetic forms of literary genres. Because Asian American identity is a sociohistorical construct—organized around what Susan Koshy calls a “fictional notion of unity”—its narrativization through literary fiction is social and contingent, always routed through the ideological and material pressures surrounding racialization.¹⁵ Here, too, genre plays an important mediating role, as categories of “Asianness” in the American scene are variously reproduced, reified,

Asian American studies, see Candace Fujikane, “Sweeping Racism under the Rug of ‘Censorship’: The Controversy over Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging*,” *Amerasia Journal* 26.2 (2000), 159-94; Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature & Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). For an intellectual history of Asian American studies’ crisis of representation in the American university at large, as well as how it relates to broader questions of ethnic studies and racial capitalism, see Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). For a more pedagogical engagement that takes the controversy around Yamanaka’s work to “teach the conflicts” of literary studies, see erin Khuê Ninh, “Teaching *Blu’s Hanging*,” *Pedagogy* 15.2 (2015), 233-251.

¹³ On various debates surrounding the institutionalization of ethnic literature and studies in U.S. universities during the late 1980s and early 1990s—often known as the “canon wars,” and hardly isolated to only Asian American literature—spurred by the liberal discourse of “multiculturalism” and “diversity,” see *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

¹⁴ See Susan Koshy’s influential 1996 essay, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” which examines the difficulty of theorizing contemporary Asian American literature because of “the premises and assumptions underlying our constructions of commonality and difference” (469). For Koshy, “Asian America” is a “fictional” and “catachrestic” category whose coherence is always a future-tending conjectural one due to the continually changing demographic realities of contemporary Asian America. Koshy’s argument has lost none of its relevance over the years, as many critics such as Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai, Donald C. Goellnicht, Christopher Lee, and Colleen Lye have more recently written. If anything, the growing heterogeneity of what constitutes contemporary Asian America has only made “Asian America” an even more fictional category. One of the gambits of this dissertation is that rather than theorizing “Asian America” through its more familiar rubrics (that is, as a political, ethnic, racial, or even fictional category), we might productively conceptualize it as a popular *generic* category. See Susan Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9.2 (1996), 316-46; Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai, and Donald C. Goellnicht, “Theorizing Asian American Fiction” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 56.1 (2010), 1-18; Christopher Lee, “Asian American Literature and the Resistances of Theory” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 52.1 (2010), 19-39; Colleen Lye, “Reading for Asian American Literature” in *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, edited by Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (Malden, Mass: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 483-499.

¹⁵ Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” 318.

or contested through the horizon of narrative and affective expectations pertaining to specific literary genres. As Rey Chow argues,

Asian Americans are perhaps the paradigmatic case of a coercive mimeticism that physically keeps them in their place [...] and, I would add, in their *genre* of speaking/writing as nothing but *generic* Asian Americans. The visible, *genetic* signs of ‘ethnic difference’ on their bodies—an accident of birth—become, in this light, the referential limits embedded in their otherwise proliferating discourse.”¹⁶

Writing from the perspective of comparative literary studies, Chow views Asian Americans as paradigmatic generic subjects not just because “there is no literal referent for the rubric ‘Asian American’” (as Koshy argues) but because the English language is extrinsic to Asian American as a racial identity.¹⁷ Because Asian American studies and literature is still predominantly conducted in and through English, Asian American literary criticism must account for its mediation not just through English-language texts but also, I contend, generic Anglophone forms. Racial form is thus also a generic form—and, as my dissertation will show through its readings of generic Asian authors and filmmakers, Asian American racial form perhaps especially so.

In contrast to the currently dominant approaches to the field, which define it using an increasingly additive logic, I seek to read the constitution of the category of “Asian America” dialectically, such that the ongoing writing and expanding literary production of Asian American and Asian diasporic authors working in English can help us see the initial canon of Asian American literature as always already global. Ishiguro’s peripheral status can help us begin to redescribe the map of Asian America, and indeed American, literature anew. This is not only because of his exemplary status as one of the first prominent contemporary Asian writers writing in English, but because his novels triangulate postwar Japanese, American, and British imperial powers in the waning decades of the American Century. As my first chapter explores, almost all of Ishiguro’s novels are written in the genre of historical fiction—but in being historical fiction, they are also persistently taking the temperature of the contemporary.¹⁸ Embedded inside the story about the writing of American literature is an ongoing story about the writing of global Anglophone literature, in which Asian diasporic authors working in English now play a crucial and decisive part.

“Generic Asians” seeks to bring Asian American and Asian Anglophone diaspora artists together with the aims of describing the existing maps of Asian American cultural production as part of the larger territory of Asian diaspora. I do this not just by examining the shifting geopolitical contours of post-1970s Asian American and Asian diaspora, but also by examining the persistence of a much longer history of Asian representation that has been mediated through Anglophone literary and cultural forms—and specifically through popular literary genres from the late-nineteenth-century British empire. In doing so, I attend to the material history of literary forms across global capitalism’s *longue durées*, following the recurrence of hegemonic cultural forms dialectically as they get recaptured by different imperial powers: British, American, and now Asian.

¹⁶ Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 125.

¹⁷ Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” 342.

¹⁸ Theodore Martin’s *Contemporary Drift* approaches this issue of historicizing “the contemporary” by reading the present through the accumulation of previously codified genres. I am especially indebted to his first chapter, on the period piece as a genre of historical fiction. See Theodore Martin, *Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

II. Stereotype & Genre

While Asian American literary criticism has constituted itself around the rejection of Orientalist stereotypes, Orientalist stereotypes have remained an uncannily resilient force in Asian American literature. In the groundbreaking *Aiiieeeee!* (1974), Frank Chin and his co-editors sought to define their “exclusively Asian-American” anthology in opposition to the Orientalizing “Charlie Chan/Fu Manchu imaginings” of American popular culture.¹⁹ In her important 1993 Asian American anthology (the first issued by a commercial publisher), Jessica Hagedorn took it a step further and proclaimed that “Charlie Chan Is Dead” and, along with him, “the demeaning legacy of stereotypes.”²⁰ After purportedly killing Charlie off, however, Hagedorn subsequently revived him ten years later in the anthology’s second installment. Acknowledging the first *Charlie Chan Is Dead* as created “out of a need” for Asian American political representation, Hagedorn’s 2003 reevaluation—in light of the field’s increased diversification and legitimization—admits that Charlie’s death might have been premature:

Ingrained in American popular culture, Charlie Chan is as much a part of the legacy of cultural stereotypes that continues to haunt, frustrate, and—dare I say it?—sometimes inspire us. Fu Manchu. The bucktoothed, apelike Jap wielding his bayonet. The cunning Dragon Lady. Tokyo Rose. The Placid Geisha. The indolent Filipino House-boy. The Model Minority. Miss Saigon, tragic victim/whore of war-torn Vietnam. Weeping. Giggling, bowing, and scraping. ...Is Charlie Chan really dead? Probably not.²¹

As Hagedorn’s list evinces, the history of Asian American popular culture is littered with the bodies of Orientalism’s darlings. These generic figures are recalled in positions of compromised contortion—“Weeping. Giggling, bowing, and scraping”—but are never extinguished from cultural memory.

While Asian American studies has provided rich genealogies into this Orientalist archive, its U.S.-centric field formation has led to its largely overlooking a related body of British imperial tropes with a similarly robust cultural afterlife.²² This work has previously been the province of postcolonial studies, though such a division of critical labor is increasingly out of step with a progressively globalizing cultural and media landscape. As such, the readings in “Generic Asians” work across this dividing line to analyze how emergent East Asian cultural producers recirculate hegemonic aesthetic forms to reconceive who—and what—now constitute the Anglophone. In reevaluating Orientalist discourse, I further specify the genre of the *East* Asian Anglophone—a category that has remained oddly underexamined despite the increasing prominence of China’s economic rise in contemporary notions of global futurity. The regnant postcolonial paradigms in global Anglophone studies must be adapted, as we will see, for nations like Japan and China, who have not only been subjugated by Anglo-American powers, but are themselves imperial and

¹⁹ Frank Chin et al., “Preface,” in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, eds. Frank Chin et al. (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1974), ix, xv.

²⁰ Jessica Hagedorn, “Introduction,” in *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), xxi.

²¹ Jessica Hagedorn, “Introduction,” in *Charlie Chan Is Dead 2: At Home in the World: A New Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), xxvii.

²² And even as more recent Asian American scholarship seeks to move beyond its previously U.S.-centric borders, the understandable impulse to look to previously un- or under-examined archives or geopolitical axes (in Asian transpacific or Asian indigenous studies, for example), often deemphasizes the importance of conventional British genres in contemporary Asian Anglo-American cultural production.

colonizing nations. By focusing on ethnically Japanese and Chinese Anglophone artists, my dissertation reframes East Asian tropes with centuries-long Orientalist archives. These generic figures and figurations have traveled easily from British print media to American popular culture—cinema, television, comic books—and beyond that have shaped important projects in contemporary literature and mass culture—social media, advertising, video games. How they are transvalued now is the subject of this study.

As I hope to show, the American lineage of Oriental stereotype and counterstereotype is a crucial but partial sub-plot in the larger history of contemporary Asian Anglo-American cultural production. My aim is not to restrict or reduce the critical importance of Asian American stereotyping, but to deepen its literary archive, situating it in a broader genealogy and longer timeline. In fact, the endurance of stereotypes lies precisely in how they never quite come to us fully formed. Recognized always metonymically, these ostentatious racial tropes and ornamental character types persist in popular culture in being under-marked, in being partial. As Chin and Hagedorn both emphasize, their pervasiveness lies in their dissemination through the popular genres of mass media, absorbed by Asian Americans from “the silver screen, from television, out of comic books”; from “watching Hollywood movies featuring yellowface, blackface, and redface actors.”²³ While Charlie Chan first entered the popular imagination through the pages of Earl Derr Biggers’s detective novels, audiences might subsequently encounter him first on TV, through passing anecdotes, in the titles of Asian American anthologies. Often reduced to proper names, Oriental stereotypes continue to elicit strong feelings and associations not despite, but because, of just how little it takes to evoke them. Because the Asian stereotype’s generic usefulness lies in their inscrutability and radical under-specification, they might even, as Hagedorn hazards, become inspiration for subsequent Asian American writers. For if “[t]he background is your province,” as Biggers imagines it must be for Charlie Chan, then there always remains the lingering possibility that you, as “minor character,” might later re-appear in having been previously overlooked.²⁴

Hidden in plain sight, this minor character—cultural history’s (original) Generic Asian—threatens to become one with the background. In being so familiar to the fictional worlds they inhabit, generic Asians become potentially constitutive of the genres they frequently populate. While Biggers aims to put Charlie Chan in a corner, he also gets at the latent dynamism of this Orientalist trope: that the figure anchoring a long-running franchise, or indeed genre, could be (and in this case literally is) a minor character. Following Biggers’s run of detective fiction, Charlie Chan has since taken on multiple afterlives, both in literature and other screen mediums. Originating from the province of the narrative background, this Orientalist minor character has progressively accumulated his own gravitational force, emerging from the generic worlds he’s long anchored into what I call the space of the “minor protagonist.”

Minor protagonists are not simply Orientalist background figures who have reclaimed the narrative grounds upon which they were once subjugated—they do not constitute a NeoVictorian Asian case of the “empire writing back.” Even when a hoary Orientalist stereotype such as Charlie Chan moves to the foreground (as he does in Charles Yu’s 2020 novel *Interior Chinatown*, which I examine in my final chapter) to take the position of the novel’s protagonist, this does not render him *any less stereotypical*. In other words, minor protagonists always carry a degree of characterological

²³ Chin et al., “Preface,” in *Aiiieeeee!*, ix; Hagedorn, “Introduction,” in *Charlie Chan Is Dead*, xxii.

²⁴ This description of Charlie Chan (which also serves as this essay’s first epigraph) was told by Biggers to a journalist in the idiosyncratic diction of Chan himself. By continuing to mime Chan’s voice in the context of nonfiction, Biggers suggests the evocative potential of his fictional character, even as the description emphasizes Chan as a “background” or “minor character.” Homer Croy, “The True Story of Charlie Chan As Confessed by His Creator, Earl Derr Biggers,” *Honolulu Advertiser* (September 11, 1932).

minorness or partiality even when they are taking up more and more of what Alex Woloch terms the “character-space” of the novel.²⁵ The tropes associated with Orientalist stereotypes exert such a gravitation pull on the characters subject to them that, even when these minor characters are elevated to protagonists, they still cannot entirely break free of their strictures. Their becoming protagonists might shift or reorient the center of the plot or narrative landscape, but it does not fundamentally lead to a thickening or development of the character itself. Thus when a Charlie Chan figure takes center stage, he also further underscores how his minorness has, in fact, always been the running lynchpin of this fictional universe.

The shift from Charlie Chan to Charles Yu—or, indeed, from Jane Austen to Ang Lee—maps the long transition from generic Asians as surplus and excess to generic Asians as aesthetic producers, creative subjects, and historical protagonists. While this dissertation draws connections across the generic aesthetic forms that recur across different empires, I focus on post-1980s Asian-authored popular novels and film to emphasize how the emergence of a previously minor Oriental character into a contemporary protagonist is something that could not have occurred under earlier regimes of print and film media. Since Hagedorn’s anthologies, Charlie Chan has indeed been revived in Yunte Huang’s 2010 scholarly study, which reads Biggers’s fictional creation in terms of the enduring “strength of his character.”²⁶ While Huang’s study begins by narrating the mythology of Charlie Chan in terms of Chang Apana—the real-life Honolulu police officer upon which Biggers’s fictional character is based—the majority of Huang’s book turns to examine Chan’s legacy in the broader genre of detective fiction and Hollywood genre films. These contemporary reconsiderations not only suggest the aesthetic vitality of stereotype, but also the ongoing relationship between Oriental stereotype and generic forms.²⁷

Yet the journey this dissertation narrates ultimately cannot be properly charted if we only track the historical evolution of generic Asians from Biggers’s Charlie Chan to its contemporary iterations in Yu’s *Interior Chinatown*; it can only be understood against the broader re-mediation from Austen to Lee. “Generic Asians” aims to contextualize the contemporary revival of these old stereotypical minor characters alongside the broader rise of contemporary Asian Anglo-American genre fiction that both houses and reconsiders them in order to show the aesthetic afterlives of British imperial forms. More, it seeks to show how contemporary rewritings of genericness might retroactively reveal or even recategorize previously “minor literature” or “genre fiction” as the grounds for contemporary realist fiction.²⁸

²⁵ See Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). Woloch’s study of minor characters in realist fiction helpfully distinguishes between the category of the “character-space” and “character-system”: character-space marks “that particular and charged encounter between and individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole,” while the character-system is “the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character spaces—different configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure” (14).

²⁶ Yunte Huang, *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and his Rendezvous with American History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

²⁷ Huang’s critical rescuing of Oriental stereotype finds its parallel aesthetic recuperation in playwright David Henry Hwang’s 2002 revision of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical adaptation of C.Y. Lee’s 1957 novel *Flower Drum Song*.²⁷ Taking the musical that further popularized Lee’s novel, rather than the original novel itself, Hwang’s play relishes in stereotypes by restaging them in the historically Orientalizing genre of the musical.²⁷

²⁸ On “minor literature,” see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). On the relationship between Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of minor literature and Asian American literary realism, see Yoon Sun Lee, “Type, Totality, and the Realism of Asian American Literature,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012), 415-432. On the productive associations between “minor” and “minority” literature, see Stephen Hong Sohn, “Minor Character, Minority Orientalisms, and the Borderlands of Asian America,” *Cultural Critique* 82 (2012), 151-85; Ulka Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Novel: Colonial Differences and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Recent Asian American scholarship by Betsy Huang, Min Hyoung Song, Sunny Xiang, and Aimee Bahng has further analyzed turn-of-the-century Asian American literature as increasingly one of genre fiction, with particular focus on visual media such as comic books (Song), the lowbrow (Xiang), and sci-fi (Huang, Bahng).²⁹ Such observations about the rise of genre in Asian American fiction find cognates in Anglo-American literary studies more generally, with scholars such as Fredric Jameson similarly observing the “genre turn” in contemporary fiction, albeit with lesser focus on genre’s racializing aspects.³⁰ At the same time, a growing body of scholarship on the relationship between literary genres and the African American and African diaspora has revitalized our understanding of genre fiction, and especially speculative genres, with an attention to race and ethnicity.³¹

What both scholars of contemporary Asian American and Anglo-American literature overlook, however, is how popular genres continue to pick up—and increasingly *play* up—their associated Oriental stereotypes. Contending with Asian America’s historically fraught relationship to authenticity, recent scholarship on new genre fiction either emphasizes the potential humanism of racial characters or deconstructs the “ethnic stereotype [as] but an ethnic imposture.”³² Yet, from the multiple reanimations of Charlie Chan to, as this dissertation examines, the more contemporary genre fictions of Ruth Ozeki and Charles Yu, the landscape of Asian American literature has grown not only more generic in its narrative forms, but, as I show, also more stereotypical in its human protagonists. Given that early Asian American literary criticism dismissed stereotype out of political necessity, these contemporary recuperations that flesh out and even flaunt the seductions of Orientalism might be read as “extravagant,” to borrow Sau-Ling Wong’s term.³³ Yet it is an extravagance that is increasingly necessary for Asian Americanist critique—for as the globalization of popular genres spreads the afterlives of Orientalism further and faster, Asian American literary

²⁹ See Betsy Huang, *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Aimee Bahng, *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Sunny Xiang, “Global China as Genre” in *Post45* 2 (2019). Mark Jerrold’s recent *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018) theorizes the relationship between “noticing race and building [generic] worlds” (2), but his archive largely engages pre-1945 material.

³⁰ See also Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Andrew Hoberek, *Postmodern/Postwar and After: Rethinking American Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016); Martin, *Contemporary Drift*; Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*.

³¹ While a comparative analysis of contemporary Asian American and other ethnic American genre fiction is beyond the scope of this dissertation, contemporary African American and African diasporic authors such as Colson Whitehead and Zadie Smith have been critical to my conceptualization of the specificity of Asian genericness. See, in particular, Yogita Goyal’s *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery*, which argues for the slave narrative as a “new world literary genre” (5), situating its reproduction and transmutation in the novels of both contemporary African American writers, such as Colson Whitehead, Paul Beatty, and Mat Johnson, as well as writers of “the new African diaspora,” such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, and NoViolet Bulawayo; Goyal, *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). On the “proliferating subgenre of speculative fiction meets neoslavery narrative” (780), see Madhu Dubey, “Speculative Fictions of Slavery,” *American Literature* 82.4 (2010): 779-805.

³² This quote is from Xiang’s “Global China as Genre,” which picks up on Tina Chen’s theory of “stereotypes of Asians as ‘sneaky,’ ‘secretive,’ and ‘inscrutable’” in terms of Oriental obfuscation or impersonation. My aims in reading Oriental stereotypes, however, seeks to read the stereotype more flagrantly as a positive aesthetic form. See Chen, *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), xviii. On the trope of the Oriental spy and impersonation, see also Crystal Parikh, *An Ethics of Betrayal: The Politics of Otherness in Emergent U.S. Literatures and Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

³³ Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong’s *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) poses the binary between “necessity” and “extravagance” as “two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservative-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism” (13).

remediations of Biggers's stereotypical minor character into the contemporary minor protagonist crucially renegotiate what constitutes not only the historically Oriental Asian, but also the heretofore Occidental American as well.³⁴

III. *The Underspecified Hero (Protagonist)*

What I call the “generic flexibility” of Oriental stereotypes is an especially interesting domain for Asian American literary experimentation, given that the generic category of Asian American is itself always undergoing redefinition. While Asian American study built itself around the inclusiveness of a heterogeneous and invented pan-ethnicity, turn-of-the-century scholarship finds itself, as Rachel Lee describes it, “relishing the fragment,” “plastic transformations,” and “weak ethnicity” of Asian racialization.³⁵ Increased scholarly interest in the fragmentation and plasticity of a weakly constituted Asian American body politic harks back to its pan-ethnic constructedness, but is further driven by the growing transnationalization of contemporary Asian American existence. As I show, the Oriental stereotype is one example of Asian American fragmentation and is itself constituted from partiality—its rhetorical and narrative affordances evoked through synecdoche, association, and personification. For instance, a stereotypical minor character might convey entire discourses through their very name: Charlie Chan (detective fiction); Fu Manchu (yellow peril). Alternately, a stereotype about a particular discourse often comes with attendant images, such as the yellow peril's stereotypical associations with the hoard, the octopus, and even, as Mark Jerng theorizes, fog.³⁶ In analyzing the rise of the minor protagonist, my own language tropes on broader economic discourses about the stereotypical Asian American “model minority” and the post-1970s economic rise of East Asia. In this way, “Generic Asians” also conjugates Asian American studies with global theories of capital accumulation.³⁷ In doing so, I show how contemporary Asian American adaptations of the minor protagonist—characterologically weak because of their racial stereotyping, but formally flexible as a result of it—index broader geopolitical and cultural shifts. Put another way, Asiatic weakness or minorness might, in fact, be a kind of aesthetic *strength*, as the easily fragmented bodies (sometimes killed off, often later to be revived) and flexible figurations of Asianness continue to circulate, remediate, and potentially even reframe the popular narratives of our increasingly Asia-inflected present.

In examining the aesthetic afterlives of empire, I historicize the flexible minor characters of contemporary Asian America genre fiction from the origins of Orientalist discourse itself. As

³⁴ Recent scholarship by Alex Woloch, Deidre Lynch, Jeremy Rosen, and Stephanie Insley Hershinow have examined various aspects of novelistic character, whether in terms of their genericness (Lynch), minorness (Woloch, Rosen), or naivety (Hershinow). While my work finds affinities with these theorists, and in particular the economic approaches of Lynch and Woloch, my concept of “minor character” diverges in framing minorness in terms of the racialized minority. See Woloch's *The One vs. the Many* (2004); Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Rosen, *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Hershinow, *Born Yesterday: Inexperience and the Early Realist Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

³⁵ Rachel C Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 8-9.

³⁶ See Jerng's discussion of “Yellow Peril Genres” in *Racial Worldmaking*, 31-68.

³⁷ On the model minority as an Asian racial form related to economic discourses, see Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). On the aesthetic and narrative affordances of the model minority, see Yoon Sun Lee, *Modern Minority: Asian American Literature and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Edward Said's important study of nineteenth-century European Orientalism tells us, Western authority relies on its "flexible positional superiority" over the Orient "with very little resistance on the Orient's part."³⁸ Whereas the pliant Other of Saidian Orientalism was largely located in the Middle East, American Orientalism signalled a shift in focus to East Asia. As Christina Klein and Colleen Lye have elucidated, this shift in geopolitics also shifted the tenor of Orientalism, in which the threat of an East Asian economic modernity rendered this new racial Other as exceptional in its stereotypical flexibility.³⁹ In contrast to the pliant and primitive Other of European Orientalism, then, American Orientalism tells a different story about the rise of the Asiatic capitalist modernity, whose stereotypical efficiency also meant its flexible capacity to inhabit multiple tropes.

In the contemporary context of global capitalism, the relationship between Asiatic flexibility and what sociologist David Harvey describes as our post-Fordist age of flexible accumulation has sharpened this link between the stereotypical Asiatic and economic form.⁴⁰ Drawing on Harvey's structuralist analysis of late capitalism, anthropologist Aihwa Ong develops a more human-oriented theory of "flexible citizenship," which refers to a set of cultural logics and practices that adapt to the workings of flexible capital accumulation—a theory, Ong attests, prompted by an increasingly transnational and economically elite Chinese population.⁴¹ In the context of rising Asian American cultural and economic capital, Viet Thanh Nguyen similarly emphasizes the "flexible strategies" of Asian American authors and characters to navigate political and ethical situations that expand the traditional binary of resistance or accommodation.⁴² Ong and Nguyen strengthen the connection between Orientalism's flexible Asiatic and global capitalism's flexible modes of accumulation, but their analyses stop short at level of the individual: the flexible citizen, author, or character. In contrast, my examination of Oriental stereotypes alongside the popular genres in which they thrive (as Said reminds us, the Occident maintains a "flexible *positional* superiority" to the Other in a broader *discourse* that is Orientalism) emphasizes how the flexible stereotype necessarily exists within a larger system of popular narratives whose aesthetic purchase similarly rests in their adaptability. While the flexible citizen and flexible author ground the flexible capital of contemporary Asian diasporic subject in the body of the individual, my conceptualization of what I call the "generic flexibility" of generic Asians lies in their capacity to inhabit and accommodate multiple character types and generic worlds.

In attending to contemporary Asian American re-mediations of past hegemonic forms, my analysis shares more with Giovanni Arrighi's account of cycles of capital accumulation—in which hegemonic transition is marked by "a recurrent pattern" of economic forms—that is itself an adaptation of Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*.⁴³ In contrast to Harvey's more stagist analysis of contemporary capitalism in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (which Ong and Nguyen subsequently take up), Arrighi offers a more cyclical historicization of capitalism and its recursive forms of accumulation. In fact, Fernand Braudel already describes capitalism's "unlimited flexibility" and "capacity for change and adaptation" to be its essential feature over its *longue durée* and not just its current post-Fordist manifestation.⁴⁴ Here, Braudel's language in describing capital might also characterize the stereotypical Asian over the course of Orientalism—as though the generic Asian might be, in so many words, characterized in terms of capital itself. Born out of the economic needs

³⁸ Edward W. Said, "Introduction," in *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Vintage, 2003), 7.

³⁹ See Lye, *America's Asia*; Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁴⁰ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

⁴¹ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 6.

⁴² Nguyen, *Race & Resistance*, 4.

⁴³ Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of our Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 274.

⁴⁴ Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 433; emphasis in the original.

of American imperialism, generic Asians thus share with capital not some common essential content, but instead a formal tendency toward “unlimited flexibility” and a “capacity for change and adaptation.”

Even more than Braudel, Arrighi’s expansive sociological account for recurring economic phenomena across serially repeating imperialisms has given cultural critics of our contemporary era a new hermeneutic for conceptualizing late capitalist crisis. Drawing on Arrighi’s cycles-of-accumulation account, the literary scholar Jed Esty has historicized and theorized the recurrence of aesthetic forms—and in particular popular narrative genres—across the two global empires of late-nineteenth-century Britain and early-twentieth-century America.⁴⁵ Esty specifically reads the transition between these two Anglophone superpowers as symbolically waged through the American uptake of Victorian genre fiction—a war of genres, we might call it, that Asian *Americans* are newly restaging in their adaptations of Oriental forms. Following Esty’s examination of how America recaptured popular late-Victorian genres such as adventure and detective fiction to symbolically negotiate their own “half-articulate dreams of expansive political projection,” my work adds another chapter to empires’ serial histories.⁴⁶ By examining how contemporary Asian Americans adapt the popular Americanized genre of speculative fiction—infamous for both its Orientalist and Victorianist depictions of futurity—I show how the flexible genres of empire’s past continue to mediate new narratives about our global present.

Contemporary Asian American genre fiction models itself upon previously established genre fiction not only to relish the unreal stereotype, but also to pose this stereotype as a historically crucial component of European realism. In emphasizing the minor (racial) characters that, as Woloch has theorized, gives the major protagonist of realist novels their liberal humanist interiority, contemporary Asian American genre fiction revises stereotypes not simply to make them “round,” but to emphasize the potential of remaining flat.⁴⁷ While recent scholarship by novel theorists have explored the affordances of characterological flatness or characterological numerousness, such work takes the genericness of novel characters as distinct from the genericness of racial or ethnic stereotypes. Marta Figlerowicz’s recuperation of the “flat protagonist,” for instance, eschews the notion of “flat character [as] conventionally associated with stereotyped thinking,” in favor of flatness as approximating the “experience of being a single person amid a mass of others”—in other words, as a *generic* subject.⁴⁸ Emily Steinlight similarly explores the representational possibilities of the mass—though not from the position of the protagonist, but of the collective human aggregate or “human surplus” itself.⁴⁹ While this dissertation also seeks to move beyond novel theory that privileges what Ian Watt calls “the primacy of individual experience,” it departs from these other studies in its focus on how racialized and stereotypical forms of generic and surplus character further scramble the tenets of novel theory.⁵⁰ In particular, I am invested in the dialectical imbrication—as well as contrastive potential—between the contemporary Anglophone literary character as typical (if not always flat) and *racialized* forms of flatness.⁵¹

⁴⁵ See Esty, “After the West”; Esty, “Realism Wars,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 49.2 (August 2016), 316-342. See also Esty, *The Future of Decline*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁴⁷ See Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*.

⁴⁸ Marta Figlerowicz, *Flat Protagonists: A Theory of Novel Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 11.

⁴⁹ See Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁵⁰ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

⁵¹ In doing so, I build on the momentum of recent scholarship on the relationship between characterological minoriness and racialization. Swati Rana’s *Race Characters* examines the racialization of ethnic figures and tropes in American literature from the 1900-1960, and offers a kind of pre-history to some of the minor protagonists in my third chapter;

In examining the potential overlap or contradiction between these two types of generic character—one typical and the other stereotypical—I focus on Asian Anglophone novels and films that aggressively oscillate between what we might call typical novelistic realism and the stereotype-populated and often speculative worlds of genre fiction. Focusing on the generically Asian protagonists of these texts, I examine how contemporary Asian artists mobilize the racial inscrutability of Oriental tropes to tell stories that scramble and stretch the logic of both literary realism and speculative genre fiction. In place of the traditional Asian American protagonist of the ethnic minority—what we might call the “genetic Asian”—these novels instead foreground a generic Asian: an ethnic protagonist who is both more general in her genericness and less specific in her personal individuality. In placing pressure on the stereotypicality of this minor protagonist, however, these texts show how the generic Other has always been central to the narrativization of Anglophone empires’ globalizing impulses; they also begin to dramatize how such genericness might be reproduced anew. For if the configuration of race for Asian Anglophone diaspora has always been strongly tied to the needs of capital, and if the flows of capital in our global present are undergoing intense reorganization away from the U.S. and toward East Asia, then we might look to the generic Asians of contemporary Asian Anglophone popular culture as a new kind of protagonist—one whose historical minorness is precisely what sustains their contemporary proliferation.

My chapters proceed chronologically, starting with Ishiguro’s literary corpus, before turning to Ang Lee’s cinematic oeuvre, and concluding with the contemporary boom in twenty-first-century Asian American novels that self-consciously trope on the narrative conventions of both literary realism and lowbrow genre fiction. My first two chapters analyze two Asian Anglophone auteurs—a British Japanese novelist and a Taiwanese American film director—who function as what we might call “exemplary” generic Asians for this dissertation’s purpose. Ishiguro and Lee’s exemplarity derives partly from their historical priority—in being two of the first major global Asian Anglophone auteurs working in the post-1970s era. As such, Ishiguro and Lee function—both individually and collectively—as generic templates for contemporary Asian Anglophone popular culture. Yet, in this way, the exemplarity of these Asian Anglophone auteurs also lies in their genericness, which is expressed not just in their auteur status, but in their capacity to move flexibly across many different generic forms. By juxtaposing Lee’s and Ishiguro’s eclectic experiments with different genres and media, we can better conceptualize the generic Asian who ranges from prestige-winning literary fiction to the commercially successful global media. My third chapter analyzes how these popular modes (the bourgeois novel and Hollywood narrative cinema) are transformed by twenty-first-century Asian American novelists beyond their typical generic and medium-specific limits. Though my chapters examine increasingly speculative and multi-mediated representations of Asian racialization, these examples are not simply decontextualized rejections of Victorian realism, but, I argue, a series of contemporary iterations that tests the genre’s initial Eurocentrism by using the logic and tropes immanent to realism’s form.

see Rana, *Race Characters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020). Anjaria builds on Woloch’s theory of Victorian minor characters in reading 1930s Indian novels through the lens of literary realism; see Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel*.

In my first chapter, “Typical Japanese,” I place the Japanese British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro’s first two “Japanese” historical novels—*A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986)—alongside his last two “British” historical novels—*Never Let Me Go* (2005), *The Buried Giant* (2015)—in the context of both nations’ relative lag to American capital accumulation during the postwar period. I show how Ishiguro’s oeuvre moves not only from typically Japanese to typically British themes, but also from historical realism to late-Victorian genre fiction. While this arc might be read in terms of a shift from ethnographic realism to science fiction, I track the recurring inscrutable narrator across Ishiguro’s eclectic canon to re-classify his earlier Japanese historical fiction as also deeply generic.

Shifting to the American scene, my second chapter, “Chinese Sentiment,” draws a similar parallel across Lee’s eclectic oeuvre, from his initial 1990s Taiwanese family melodramas to his subsequent Hollywood CGI thrillers *Hulk* (2003) and *Gemini Man* (2019). Like Ishiguro, Lee’s emergence as an international auteur begins with representing generically Asian stories and ends with adapting imperial genre fiction such as science and spy fiction. While Lee’s later Hollywood thrillers appear to depart from his earlier Taiwanese melodramas, scenes of crying across them show the emotional excesses of his Taiwanese melodramas spilling into his later CGI blockbusters not through visibly Chinese bodies but larger-than-life, digitally enhanced action heroes. Lee’s trajectory is toward films where Chinese characters seem increasingly and conspicuously absent, but his prior aesthetic signature of “Chineseness” reemerges in his later CGI blockbusters through what I call the “generic feelings of melodrama” (rather than Chinese bodies). Lee’s more recent films engage new digital technologies, which flexibly manipulate bodily and affective representation, in order to enhance hyperlegible generic feelings. Here it is precisely the way bodies are indexically and, at times, racially under-or even un-marked that allows them to typify not simply a national but a more global generic subject.

Following the flexibility of generic Asianness to contemporary Asian American novels, my third chapter, “Generic Protagonists,” reads the commercial rise of Asian American literature through the reproduction of their generically Asian protagonists: the Japanese schoolgirl “Nao” in Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for Time Being* (2013) and the “Generic Asian Man” in Charles Yu’s *Interior Chinatown* (2020). Whereas imperial Anglophone genre fiction once framed Asian stereotypes as minor characters, contemporary Asian American novels now reproduce these generic Asians not as peripheral figures, but as generic protagonists. In sliding from margin into mainstream literary culture, these generic Asian protagonists also crucially reshape the genericness of the literature they populate, resolving their experimentations with genre fiction (Ozeki’s science fiction and Yu’s multi-media detective fiction) into, I argue, realism. In doing so, these texts further underscore how minor Asian stereotypes have always been central in constituting the major genre that is American novelistic realism. Here, genre fiction becomes the realism of Asian American literary assimilation.

Partly grounded in real history, yet constantly expanding into alternate worlds, these novels place pressure on their generic protagonists to mediate between competing narrative modes. This pressure is often felt through the potential multiplication or merging of protagonists—as protagonicity gets spread across more than one character, or oscillates between more than one narrator. In fact, the genericness of these minor protagonists always threatens to submerge them into a characterological formation so weak as to render them dangerously indistinguishable from other minor characters. As minor protagonicity mediates across generic worlds and various characters, it not only emphasizes the weak ethnicity of pan-ethnic identity, but also generates a weak narrative affect. In giving Asian American political heterogeneity an aesthetic form, these generically flexible novels also provide a new way of thinking about the minor and weak affects that

scholars of the contemporary have characterized to be the dominant mode of late capitalist life.⁵² Such affective weakness, however, is also what allows them to mediate between different narrative, characterological, and, I would argue, geopolitical possibilities in a period of inter-hegemonic transition (in the world system) and disciplinary transformation (in the university). As the minor protagonist floats across different generic registers, she concatenates a new kind of novelistic totality—a more uncertain and complex system of character and perspective that narrates the complex systems of our global present through our still tenuous relations to our historical past.

⁵² See, in particular, Fredric Jameson's influential theory in *Postmodernism* about the "waning of affect" that characterizes the new depthlessness of post-1960s art and life—a concept he further revises in *The Antinomies of Realism* as the "waning of protagonicity," that begins in the nineteenth-century realist novel and which now characterizes contemporary fiction. One of the shadow arguments in "Generic Asians" lies in exploring how generic Asianness—in all its weak, minor, partial, flat forms—might open an alternate way of thinking about the contemporary waning of affect and protagonicity as, in fact, the rise of a new kind of protagonicity in the form of generic Asians. See Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1984); Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013). See also Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Chapter 1

Typical Japanese:

Kazuo Ishiguro and the Asian Anglophone Historical Novel

“My father wasn’t typically Japanese at all because he grew up in Shanghai. He had a Chinese characteristic, which was that when something bad happened, he smiled.”
– Kazuo Ishiguro, “The Art of Fiction No. 196,” *The Paris Review*

How did Kazuo Ishiguro evolve from a celebrated novelist of the postwar Japanese experience to a representative figure of Asian American, and indeed, Anglophone world literature? As his literary star has risen internationally, critics have anointed Ishiguro—who was born in Nagasaki, Japan in 1954, but immigrated to the UK six years later—as a quintessential writer of globalization and its discontents. When he won the 2017 Nobel Prize for Literature, the award committee’s official statement praised Ishiguro for his commitment to the global “in novels of great emotional force, [that have] uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world.”⁵³ Still, as a British novelist of Japanese heritage, he was often assumed, especially in his early 1980s fiction, to express qualities typical of Japaneseness. Readers largely interpret Ishiguro by way of national or ethnic categories, expecting him to function as a kind of generic Asian (despite his Japanese origins) whose British upbringing made him broadly approachable as an Anglophone author. While rendering him a generic figure to critics, Ishiguro’s ethnicity has conversely led them to disregard his early and ongoing experimentations with generic categories—both ethnic and literary—themselves.

In a 2008 interview, American publisher Susannah Hunnewell asked Ishiguro to contextualize his fictions as somehow “typically Japanese.”⁵⁴ In response, the writer flatly invoked a different genre of Asianness: “My father wasn’t typically Japanese at all because he grew up in Shanghai. He had a Chinese characteristic, which was that when something bad happened, he smiled.”⁵⁵ Ishiguro’s typical Japaneseness, it turns out, is a flexible category that accommodates Chinese characteristics as well as projections of Anglophone universalisms.

Western critics have observed this flexibility in Ishiguro’s ethnic identifications, even as such flexibility has largely failed to deflect Orientalist stereotyping from these very same critics. Instead, American scholars in particular have increasingly examined how his work cuts across geopolitical difference by troping generic Englishness. Rebecca Walkowitz argues that Ishiguro’s works are representative of the contemporary novel in an age of world literature, largely focusing her readings on his two most internationally famous works, *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), both set in postwar England.⁵⁶ Similarly, Jed Esty places Ishiguro alongside Ian McEwan as “two writers whose names now crop up as representatives of the English novel,” emphasizing *Never*

⁵³ The Nobel Prize in Literature 2017. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019. Sun. 3 Mar 2019., <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2017/summary/>.

⁵⁴ Susannah Hunnewell, “Kazuo Ishiguro, The Art of Fiction No. 196,” *The Paris Review* 184 (2009), 25.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ See Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); and Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

Let Me Go (2005) as a “perfectly chilled dystopian treatment” of post-imperial Britain.⁵⁷ Walkowitz understands Ishiguro as writing typical global Anglophone novels, in which Englishness becomes a universal mediator, whereas Esty views Ishiguro as a typical English novelist, who in *Never Let Me Go* perfects the contemporary British novel of imperial decline. For both, it is Britishness that typifies worldliness. For Ishiguro, however, Asianness emerges as the more generic field of cultural negotiation, in which assumptions about his typical Japaneseness enable him to comparatively articulate other ethnicities—Asian or Anglophone—as also typical.

This chapter contends that Ishiguro’s novels, even and especially the later ones set in Britain, continue to be mediated through the specter of generic Asian stereotypes. To echo Rey Chow, these stereotypes, in relation to genre, are not merely misrepresentations, but representational devices that enact “a deliberate process of *duplication*.”⁵⁸ Rather than view stereotypes as simply Orientalist misrepresentations, Chow helps us see them as eminently reproduceable, and thus having a long range of explanatory power. They are forms of over-iterative mimesis that are, in Ishiguro’s case, reanimated precisely because of his relative cultural distance from the ethnic trope in question. Japan’s peripheral relationship to Britain during the postwar period—as well as both nations’ peripherality to American power—is what enables Ishiguro to represent our present moment of waning Anglo-American power and rising Asia as one of belated and uneven development. While Walkowitz locates Ishiguro at the center of the Anglophone world, it is precisely how Ishiguro’s Japaneseness is not exemplary of either Britishness or Americanness that allows him to mediate the geopolitical shifts that typify our global present.

I. Generic History, Generic Heroes

Ishiguro negotiates the ethnic writer’s position in Anglophone world literature by drawing on the well-worn English literary genre of the historical novel. Indeed, nearly all of Ishiguro’s novels are historical genre fiction—from his first book, *A Pale View of Hills*, published in 1982, but set in the years following World War II in Japan, to his 2015 novel depicting post-Arthurian England, *The Buried Giant*. The historical novel’s formal capacity lies in its “typical” protagonist, theorizes Georg Lukács, who negotiates between individual desire and the social collective: they are “typical characters nationally . . . in the sense of the decent and average.”⁵⁹ In the context of post-imperial Britain, Ishiguro’s novels update this typical protagonist by presenting the reader with an overtly stereotypical protagonist, who emerges as a figure of cathexis across a broader geopolitical context than Lukács’s nineteenth-century national subjects. In addition to their deliberately generic characters, Ishiguro’s historical novels flexibly incorporate narrative features from additional popular subgenres: *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) reproduces the tropes of the gothic novel; *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) positions itself as a Künstlerroman; *The Remains of the Day* (1989) unfolds as manor house fiction; *The Unconsoled* (1995) takes on modernist surrealism; *When We Were Orphans* (2000) steals from the detective novel; *Never Let Me Go* (2005) draws on science fiction; and *The Buried Giant* (2015) embodies fantasy. And while Ishiguro’s most recent novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021), about a science fictional robot, is his first to be explicitly set both in the future and in America, its ongoing mobilization of retrospective first-person narration (as well as its generic and

⁵⁷ Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 211.

⁵⁸ Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 54.

⁵⁹ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 36.

thematic resonances with *Never Let Me Go*) can be productively read in terms of Ishiguro's formal experimentations with the historical novel form.⁶⁰ Ishiguro's oeuvre thus models in condensed miniature the trajectory of the historical novel since Walter Scott's germinal *Waverley* (1814)—as a form that has grown more generically fantastical and categorically unrealistic over time.⁶¹

This parallel between the formal development of the historical novel and Ishiguro's career has two related consequences for my claim about his generically Asian characters in global Anglophone fiction. First, read in continuum, Ishiguro's novels help us see how contemporary novelistic representations of national histories—and especially those of Asian American history that underwrite the novels in my final chapter—are predicated on the genericness of British historical fiction. As Ishiguro has increasingly experimented with speculative genre fiction, we can see how stereotypes of Asian inscrutability in his early work are in fact part of a broader fiction about characterological genericness. Ishiguro's use of gothic tropes in his first novel *A Pale View of Hills*, for example, encouraged Orientalist readings from his critics, who cast his morbid characters as, we might say, generically Japanese. Second, it allows us to reevaluate the arc of Ishiguro's career, moving away from teleological narratives of his transition from a typical Japanese to a typical universal writer. Instead, Ishiguro's ethnicized protagonists trouble the presumed universal Anglophone subject of both the historical novel and recent world history by returning focus to the genre's flexibly wavering protagonist already present in *Waverley*'s narration of history.

In tracking the ongoing evolution of popular literary genres, then, this dissertation begins by unfolding the afterlives of what is often considered the defining genre of the novel form itself: the historical novel. Not only does the historical novel thematize the process of history in its narrative form, its critical history helps us understand the methodological stakes of literary genre theory as a recurring *contemporary* problem.⁶² After all, it is the very historicity of the historical novel that makes it dialectically a genre of and about the shifting conditions of the ongoing present. As Perry Anderson's recent survey of the historical novel observes, the genre has persisted since its

⁶⁰ I address Ishiguro's late turn to narrating a post-apocalyptic America—that is, an America in population and climate disaster—in my essay on *Klara and the Sun*. See Hu, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Robot," *The New York Review of Books* 68.17 (2021).

⁶¹ On the evolution of the historical novel form, see Ian Duncan, "History and the Novel after Lukács" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 50.3 (2017): 388-396; and Catherine Gallagher, *Telling It Like It Wasn't: The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). In fact, Ishiguro's experiments with historical fiction track Fredric Jameson's recent observations about the waning of protagonicity and the rise of novelistic affect in the contemporary historical novel, in which the hazy atmosphere that first gives us *A Pale View of Hills* later bleeds into the shadows at *The Remains of the Day* before finally transforming into the literal fog of forgetfulness that actively impinges on characterological development in *The Buried Giant*. What Jameson sees as the temporal weakening of narrative in the contemporary novel becomes, over the course of Ishiguro's writing, literal weather—the atmosphere that crucially disassociates characters from their surroundings and historical contexts.

⁶² Contemporary scholarship on the historical novel points both to the generic pre-history and afterlife of *Waverley*. Richard Maxwell's "Inundations of Time" recontextualizes the *Waverley* novels in terms of the "major genre" of Gothic and sentimental "national tales" that precedes it, while also considering the influence of Scott's reception history, which crucially includes, for Maxwell, his critical reception. Similarly, Ian Duncan notes how "Lukács was right to emphasize Scott's originality and its epoch-making impact—even if originality is to be characterized in terms of synthesis rather than of creation *ex nihilo*" ("Walter Scott and the Historical Novel," 315). Fredric Jameson's final chapter in *The Antinomies of Realism* points to how Lukács's own study of the historical novel rests on "the generic distinction between the theater and the novel"—a distinction that ultimately dissolves, explains Jameson, as Lukács sees the historical novel merging with "realism" more broadly. As we can see, the history of the historical novel models the piecemeal and experimental process of genre "inauguration" both at the level of their primary texts as well as in its critical and reception history. See Richard Maxwell, "Inundations of Time: Definition of Scott's Originality" *ELH* 68.2 (2001), 419-468; Ian Duncan, "Walter Scott and the Historical Novel" in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 2: English and British Fiction, 1750-1820*, eds. Peter Garside and Karen O'Brien (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 312-332.

“inaugurat[ion] by *Waverley*.”⁶³ Though at times waning, the genre has never disappeared from literary production, but has, instead, adapted and evolved to different national contexts. In particular, Anderson describes its resurrection during the mid-1970s—in which the genre not only peaked in quantity, but also in cultural prestige—as “one of the most astonishing transformations in literary history.”⁶⁴ This resurrection of the historical novel, notes Anderson, “has also famously been a mutation,”⁶⁵ in which the major innovations of the genre occurred no longer in Europe, but in the so-called periphery. Anderson cites postwar writers Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel García Márquez as anticipating the torrent of Latin American historical novels written during the 1970s, which became the “pacemaker for the global diffusion” of the genre.⁶⁶ As with *Waverley*, these Latin American historical novels work through collective historical traumas, though with a difference. Contending with history on a more contemporary global scale, these 1970s “dictator novels,” as Anderson describes them, confront history not as progress, but as potential regression. In working through a volatile recent past and uneasy present, 1970s and 1980s Latin American historical novels famously incorporated more speculative narrative forms in order to narrate “distorted, fantastical shapes of an alternative past” that, most notably, result in the founding texts of magical realism.⁶⁷ Latin American writers’ generic experimentations with the historical novel form marks an instance of what Colleen Lye and Jed Esty’s “peripheral realism”: formally complex means of encoding veridical referents from beyond Euro-America that either were underestimated and dismissed by Cold War-era criticism as naive realism or reclassified as something other than realism to account for their aesthetic innovations.⁶⁸ Once texts like Latin American historical novels are recognized as genres of realism, albeit of a magical variety, they can function as models of how writers adapt realist forms to suit developments within the world system. Shielded from the arresting glare of Cold War ideologues, magical realism becomes postcolonial realism, and an example of how peripheral realism finds new aesthetic means to mediate new arrangements of totality.

As Ishiguro’s literary corpus makes increasingly clear, the historical novel has continued to proliferate partly because of its ability to integrate *other* genres—an aesthetic flexibility that can be traced to the first pages of Scott’s novel, which considers casting *Waverley* as alternately “a romance of chivalry” or “a tale of modern manners,” before deciding to set it “Sixty Years before this present.”⁶⁹ The historical novel, in other words, does not emerge as a defined genre even in *Waverley*, but, rather, indirectly *through* its negotiation with other preestablished genres and modes.⁷⁰ Nor does its afterlife maintain strict allegiance to Scott’s “originating” model, if the international

⁶³ Perry Anderson, “From Progress to Catastrophe,” *London Review of Books* 33, no. 15 (2011): 24.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ See Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, “Peripheral Realisms Now” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012): 269-88.

⁶⁹ Walter Scott, *Waverley*, ed. Claire Lamont (Oxford UP, 2015), 4.

⁷⁰ Contemporary scholarship on the historical novel points both to the generic pre-history and afterlife of *Waverley*. Richard Maxwell’s “Definition of Scott’s Originality” recontextualizes the *Waverley* novels in terms of the “major genre” of Gothic and sentimental “national tales” that precedes it, while also considering the influence of Scott’s reception history, which crucially includes, for Maxwell, his critical reception. Similarly, Ian Duncan notes how “Lukács was right to emphasize Scott’s originality and its epoch-making impact—even if originality is to be characterized in terms of synthesis rather than of creation *ex nihilo*” (“Walter Scott and the Historical Novel,” 315). Fredric Jameson’s final chapter in *The Antinomies of Realism* points to how Lukács’s own study of the historical novel rests on “the generic distinction between the theater and the novel”—a distinction that ultimately dissolves, explains Jameson, as Lukács sees the historical novel merging with “realism” more broadly. As we can see, the history of the historical novel models the piecemeal and experimental process of genre “inauguration” both at the level of their primary texts as well as in its critical and reception history.

transmission of magical realism—which subsequently gets mobilized to narrate the historical traumas of nations beyond Latin America—is any indication. The historical novel thus continues to persist not only because it dialectically relates to and produces the always moving target of the “present,” but also because of its *formal* flexibility; or what I term its “generic flexibility.” Not quite as dominant or capacious as a mode (such as romance or realism), nor as episodic or fixed as a sub-genre (such as the shorter-lived Victorian sensation novel or industrial novel), the historical novel occupies a kind of generic middle and mediating ground. Rather like the “middling” protagonist at its center, the historical novel is what I call an exemplary “mediating” genre: a genre that not only mediates among different historical moments and geopolitical contexts, but which also mediates other genres and character types.

Ishiguro’s engagements with the generic occur not only at the level of genre fiction, but also in characters that appear generically Japanese. His first two novels about postwar Japan were immediately associated with other postcolonial or multiethnic British novelists such as Salman Rushdie and Timothy Mo, who also arrived on the international literary scene around the 1980s. Writing in 1989, Angela Carter describes Ishiguro’s novels in terms of the “elegiac reticence” she associates with Japanese fiction,⁷¹ while a *New York Review of Books* essay published the same year describes Ishiguro’s “perfect” English in terms of an “elegant bareness [that] inevitably reminds one of Japanese paintings.”⁷² Even his third and breakout novel, *The Remains of the Day*—which is set in postwar England and focuses around the everyday life of an English butler—was read as imbued “with a fine Japanese sensibility.”⁷³ Pico Iyer’s review of *The Remains of the Day* describes how Ishiguro’s rendering of the English country house staff, with “its precisely stratified hierarchy, its uniforms and rites and stress on self-negation, might almost belong to Sony or Toshiba.”⁷⁴ Characterizations of Ishiguro’s Japaneseness frequently mobilize Oriental tropes about Asiatic inscrutability—“elegiac reticence,” “elegant bareness”—but Iyer’s comparison of Ishiguro’s orderly English butler to the corporate structure of an electronics conglomeration also points to Ishiguro’s exemplification of another aspect of Japaneseness: its rapid technological modernization and economic growth during the postwar period. Ishiguro’s novels thus represent a flexibly generic Japaneseness that is both culturally essentializing and technologically modern, elegantly bare and economically efficient.

While Ishiguro’s use of speculative genres obfuscates the historical coordinates of his fictional narratives, his engagement with Oriental stereotypes unsettles the realist coherence of his fictional characters. In mobilizing fantastical plots and clichéd characters, Ishiguro distances the historical novel from itself, which is partly why he is so seldom read in such terms. Yet as suggested by Ishiguro’s early literary reception, readings of his Japaneseness as both atavistic and hyper-modern are anything but ahistorical, and instead actively trope on the postwar anxiety about Japan’s era of high economic growth and emergence as a competing imperial power. Whereas Latin American historical novels were the pacemaker for the global diffusion of the genre during the 1970s, I propose that the contemporary historical novel of waning America and rising East Asia might be typified by the contemporary Asian Anglophone historical novel. For just as Latin American authors mutated the European historical novel genre by emphasizing the collective experience of not only historical progress, but *regression*, the contemporary Asian Anglophone historical novel similarly stages competing chronologies of “development” and “decline” through the juxtaposition of the generically Asian and the generically Anglophone.

⁷¹ Qtd. in Jocelyn Targett, “A Writer of the Floating World,” *Weekend Guardian* (13 May 1989): 6.

⁷² Gabriele Annan, “On the High Wire,” *The New York Review of Books* (Dec 1989): 3.

⁷³ David Gurewich, “Upstairs, Downstairs,” *The New Criterion* (Dec 1989): 80.

⁷⁴ Pico Iyer, “Waiting Upon History: The Remains of the Day,” *Partisan Review* 58 (Sep 1991): 586.

Against the historical backdrop of postwar Anglo-Japanese relations, Ishiguro rise to international fame works by playing two types of generic identification—one literary and the other ethnic—off each other. For while Japan does not typify the world as Britain might, its postwar economic power and protection under the U.S. imperial umbrella enabled it to typify global Asianness. Japan's era of rapid economic expansion rendered Ishiguro's Japaneseness an exemplary genre of Asianness—the first one that enjoyed a kind of parity with the global subject of European world history. The formal flexibility of Ishiguro's stereotypical Japaneseness is not only an Oriental fantasy, then, but also an economic flexibility, as David Harvey puts it, characteristic of Japan's era of high growth specifically and late capitalist accumulation more broadly.⁷⁵ Initial reviews of Ishiguro's early novels oscillated between reading the “elegant bareness” of his “perfect” English as atavistic on the one hand and hyper-modern on the other—an antinomy of Japanese inscrutability that not only speaks to its aesthetic flexibility, but which also actively tropes on late twentieth-century Anglo-American anxieties about Japan's so-called economic miracle. Initial reviews of Ishiguro's early novels oscillated between reading the “elegant bareness” of his “perfect” English as atavistic on the one hand and hyper-modern on the other—an antinomy of Japanese inscrutability that not only speaks to its generic flexibility, but which also actively tropes on late twentieth-century Anglo-American anxieties about Japan's so-called economic miracle.

Given that Ishiguro's first two Japanese historical novels were published within the last phase of Japan's economic bubble, before the dramatic economic recession that began rather abruptly in 1991, their initial British reception can be read as enacting a particularly modern form of Orientalism. During the 1980s, stereotypes about Ishiguro's Japaneseness—in *A Pale View of Hills*, *Artist of the Floating World*, and even *The Remains of the Day*—reflected Anglophone concerns about East Asian ascendancy in the long shadow of British imperial decline. By the time Ishiguro published his fourth book, *The Unconsoled*, in 1995, however, Japan had begun to join Britain in economic stagnation, while the United States continued to outpace both in its economic expansion. It was also during this period that Ishiguro increasingly turned away from Japanese national history and toward European, specifically British, history and its typical genres, shifting from narrating the postwar history of rising Japan to that of waning Britain. Yet this Britain continued to represent Japan, the Japan that was now also in economic stagnation. Indeed, Ishiguro's increasingly speculative historical novels can be read as national allegories for both Britain and Japan, former island empires that were in decline by the end of the twenty-first century. Grasping both ends of Ishiguro's oeuvre, this chapter juxtaposes his first two Japanese historical novels (*A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*) and his latest two British historical novels (*Never Let Me Go* and *The Buried Giant*) to reveal both nations' relative decline to America's capital accumulation during the postwar period. In contrast to scholars who separate Ishiguro's early Japanese fiction from his subsequent global Anglophone novels, my reading insists on a less linear story about Ishiguro's international rise than the typical ones about globalization, universalization, or Anglo-American homogenization.

Tracing how Ishiguro's generic Asianness mediates the genre of Anglophone historical fiction, I argue that his Asian Anglophone historical novels provide a new way to think about overlapping cycles of capital: from British hegemony to U.S. hegemony and now a potential Chinese hegemony. Japan's exemplary postwar rise and fall was what made it the typical Asian of contemporary world history—uniquely placed to model the broader Asian hegemony, the specter that began to cut across the Anglophone hegemonies of Britain and America during the late twentieth century. At the same time, the historical novel's generic capability provides a form in

⁷⁵ See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

which Ishiguro's stereotypical protagonists waver between the Asian and the Anglophone, suggesting the dialectical entwinement between these two ethnicized forms. If Ishiguro's stereotypical protagonists mark a tactical mimesis of ethnic character, then we might say his historical genre fiction performs a similar operation upon history—historical genre fiction is the stereotype of real-world history. In approaching the postwar rise and decline of U.S. empire from the slant position of Ishiguro's historical genre fiction, I seek to grasp what is often overlooked in studies that privilege and center Englishness: the generic Asian that has always haunted the global Anglophone.

II. *Pure Japanese*

Winner of the 1982 Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize for best expression of a sense of place, Ishiguro's debut novel *A Pale View of Hills* was widely acknowledged by reviewers as evocative of Japan. As Edith Milton observes, Ishiguro's narrator is "a Japanese woman, Etsuko, who, *like the author*, was born in Nagasaki and lives in England."⁷⁶ Ishiguro's literary reception frequently involves forms of authorial filiation—an implied racialization of the writer that colors the reading of his fiction. Yet Ishiguro's own relationship to his characters is explicitly one of biographical distance: "I've always found it easier," he said in 1990, "to be intimate and revealing with central characters who are not like me."⁷⁷ The Japanese author's presumed biographical likeness to his Japanese characters is expressly a fiction. In the case of *A Pale View of Hills*, Ishiguro demonstrates intimacy with but is not like its Japanese female protagonist. If Ishiguro and Etsuko share some generic Japaneseness, then, it emerges not through any direct engagement with Japan but, to use the language of the Holtby Memorial Prize, a sense of Japan as place.

Ishiguro's first historical novel approaches postwar Japan from not only a temporal distance, but also a geographical one. As suggested by its title, *A Pale View of Hills* offers a hazy, attenuated vision of war-torn Nagasaki, which Etsuko recalls from her present-day life in the 1980s English countryside. As the first of Ishiguro's protagonists who updates Lukács's typical hero of the historical novel, Etsuko lives her negotiation between Japan and England through her two daughters, who embody characteristics that appear stereotypical of their respective national identities. Born in Japan, Keiko "was pure Japanese," as Etsuko describes her first daughter.⁷⁸ In contrast, born in England, Niki is Etsuko's second child with her second British husband, whose name was chosen for having "some vague echo of the East about it" (9). The novel begins with Etsuko and Niki processing Keiko's suicide, which the British newspapers repeatedly frame in terms of Keiko's pure Japaneseness: "The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide," observes Etsuko, "for that was all they reported" (10). The English newspaper's repackaging of the Japanese stereotype offers a clue for how we might approach *A Pale View of Hills*, which similarly conveys a vague sense of historical Japan from Etsuko's contemporary England. Rather than naturalize what the English might assume to be typically Japanese, Ishiguro's novel instead emphasizes the process of stereotyping—by way of the English newspaper, or Etsuko's hazy retroactive narration—in order to foreground pure Japaneseness as a highly mediated trope. As in his later work, Ishiguro here deploys ethnic stereotypes as over-iterated mimesis—generic tropes and clichés tactically reproduced, not to naturalize the stereotypes, but to emphasize them as

⁷⁶ Edith Milton, "In a Japan Like Limbo," *New York Times Book Review* (9 May 1982): 12, emphasis added.

⁷⁷ Bill Bryson, "Between Two Worlds," *The New York Times* (29 April 1990).

⁷⁸ Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* (New York: Vintage, 1982): 10. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

constructions.

While the novel begins by suggesting Etsuko's generic flexibility through her two daughters—one Japanese and the other British—its historical narration of postwar Nagasaki moves beyond this Japanese-British dichotomy that reviewers were so quick to identify with Ishiguro. Keiko's suicide prompts Etsuko to reflect on her origin story as a child born amid Nagasaki's nuclear aftermath, which reorients the novel's geopolitical scope toward the question of American power—both in its bombing of the seaport city and its subsequent Allied Occupation of Japan (1945-1952).⁷⁹ Etsuko's descriptions of postwar Nagasaki—and, in particular, its infrastructural rebuilding—thus entail attention not only to Japan-British, but also Japan-U.S. relations. This pivot to Japan's postwar entwinement with America is further focalized through Etsuko's recollections of another Japanese woman, Sachiko, who—in contrast to Etsuko's migration to Britain—plans to leave for America with her own daughter, Mariko. As the novel's second Japanese mother-daughter pair living in postwar Nagasaki, Sachiko and Mariko can be read as formally mimetic—we might even say stereotypic—of Etsuko and Keiko. As the novel unfolds, Sachiko and Etsuko's storylines come to mirror each other, except for their respective national destinations: Sachiko's Japanese American immigration plot versus Etsuko's more atypical Japanese British one.

Etsuko's and Sachiko's divergent Asian Anglophone plots suggest two alternate narratives of postwar Japanese historical progress. Both women's narratives imply a degree of developmental, and specifically generational, progress—as both understand their decision to leave Japan in terms of their respective daughters' futures. The first, embodied by Etsuko, unfolds not quite as regression, but as a kind of stagnant relocation to a prewar global empire—a stagnation that is further aestheticized in the weak affect of Etsuko's narrative voice. The second, embodied by Sachiko, represents a more economically propulsive push toward a technologically modernized future. As Sachiko's departure to America with her daughter precedes Etsuko's own to England, Sachiko's Asian American immigration plot thus both narratively and historically precedes Etsuko's Asian British one—a temporal precedence that implies not only Japan's, but Britain's, economic stagnation relative to postwar America. Indeed, Sachiko repeatedly associates her desire to leave Japan with a progressively democratic American drive, whereas Etsuko's memories of her past life in Nagasaki largely involve subservient caretaking of both her Japanese husband and father-in-law. Living as a single-mother, Sachiko frequently teases Etsuko for her Japanese conservatism and, by implication, anti-feminism. “Mariko will be fine in America,” Sachiko informs Etsuko, “It's a better place for a child to grow up. And she'll have far more opportunities there, life's much better for a woman in America” (46). Etsuko's characteristic response to this reaffirms her tendency toward passivity: “I couldn't be happier with things as they are. Jiro's work is going so well, and now the child arriving just when we wanted it” (46). In these early flashbacks, Sachiko and Etsuko neatly embody two divergent stereotypes with diverging nationally-oriented drives: the progressive Asian American immigrant and the conservative adherent to the country of origin and its customs.

Yet what begins as a stark antinomy between Sachiko's American progressivism and Etsuko's Japanese subordination becomes increasingly blurred through the novel's generic structure. That Ishiguro's historical novel is narrated in the first-person already implies a formal entanglement between Etsuko's and Sachiko's plots: Etsuko narratively reproduces Sachiko's story. The novel's Gothicism further collapses these dual Asian Anglophone plots by repeating a series of generic symbols: a river, a cottage, a ghostly woman, and a mysterious little girl. In their recurrence, these blunt tropes threaten to take Etsuko's narration out of its individual historical context and into the

⁷⁹ While Americans remember the Occupation as one of their most successful postwar reconstruction endeavors, Japan, too, experienced the relationship in terms of political and economic development. See Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 350-51.

more generic realm of allegory. As stereotypes compound, they work against the realist specificity of the historical novel, detaching from any single character and instead, with increasing persistence, collapse plots that initially appeared diametrically opposed.

If national tropes distinguish Etsuko and Sachiko as two different types of Japanese characters, then literary tropes merge them. Etsuko first encounters Sachiko as what we might call her gothic double, when the latter moves into a cottage “on the edge of the river” (12) opposite Etsuko’s own home. As the “one wooden cottage [that] had survived both the devastation of the war and the government bulldozers,” Sachiko’s home is itself understood in gothic terms—a prewar anachronism haunting the desolate landscape of postwar Nagasaki. The gothic nature of Sachiko’s home is heightened when Mariko keeps mentioning an invisible “woman from across the river” (18). Sachiko explains this apparition to Etsuko as a traumatic holdover from wartime Tokyo, when Mariko saw a mother drown her daughter’s kittens as part of a household purge:

There was a canal at the end and the woman was kneeling there, up to her elbows in water. [...] I knew something was wrong as soon as I saw her. You see, Etsuko, she turned round and smiled at Mariko. [...] she brought her arms out of the canal and showed us what she’d been holding under the water. It was a baby. (74)

Sachiko’s explanation allows us to interpret Mariko’s ghostly woman—much like their cottage—as a representation of real postwar trauma: gothic conventions objectify a historical experience otherwise difficult to grasp. Yet these images not only mark Sachiko and Mariko’s traumatic past, but are also absorbed into Etsuko’s recollections of her own Japanese past. When Sachiko prepares to leave for America, this scene is reproduced from Etsuko’s perspective:

[Sachiko] put the kitten into the water and held it there. She remained like that for some moments, staring into the water, both hands beneath the surface. She was wearing a casual summer kimono, and the corners of each sleeve touched the water. Then for the first time, without taking her hands from the water, Sachiko threw a glance over her shoulders towards her daughter [...] Sachiko brought her hands out of the water and stared at the kitten she was still holding. (167)

Ishiguro makes an obvious point of recycling the same generic images in both scenes: the initial woman “kneeling there, up to her elbows in water” (74) becomes, in Etsuko’s narration, Sachiko “staring into the water, both hands beneath the surface” (167); the Tokyo woman who “turned round and smiled at Mariko” (74) becomes Sachiko, who “threw a glance over her shoulders towards her daughter” (167); and, finally, the woman who “brought her arms out of the canal and showed us . . . a baby” (74) is echoed in how “Sachiko brought her hands out of the water and stared at the kitten she was holding” (167). Here, the machinery of stereotype works over time as Ishiguro’s reproduction of the gothic woman doubles as a generically Japanese one. Not only is Sachiko an echo of the woman from wartime Tokyo, she is also a stereotypically Japanese echo, with her “casual summer kimono, and the corners of each sleeve touch[ing] the water.” Given Etsuko’s initial remark about how “[t]he English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide,” what might be the value of two representations of Japanese women performing acts of arguably maternal selfishness not just in stereotypical terms, but in prose that clunkily points to the genericness of that stereotype?

Ishiguro’s first attempt at novel writing hovers between the realm of historical realism and what we might call “bad” genre fiction. If we shift to read *A Pale View of Hills* as a historical novel that is not about postwar Japan, but as purposefully reproducing stereotypes about *Japaneseness*, then

Etsuko's gothic doubling comes into clearer focus. For while a realist reading might take *A Pale View of Hills* to be an ethnographic representation of postwar Japan, understanding it through the logic of genre fiction helps us see Ishiguro's stereotypical Japanese women as intentional gothic doublings. Particularly, this doubling explains Ishiguro's stereotypical protagonist Etsuko, who spends the majority of her own first-person narration reflecting on Sachiko and Mariko's journey to America. When Etsuko recalls her past in Nagasaki, for instance, she always positions herself in the background as a servile Japanese wife. Instead, Sachiko's stories—both those she tells Etsuko (about the Tokyo woman) and those in which she is central (such as those Etsuko tells about Sachiko)—take over the bulk of Etsuko's narration, and threaten even to drown out Etsuko, the novel's purported protagonist. Despite the doubling, Ishiguro's use of gothic tropes maintains a dissonance between his two Japanese characters, preventing readers who work under the presumed context of realism from collapsing the two women entirely, while nonetheless suggesting their uncanny similarities. By repeating these clichés, Ishiguro increasingly takes his novel out of the realm of historical realism and into that of the generic. The network of gothic semblances in the novel does not point inward—to Etsuko or even Sachiko's interiority—but ultimately outward, into a seemingly timeless sphere of generic tropes and ethnic stereotypes that populate the novel. Ishiguro's narrative structure—which gradually reincorporates and reproduces central tropes—thus thematizes the movements of formal recurrence that characterize the reproduction of genre and stereotype more broadly.

A Pale View of Hills negotiates two different trajectories of postwar Japanese history through the narrative voice of one stereotypically Japanese woman who progressively comes to account for not only one, but a series of other stereotypical women. In order to convey this, Ishiguro turns away from traditional realism and draws increasingly on the more speculative genre of the maternal gothic, whose generic iterability derives from a logic of biological reproducibility. Just as nineteenth-century gothic fiction unsettled the terms of the historical-realist project by perverting the body's reproductive capacities, Ishiguro's novel merges the gothic genre with historical fiction to narrate postwar Japan's miraculous high-speed growth via Etsuko's overly generic body—generic in literary form and in ethnic type. Written at the height of Japan's economic boom, *A Pale View of Hills* might be read as reflecting Japan's era of high economic growth as one of endless characterological expansion. Etsuko's ongoing accommodation of other stereotypical characters—from Keiko's morbid Japaneseness to Sachiko's rapacious Americanness, and even Niki's complacent Britishness—suggests that what was typically Japanese during the 1980s was a seemingly miraculous capacity for what we might call flexible accumulation. At the same time, the premature suicide of her pure Japanese daughter marks a limit to this flexibility, as her narrative reproducibility—implied as potentially endless through the novel's characterological circuit—meets an untimely end in present-day England. This short-circuiting of Etsuko's narrative of biological reproduction is reflected in the novel's generic ending, as Etsuko—a specter of the ghostly woman across the lake—recedes into the gothic architecture of her English cottage.

III. Technological Miracles

While Ishiguro's first Japanese historical novel negotiates between postwar British and American geopolitics by drawing on a sense of Japan as place, his second was initially not meant to take place in Japan at all. As early drafts reveal, Ishiguro began by setting *An Artist of the Floating World* in 1980s England, with a young Japanese employee at a British firm as its protagonist.⁸⁰ Though the novel is ultimately set in postwar Japan, featuring the imperial apologist and former war propagandist, Masuji Ono, Ishiguro's initial blueprints reveal a rather different story that traffics far more in stereotypes about Britishness. "Let's write a novel that does say things about Britain," reflects Ishiguro in notes to himself, "and about what British people think are meaningful ways to spend their lives; and the idealising of the British way."⁸¹ More specifically, Ishiguro's plan to place the novel in present-day England was informed by a desire to render a "picture of a Britain under the pressure of unemployment," in which the Japanese narrator "holds the British work ethic up as a better ideal," even as firm and country begin "to crumble." Amid this typical story about Britain's period of deindustrialization was, of course, its atypically Japanese protagonist, whose "great nationalistic pride in technological miracles," as Ishiguro put it, more accurately applied to Japan's postwar expansion than Britain's.⁸² While most critics read *An Artist of the Floating World* in terms of Ono's Japanese ultra-nationalism, Mieko Anders recently reveals how its palimpsest of 1980s Britain complicates any readings of the novel as a national allegory.⁸³ As we will see, Ishiguro's initial version of the Japanese protagonist persists even in the novel's final iteration; Ono's nationalistic pride in Japanese technological miracles continues to draw on the generic blueprint of the postindustrial British corporation.

If *A Pale View of Hills* abounds in stereotypically Japanese women, then *An Artist of the Floating World* makes stereotype's reproductive potential all the more explicit by featuring what we might call a typically Japanese mode of reproduction: *ukiyo-e*. Thus, readings that plow "*Artist* for national allegories or national stereotypes," as Sunny Xiang puts it, "miss that the conflict of significance for Ono and at stake in the novel is not between Japan and the Allies but between aesthetic approaches."⁸⁴ The novel's title—a literal translation of *ukiyo-e*—refers to the artistic genre of Japanese woodblock printing, the long history of which has been shaped by technological developments in mass industrial reproduction that evolved into a well-coordinated system involving artist, publisher, carver, and printer. *Ukiyo-e* emerged during the late seventeenth century and by the early nineteenth was already in decline by the mid-twentieth century of Ishiguro's novel, it survived only as a commodified mass medium that manufactured Japanese paintings for a predominantly Western market. Ono explicitly describes his art production in commercial terms—at "Master Takeda's 'studio'" and "the Takeda firm"—that point to *ukiyo-e* during the 1930s as a corporate

⁸⁰ Many thanks to Mieko Anders for pointing me to this archival discovery.

⁸¹ "Early Notes," Kazuo Ishiguro Papers, Container 1.2. The Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, Texas, United States.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Mieko Anders, "Corporate Ties: Specters of Alienation and Racialization in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*." Undergraduate thesis. UC-Berkeley.

⁸⁴ Sunny Xiang, "Voicing Asia: Post-Cold War Novels, Geopolitics, and Human Rights" PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley (2014): 25. More recently, however, Xiang makes an argument for *Artist* as a kind of national allegory, in which Ono figures as the fictional representation of Japanese emperor Hirohito, whose reputation moves from Japanese cold war innocence to post-cold war criminal. In Xiang's argument, Ono's fictional narrative voice renders him a "typical [Asian] racial subject" during the Cold War, who becomes a "passive vessel through which rumors could pass." See Sunny Xiang, *Tonal Intelligence: The Aesthetics of Asian Inscrutability During the Long Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 94.

enterprise.⁸⁵ The commercial aspect of contemporary *ukiyo-e* production, moreover, informs its stereotypically Japanese aesthetic content: “the essential point about the sort of things we were commissioned to paint—geishas, cherry trees, swimming carps, temples—was that they look ‘Japanese’ to the foreigners to whom they were shipped out, and all finer points of style were quite likely to go unnoticed” (69). Ono’s own narration of both the Takeda firm and its generically Japanese images repeatedly omit the “finer points” of *ukiyo-e* production to convey a more generic impression of competitive Japanese technological efficiency to “foreigners.”

By emphasizing *ukiyo-e* as a commercial mode of mass reproduction, Ishiguro draws a contradiction between what foreigners assume to “look ‘Japanese’” and the technological efficiency necessary to reproduce these Orientalist impressions. What is more, this contradiction alerts readers to the dissonance between what *An Artist of the Floating World* purports to be about (a Japanese imperial apologist who paints wartime propaganda) and what it deliberately narrates (the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, we might say). Ishiguro does not suggest that contemporary Japanese aesthetic production must be unmediated in order to be authentic, but, rather, its opposite: contemporary Japanese aesthetic production must be mediated—must involve mechanical reproduction and corporate branding—in order to appear authentically Japanese. In an echo from Ishiguro’s early drafts of the novel, his Japanese protagonist here continues to be alienated from his labor, even while working in Japan. In emphasizing Ono as a factory worker whose work of aesthetic reproduction is divorced from its content, Ishiguro organizes the Takeda firm and to mirror the original 1980s British firm. In both versions of *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro’s stereotypically Japanese protagonist figures finally as the stereotypically alienated worker of late capitalist accumulation.

The twinned relationship between booming wartime Japan and precarious 1980s Britain further reframes the novel’s more explicit depiction of U.S.-Japanese economic competition during the postwar period. Ono’s aesthetic and ideological outmodedness is repeatedly contrasted against his grandson, Ichiro, who, much like Sachiko in *A Pale View of Hills*, enthusiastically champions American values. In contrast to Ono’s career as a painter in imperial Japan, Ichiro is obsessed with American genres (Hollywood films) and tropes (cowboys) that typify its capitalist modernity. During the novel’s first conversation between Ono and his grandson, Ichiro asks him:

“I want to know about the monster.”

“The monster?”

“Is it prehistoric?”

“Prehistoric? You know words like that already? You must be a clever boy.” (15)

As with Ono, the reader’s introduction to Ichiro’s question about the prehistoric monster is under-specified—is expressly generic—as to prompt any number of associations, as well as, for Ono, ongoing clarification. Only after “prehistoric” is repeated three times do we learn from Ichiro’s mother that her son first spotted the monster on “a film poster outside the railway station.” Ichiro’s mother situates the monster within the context of technological modernity exemplified by cinema and trains, but Ichiro’s childish perspective continues to sustain the dissonance between the prehistoric creature and its commercialized reproductions in blockbuster genre films.

⁸⁵ Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 66, 65. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

As is soon made clear when Ono asks Ichiro to recreate the poster from memory, the seemingly timeless prehistoric monster on the film poster emerges as none other than a version of Godzilla:

Using a dark brown crayon, he drew on the lower part of the sheet a row of boxes—which soon became a skyline of city buildings. And then there emerged, looming above the city, a huge lizard-like creature up on its hind legs. At this point my grandson exchanged his brown crayon for a red one and began to make bright streaks all around the lizard.

“What is this, Ichiro? Fire?” . . .

“Electric cables,” Ichiro said, with an impatient sigh. . . .

Ichiro gave another sigh and continued to draw. He picked up his dark crayon again and began to draw at the foot of the sheet panic-stricken people fleeing in all directions. (33)

The novel never calls Godzilla by his name. Instead, the generic monster is identified by this ekphrastic description—in which his over-iterative genericness is further formalized through Ono’s narration of the scene as Ichiro draws it. We might understand the omission as Ishiguro’s fidelity to historical accuracy (this scene takes place in 1948 and the first Ishirō Honda *Godzilla* film was not released until 1954), but the lapse is more simply justified by the fact that we need not name the mass-produced Godzilla to recognize that Ichiro is drawing one. For Ishiguro’s cosmopolitan reader, as Walkowitz might describe her, the image of this monster pummeling across a modern cityscape is so familiar as to require no further explication. In this instance, Ichiro’s reproduction of the poster image with his new crayons is just one of many adaptations of Honda’s *Godzilla* (Figure 1.1) that, with each iteration, only reaffirms the monster’s generic legibility.

The recognizability of Ichiro’s anachronistic rendering of the prehistoric monster further works to confirm the aesthetic flexibility of Godzilla in the global present. While Godzilla originates from Japan’s film industry and is internationally recognized as a monster specific to Japanese postwar nuclear modernity, the prehistoric monster in Ishiguro’s novel—as a product of Ichiro’s more recent and Americanized cultural memory—is more typically associated with Americanism. Godzilla is American insofar as Honda and Terry O. Morse adapted an Americanized version of the Japanese *Godzilla* only two years after its release (Figure 1.2). If anything, it seems that the anachronism of the monster in Ishiguro’s novel is precisely the point: Godzilla, as he is known in our contemporary moment, is so generically flexible that he quickly exceeds his own historical context. His generic Japaneseness—upon travelling the circuits of global genre films—appears now as a seemingly transnational and transhistorical phenomenon. Ichiro’s description of the monster as prehistoric, however, is complicated by the fact that he surrounds his Godzilla not with fire, as Ono seems to know the poster represents, but with “electric cables.” What Ono understands to be fire gets translated by Ichiro into technological infrastructure, as the prehistoric animal is brought to life through the crosshairs of electric wires. As with tropes about Ishiguro’s Japaneseness, Godzilla here is both atavistic and modern, representative of both postwar Japan and postwar American anxieties about postwar Japan.



Figure 1.1 Theatrical release poster for Ishirō Honda's *Godzilla* (1954)



Figure 1.2 Theatrical release poster for Terry O. Morse and Ishirō Honda's *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956)

Just as Ichiro's multi-mediated reproduction of Godzilla (from poster to crayon image to Ono's narration) scrambles the historical and medium specificity of the original Japanese monster, Ishiguro's novel also suggests that any juxtaposition between Ono and Ichiro as representing two nationally specific ideologies (imperial Japan versus contemporary America) ultimately fails. This juxtaposition, moreover, fails along the lines of technological industrialization, as Ichiro's crayon drawing of a poster of a film comes to invert Ono's own trajectory as an artist of increasingly mass-produced stereotypes: commercial *ukiyo-e* prints later inform his work as a painter of propaganda posters. As such, we might read Ichiro's rendering of the generic monster as an extension of the anachronism already at the heart of the novel, embodied in Ono, whose political beliefs and retrospective narration place him perpetually out of step with history. As Ono's historical belatedness stages him as the protagonist of his own *Künstlerroman*, the novel's capitalist modes of technological reproduction take a life of their own. History is not dramatized through Ono's individual body, then, but through the accumulation of commodified generic forms—call them technological miracles—that populate his narration.

IV. Late 1990s

Ishiguro's more recent British historical novels continue to build on the flexibility of stereotypical Japaneseness. In his 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*, the tension between stereotypical protagonist and mass technological reproduction is literalized through a group of English schoolchildren in the "late 1990s," who, unbeknownst to themselves, are clones bred for eventual organ donations.⁸⁶ In contrast to Ishiguro's early Japan novels, this more recent Asian Anglophone historical novel diverges in taking turn-of-the-century England as its setting and science fiction as its animating genre. Ishiguro's retreat from Japanese settings, however, began as early as his third novel, *The Remains of the Day*. As Bill Bryson understands it, "Ishiguro chose an English setting [for his third novel] as a deliberate reaction to the labeling of him as Japanese writer living in England."⁸⁷ Ishiguro told Bryson: "Before I knew anything about the book, I knew that it wasn't going to have anything to do with Japan or Japanese people."⁸⁸ *The Remains of the Day* put Ishiguro on the world map as an international writer not just of "Japan or Japanese people" but of universal topics, whereupon Ishiguro continued to write novels largely set in Britain.

Whereas *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* featured generically Japanese narrators, the protagonist of *Never Let Me Go* is generic due to her conspicuous lack of distinguishing characteristics, ethnic or otherwise. The 31-year-old British woman who narrates the novel, known only as Kathy H., is instead a clone whose purpose is to provide the raw material for piecemeal organ donations. As a clone, Kathy's genericness is thus understood not only in terms of her science fictionality, but also her reproducibility. Alongside Kathy, the cassette tape is one of the novel's central reproductions; or, as Walkowitz describes it, the cassette tape recording of a popular song—from which *Never Let Me Go* gets its title—"is also one of the novel's preeminent 'copies.'"⁸⁹ The analogy between the novel's generic clone and its eponymous cassette tape recording is further elucidated by different iterations of the novel's cover art (Figure 3.3). As Walkowitz points out, most covers of British, American, and even non-Anglophone translations of the novel feature a generic white girl (presumably representing Kathy), whereas the Japanese edition of the novel prominently displays a cassette tape.

⁸⁶ Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 1. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

⁸⁷ Bryson, 44.

⁸⁸ This is, of course, in one sense true, in that the novel is not about "Japan or Japanese people" ("Between Two Worlds" 44). At the same time, we might say that *The Remains of the Day* makes good on Ishiguro's prior plans to set the plot of *An Artist of the Floating World* in England, given that it is similarly about a postwar Fascist apologist caught in the throes of history who works for a waning national institution that is, in this case, butlering.

⁸⁹ Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, 109.



Figure 3.3 Front cover of the Japanese translation of *Never Let Me Go*.
Watashi o hanasanaide, translated by Tsuchiya Masao, Hayakawa Publishing, 2006.

In analyzing why “the Japanese cover, in its apparent singularity,” privileges “the image of a cassette tape over the image of a person,” Walkowitz argues that the cassette tape exemplifies the novel’s message that songs, novels, and even people only accrue meaning through networks of reproduction and circulation: “all art is a cassette tape, for better or for worse.”⁹⁰ While Walkowitz’s reading helpfully reprioritizes aesthetic form over individual person in reading Ishiguro’s novel, I seek to historicize the cassette tape further—taking it out of its generic circulation as a symbol for “all art,” and placing it back within a historical materialist understanding of the cassette tape as a Japan-manufactured format that Kathy’s retrospective narration only belatedly registers.

Never Let Me Go may not represent any Japanese characters, yet it continues to trope on typical Japaneseness in the form of the cassette tape: a technological format metonymically associated with the Japanese multinational conglomerate, Sony Corporation. The cassette tapes (as well as Sony-manufactured and branded Walkmans) that circulate in the novel are thus typical Japanese commodities that mediate Ishiguro’s historical novel set in waning Britain. Developed in 1962 by the Dutch company Philips, but only established as a worldwide standard under Philips’s 1965 alliance with Sony, the compact cassette tape became a quintessential international format of the 1980s that was, however, already on its way to obsolescence by the late 1990s of *Never Let Me Go*.⁹¹ For Ishiguro’s 2005 reader, both the cassette tape and the novel’s clones are explicitly belated forms: outmoded not only in our post-2005 present, but already in the late 1990s of the novel’s. Although the cassette tape is firmly associated with postwar Japanese modernity by the time of the novel’s publication, Ishiguro’s narrative retrospection to the relatively recent history of the 1990s suggests a more historically dialectical approach to understanding its late twentieth-century

⁹⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁹¹ John Nathan, *Sony: A Private Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 129.

technologies. By registering the cassette tape as a 1980s format already redundant by the 1990s, *Never Let Me Go* marks the speed at which technological modernity cycles through its generic commodities. As Theodore Martin argues, the post-1980s realist novel responds to the rapid pace at which cultural and class conventions change by drawing on the “particular discourse of historicity” that is the “decade.”⁹² We might say, then, that Ishiguro’s speculative historical novel about 1990s England anchors its historicity in the material cassette tape that marks itself off as a product of the *previous* decade.

The cassette’s belated status in Ishiguro’s historical novel is represented at the level of both plot and narrative form. While a cassette tape recording gives *Never Let Me Go* its title, the actual material tape is introduced relatively late in the novel. Tapes are first mentioned as an aside, when Kathy explains to readers the difference between “Exchanges” (16) and “Sales” at her boarding school, Hailsham. Exchanges involve objects made at Hailsham—crafts, poems, artwork created by and exchanged among students—while Sales involve commodities “from outside” (41), such as “a particular track suit or a music cassette” (42). The track suit and the music cassette, as typical 1970s and 1980s commodities respectively, are also belated artefacts in the sense that they enter Hailsham already used and discarded. Their afterlife in the hands of Hailsham students (otherwise unaware of current cultural conventions beyond their campus) often involve atypical repurposing of these “period details,” to borrow Martin’s phrase.⁹³ For instance, Kathy describes a trend at Hailsham during the summer after “Walkmans had started appearing at Hailsham” (102) in which “several people . . . sit on the grass around a single Walkman, passing the headset around. Okay, it sounds a stupid way to listen to music, but it created a really good feeling” (103). In describing the Walkman’s unconventional rotation among students, Kathy is aware that it might be “a stupid way to listen to music.” Yet it is also the Walkman’s communal circulation and the tape’s retroactive coherence that manifests the “really good feeling” she describes. In explaining the piecemeal way in which the tape’s contents get reconstructed, Kathy unwittingly characterizes the structure of her own nostalgic narration, which weaves between past and present in a way that gains coherence only recursively.

For instance, when Kathy finally recalls the beloved tape of her childhood, she does so in a way that both formalizes the mode of communal Walkman listening and mimics the sonic elisions of a degraded cassette tape:

I still have a copy of that tape and until recently I’d listen to it occasionally driving out in the open country on a drizzly day. But now the tape machine in my car’s got so dodgy, I don’t dare play it in that . . . The album’s called *Songs After Dark* and it’s by Judy Bridgewater. What I’ve got today isn’t the actual cassette, the one I had back then at Hailsham, the one I lost. It’s the one Tommy and I found in Norfolk years afterwards—but that’s another story I’ll come to later. What I want to talk about is the first tape, the one that disappeared. (64)

Kathy’s introduction of this tape exemplifies the sort of rhetorical stutter—a kind of self-interruption—to how she narrates her past, compounded by digressiveness. We might describe Kathy’s first-person retrospective narration as taking on a kind of cassette tape media effect. For like the cassette tape that wears down with time and repetitive use, Kathy’s descriptions take on a fuzzier, vaguer, and what we might call a more generic tone the older her memories become. The wearing down of the cassette tape mirrors the progressive indefiniteness of Kathy’s first-person narration, as one format works to analogize the disintegration of the other. As Kathy progresses in

⁹² Theodore Martin’s *Contemporary Drift* approaches this issue of historicizing “the contemporary” by reading the present through the accumulation of past genres. See Martin, *Contemporary Drift*, 31.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 32.

her recollections of the past, the novel takes on an almost looping effect, where knowledge is both anticipated and assumed, telegraphed and belated. Our understanding of the significance of the tape occurs—like our gradual comprehension of the crux of Ishiguro’s plot (that Kathy is in fact a clone, on the verge of beginning the organ donations that also mark the beginning of the end of her life)—in stops and starts, wavering forward and backward.

While Kathy’s piecemeal Walkman listening sessions at Hailsham generate “a really good feeling” (103) of collectivity, Kathy’s recursive first-person voice generates a somewhat different atmosphere, which Walkowitz has described in terms of “aleatory style,” “vague diction,” and “unoriginal expressions.”⁹⁴ Walkowitz reads the fundamental “unoriginality” in Kathy’s speech in terms of “a kind of doubling between the novel’s story and the novel’s discourse. And insofar as one critic, no less than Frank Kermode, has faulted the novel’s discourse for its ‘familiar, chatty style,’ Kathy H.’s unoriginality seems to be Ishiguro’s too.”⁹⁵ Yet, if we translate Kathy’s—and by association Ishiguro’s—“familiar, chatty style” here not as an intentional unoriginality, but instead as a flexible genericness, we gain a better literary historical grasp on the confluences between the novel’s story and discourse. By taking on the qualities of the cassette tape, Kathy’s fuzzy diction and narrative lapses generate a loose enough format that implies loss and ambiguity, to be sure, but which also reintroduces the possibility of its continued piecemeal circulation, as well as its potential reproduction, however partial or compressed. In other words, if the cassette is the stylistic “period” detail of the 1980s that gives the novel its historical texture, it’s also the historically Japanese technological format that anticipates Kathy’s narrative affect.

In formalizing both the cassette tape’s circulation and its material wearing down, Kathy’s aleatory narrative style takes on the affective inscrutability that critics associated with Ishiguro’s early Japanese novels. At the same time, Kathy’s narrative voicing is stylized to the point of being arguably under-stylized, or, indeed, hyper-generic. In this way, Kathy’s “vague diction” or “unoriginal expressions” also take on what Sianne Ngai has termed the “weak affect” of contemporary historical consciousness—a middling and meandering affective register that is not typically Japanese so much as familiar to anyone living under the pressures of very late capitalism.⁹⁶ And while the inscrutability of Kathy’s narrative voice cannot be read as characterologically Asiatic, her formal affinities with the Japanese-manufactured cassette tape allow us to read her narrative voice as typically Japanese insofar as it is generically and racially underdetermined. For while Japan’s postwar exceptionalism emerged through its becoming a new regional center of global capital accumulation, the actual location of Japanese postwar modernity is more difficult to pinpoint, given that so much of its economic growth was dependent on exports. The products of Japanese media corporations such as Sony, for instance, were largely produced to be consumed by Western markets and, as such, are not easily fixed to national boundaries. While this was already true of Japanese technological products during the nation’s period of high economic growth, it is perhaps even more true during the nation’s economic downturn during the 1990s. As Harry Harootunian and Tomiko Yoda explain, the growing popularity of Japanese anime and video game products around the world has been “one of the few bright spots in the nation’s bleak economic landscape since the 1990s.”⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, 103.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ While not a scholar of Asian American objects, the Asian American scholar Sianne Ngai’s theory of “ugly feelings” or “minor affects” (8) of late capitalism—has been influential both in Asian American studies and American studies broadly; see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005). Anne Allison’s *Precarious Japan* situates this generalized state of affective weakness and middlingness in the context of Japan’s economic collapse following 1991. See Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁹⁷ Harry Harootunian and Tomiko Yoda, “Introduction,” in *Japan After Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 11.

This rise in Japanese popular media has been, moreover, attributed to the nation's shift from being an exporter of hardware to an exporter of software—that is, a shift from exporting material forms of technology to more digital forms of media and entertainment products. At the time of Kathy's narration, then, not only was the world undergoing a shift from cassette tapes to CDs—from analog to digital—but so too was Japan moving into the production of popular digital culture that increasingly “resists easy containment in fixed national cultural identities.”⁹⁸ Perhaps appropriately, then, Kathy's narrative voice wavers indefinitely throughout *Never Let Me Go*. For during this media transition sits Kathy's precarious clone body—an obsolescent analog form confronted with the uneasy fantasy about a future of endless reproducibility.

The contradictions of Japan's technological boom during its economic downturn are encoded not only in Kathy's inscrutability, but also in the fate of her body, which promises a future for somebody else at the cost of her own. As the generic protagonist of Ishiguro's 2005 historical novel, Kathy's affective inscrutability echoes Ishiguro's stereotypically Japanese narrators, even as her science fictional clone body renders her more generically fictional than them. While almost all of Ishiguro's protagonists recall the past from a perspective much later in life, Kathy narrates her childhood as a 31-year-old. She is a young adult, but we eventually learn that her narration is occurring relatively late in her life, as she will soon enter the phase where her body will begin the process of organ donations. Rather than muddle her narration of history, however, Kathy's predetermined, cramped lifespan emphasizes the contradictions of uneven and belated development. Indeed, Kathy represents a contemporary instance of what Esty characterized as the “unseasonable youth” of the late English bildungsroman—a body out of time, and in more ways than one.⁹⁹ For most of the novel, Kathy incorrectly believes that there is possible escape from early death if she and her clone boyfriend can prove they truly love each other by creating artwork that is original—that is, in other words, not generic. Yet the promise of romantic resolution fails to afford Kathy, as well as Ishiguro's novel, traditional closure. *Never Let Me Go* ends with Kathy alone in a field, “imagin[ing] this was the spot where everything [she'd] ever lost since [her] childhood had washed up” (287), with a final sentence that explicitly forecloses this fantasy: “I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive to wherever it was I was supposed to be” (288).

In splicing the bildungsroman with science fiction, Ishiguro's historical novel suggests the inadequacy of traditional realist bildung to narrate national progress—for both Britain and Japan. Yet by ending not in the mode of speculative fantasizing, but rather with the quotidian and indeed *realist* impulse that sends Kathy back to “wherever it was [she] was supposed to be” (288), *Never Let Me Go* also suggests that it is ultimately the vestiges of realist form—however belated or estranged—that continue to orient the contemporary historical fiction. This formal relationship between the genre's classical realism and its belated science fictional adaptations helps us better grasp the generic qualities of Ishiguro's globalism.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁹ As Esty argues in *Unseasonable Youth*, the “trope of adolescence” (181) that so powerfully mediates the emergence of European—and, in particular, British—nationalism in the generic form of the “classic bildungsroman” (25) begins to falter during the late Victorian and modernist periods, at a time when the British empire was beginning to confront the contradictions of its metropole-colony relations at a more global scale. What happens toward the end of the Victorian period, then, is a detaching of the “trope of adolescence” (181) from an organic telos of bildung and, as such, from the generic form of the classical bildungsroman. With the rise of both globalization and capitalism, “the genre-bending logic of uneven development” (25), as Esty describes it, “takes on a new and more intense form in modernism,” in which the bildungsroman “had to include not only the story of progress, but also stories of stasis, regression, and hyperdevelopment.”

V. Surface Elements

The Buried Giant departs from Ishiguro's consistent use of the first-person narrator, though what Ishiguro feared would be more uncharacteristic was his turn to the genre of fantasy more often associated with lowbrow cultural production than the high literary fiction of his earlier work. In a 2015 interview, the author worried over the novel's generic divergence: "Will [readers] understand what I'm trying to do, or will they be prejudiced against the surface elements? Are they going to say this is fantasy?"¹⁰⁰ Set in post-Arthurian England around the 5th or 6th century, *The Buried Giant* takes place during a time of perpetual conflict between Britons and Saxons, in which the very future of England—not to mention that of the English empire—is under question. In turning to medieval history, Ishiguro's most recent 2015 historical novel departs from all his prior ones by focusing not on postwar history, but on something more like "prewar" history: the novel occurs on the eve of what is ultimately the Saxon takeover of the "native" Briton population, though the period Ishiguro depicts is one of temporary—albeit uneasy—peace. As such, *The Buried Giant* also diverges from many other contemporary British historical war novels (Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life* (2013)) which focus primarily—as so much scholarship continues to do—on twentieth-century wars; that is, on wars felt to be more immediate, more catastrophic, and more global. Indeed, *The Buried Giant* takes place so long ago that Ishiguro has himself described the novel as a "quasi-history,"¹⁰¹ given the relative lack of historical documentation for reference. In being quasi-history, however, *The Buried Giant* in fact engages the already speculative temporality of the historical novel that asks, "what might have been?" Such historical speculation is further accentuated by Ishiguro's incorporation of the generic conventions of fantasy: *The Buried Giant* houses not only its eponymous giant, but ogres, sprites, and, most crucially, a dragon named Querig whose breath, enchanted by Merlin, produces a literal fog of forgetfulness that attenuates characters' memories. Even greater than the specter of looming war, then, is the hovering atmosphere of forgetfulness that suspends *The Buried Giant* in a time of and about uncertainty.

Speculative in more ways than one, *The Buried Giant* was, upon its release, read as not only a violation of Ishiguro's own style, but also of the genres it enlists. Criticisms in particular take the novel's fantasy elements to task, and—whether in defense of "realism" or "genre fiction"—fault *The Buried Giant* for not committing to its generic aspirations. James Wood's scathing *New Yorker* review suggests that the problem with *The Buried Giant* "is not fantasy but allegory, which exists to literalize and simplify. The giant is not buried deeply enough."¹⁰² In being mere allegory, *The Buried Giant* becomes, for Wood, a novel whose "elaboration and prosecution of [its] theme [...] seems only halfhearted. [...] [I]ts fictional setting is feeble, mythically remote, generic, and pressureless."¹⁰³ While Meg Wolitzer admits that "There is, in fact, strong writing throughout this book, [...] it comes shrouded in its own mist; within pages, I could sometimes only half-remember parts of what

¹⁰⁰ Alexandra Alter, "For Kazuo Ishiguro, 'The Buried Giant' Is a Departure," *The New York Times*, Feb 19, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/books/for-kazuo-ishiguro-the-buried-giant-is-a-departure.html> (accessed March 27, 2019).

¹⁰¹ Kazuo Ishiguro, interview with Robert Pollie, *The 7th Avenue Project*, podcast audio, April 12, 2015, <https://7thavenueproject.com/post/116315772335/kazuo-ishiguro-interview-buried-giant>.

¹⁰² James Wood, "The Uses of Oblivion: Kazuo Ishiguro's 'The Buried Giant,'" *The New Yorker*, March 23, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/23/the-uses-of-oblivion> (accessed March 27, 2019).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

I'd already read. I can't imagine that was Ishiguro's intention."¹⁰⁴ On the side of genre fiction is no other than Ursula K. Le Guin, whose blog post review of *The Buried Giant* might be the novel's most notorious. Le Guin accuses Ishiguro of failing to give fantasy the "reality"—and thus, the respect—it deserves: "A fantastic setting requires vivid and specific description; while characters may lose touch with their reality, the storyteller can't."¹⁰⁵ While Le Guin echoes Wood and Wolitzer's frustration with Ishiguro's attempts to bring fantasy to life, she is ultimately more defensive of fantasy's generic conventions. Taking particular offense at Ishiguro's anxieties about the alienating effects of what she calls fantasy's "surface elements," Le Guin concludes by stating that "No writer can successfully use the 'surface elements' of a literary genre—far less its profound capacities—for a serious purpose, while despising it to the point of fearing identification with it."¹⁰⁶ Though these critics differed on the merits of fantasy as a genre, they all agreed on Ishiguro's failure to inhabit its assumed generic context. Instead, what occurs in reading *The Buried Giant* is a deepening sense of generic mismatch: fantasy with historical novel realism, allegorical devices with fantasy's symbolic force, "surface elements" without the more "profound capacities" of a literary genre. Though critics agree that generic tropes appear generally detached from their narrative purpose in *The Buried Giant*, what remains ambiguous is what exactly the organizing genre of the novel *is*.

Rather than read the novel as allegory (Wood), failed fantasy (Le Guin), or, a medieval bildungsroman (Wolitzer), I want to suggest that Ishiguro's latest novel emphasizes the already speculative qualities of the "classic" historical novel by extravagantly integrating the DNA of *other* genres. By detaching generic tropes from their naturalized settings and placing them into a quasi-historical setting, however, *The Buried Giant* denaturalizes not only the narrative conventions of the classic historical novel, but also those of allegory, fantasy, and the bildungsroman. As such, the novel does something formally similar to what Esty describes as the "metageneric critique" of the modernist bildungsroman: "In a metabildungsroman, the generic conventions survive albeit in ironic, partial, and belated form; the genre thus in effect discloses *its own aging process*."¹⁰⁷ Esty analyzes how the bildungsroman's flexible generic convention of the "trope of autonomous youth" detaches from the traditional bildungsroman of progress to negotiate narratives of colonial uneven development, but the flexibility of this trope similarly extends to those of other well-trod genres as well. The meta-generic effect of *The Buried Giant* works not to abolish the generic conventions of the classic historical novel, but to lay them bare in their ironic, partial, and belated forms: they emerge in Ishiguro's very recent novel about very old history in the attenuated forms of half-forgotten memories, of partial descriptions, of fantasy's autonomous "surface elements," and in allegorical devices without stable symbolic homes. In decoupling generic tropes from their generic settings, *The Buried Giant* is not mere allegory, as Wood assumes, but instead a metageneric critique of genre's allegorical functions.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Meg Wolitzer, "Ishiguro's 'Buried giant' Gets Lost In Its Own Fog," NPR, March 4, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/03/04/390447029/ishiguros-buried-giant-gets-lost-in-its-own-fog> (accessed March 27, 2019).

¹⁰⁵ Ursula Le Guin, "Are they going to say this is fantasy?" *ursulaklequin.com*, Mar 2, 2015, <https://www.ursulaklequin.com/blog/96-addendum-to-are-they-going-to-say-this-is-fantasy>.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 218.

¹⁰⁸ As Esty explains, the belated bildungsroman enacts its metageneric critique in the form of both the "broken allegory" and the "negative allegory." In the former, "the link between individual and collective is untethered and laid bare rather than naturalized as a principle of composition," while in the latter, "individuals continue to represent collective or national destinies, but not necessarily in the upward direction of moral or historical progress" (24). See *Unseasonable Youth*.

The Buried Giant tests the limits of what is typically Ishiguro by testing the generic limits of the traditional historical novel—that is, the form generic to all Ishiguro’s novels. But what most distinguishes it from Ishiguro’s prior historical novels, however, are not its speculative elements (*Never Let Me Go* is science fiction, after all), but its abandonment of the first-person narrator. Instead, the novel oscillates among three separate first-person narrators as well as an omniscient narrator who is focalized across a range of characters (some of whom later take on chapters as first-person narrators). In contrast to Lukács’s typical hero of nineteenth-century historical fiction or the stereotypical anti-heroes of Ishiguro’s prior novels, *The Buried Giant* mediates historical consciousness not through one wavering character, but by wavering, we might say, between a series of fictional—if sometimes also fantastical—voices. This multi-narrator structure emerges from Ishiguro’s growing interest in representing collective, rather than individual, historical memory, as he has explained in interviews.¹⁰⁹ Rather than narrate Britain’s national origins as one emergent storyline, the novel’s multiple conflicting voices result in an uneven narrative development that mirrors a highly contingent national development. Set right before the Britons were captured by the Anglo-Saxons, Ishiguro’s dispersed, syncopated narrative strategies work to express a moment in Anglophone history during which the Anglophone empire has not yet been guaranteed. Thus, Ishiguro’s mobilization of the genre of fantasy—which orients the speculativeness of this historical moment in Anglophone worldmaking—is amplified by the novel’s refusal to locate a single characterological or narratological focus. Instead of a realist historical novel about the birth of England focused around a typical English character, *The Buried Giant* narrates Pax Britannica’s colonial narratives about imperial modernization and global expansion as radically underdetermined—as perhaps having happened any number of other ways.

Indeed, these two aspects of the novel—its fantasy genre and its cast of generic narrators—work together in tandem, as Querig’s breath of forgetfulness is also what necessitates multiple characters throughout the novel to reconstitute the novel’s plot and its world. Querig’s magical breath functions not only as literary atmosphere, but also as a literal medium that produces characterological and narrational effects. Throughout, the ongoing forgetfulness of Ishiguro’s cast of characters who fall under its spell precipitates their attenuated narratives that cumulate into an overall “feeble, mythically remote, generic, and pressureless” narrative tone, to use Wood’s language. It is indeed a novel “shrouded in its own mist” (Wolitzer), such that readers—along with its characters—might “sometimes only half-remember parts” of what we’ve read. This, too, seems intentional. In fact, the novel ends by introducing an entirely new character: a boatman, representing death, whose first-person narration pivots away from the aging couple that the novel begins with. By undoing the naturalized alignment between individual and national progress in England’s pre-history, Ishiguro’s very contemporary novel about very old history seeks to distance readers from our assumptions about what constitutes Englishness itself.

The Buried Giant begins in the subjunctive mode that marks a counterfactual: “You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated.”¹¹⁰ Unlike Catherine Gallagher’s definition of a “historical counterfactual”—in which the counterfactual narrative must explicitly diverge from that of historical record—the counterfactual here is simply the possible world in which you went searching for the generic winding lanes or tranquil meadows for which England is famous. Unlike historical counterfactuals that contrast a possible world and the world as we know it, moreover, Ishiguro’s subjunctive here contrasts two different historical periods, neither of which are in the present: that is, between the period in which “you would have searched a long time” and that of “the sort of winding lane or

¹⁰⁹ Ishiguro, interview with Robert Pollie, *The 7th Avenue Project*.

¹¹⁰ Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* (New York: Vintage, 2015), 3. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

tranquil meadow for which England *later* became celebrated.” In establishing the first scene of his novel through a hypothetical relationship between not just one, but two, historical periods, Ishiguro alerts the reader to just how mediated the history of this novel is going to be—history so far from our present that it can only be reached through a thought-experiment. Here, the logic of counterfactual reasoning is mobilized in order to point out our distance from a history. Indeed, the equivocation in the language of “sort of” and “or” suggests to the reader the relative poverty of their current conceptual resources for conjuring up this past world. That “the *sort of* winding lane *or* tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated” is, here, at this point, as mythical—as fictional, or, indeed, generic—as the fictional landscape of *The Buried Giant*.

Embedded in this opening description is a not only a sense of the ongoing genericness of England as a setting, but also an England that maintains a kind of perpetual belatedness. For even when projecting into the narrative future of winding lanes and tranquil meadows, contemporary readers register these descriptions as typifying what Raymond Williams would describe as “the common image of the country [as] now an image of the past,” in contrast to “the common image of the city as an image of the future.”¹¹¹ In negotiating between different types of rural English landscapes, *The Buried Giant* begins by defining Englishness in terms of its generic settings—and indeed settings as generic as Etusko’s English cottage in Ishiguro’s first novel. By populating a recognizably English landscape with fantastical ogres and dragons, *The Buried Giant* also suggests that neither characterization of England is meant to be historically accurate, but that both instead draw on generic ideas about England inherited from Anglophone literary history. Just as *A Pale View of Hills* narrates the gradual uncoupling of stereotypes about Japaneseness from Japan, the hyper-English tropes in *The Buried Giant* similarly work to detach tropes about Englishness from England. These generic tropes are the realist English novel’s privileged surface elements, we might say, rendered uncanny and alienated by Ishiguro.

Because Ishiguro ends his novel right before the Britons are absorbed under the power of the Anglo-Saxons, however, the conflicting perspectives of *The Buried Giant* never actually cohere into a recognizable collective—that is to say, national—entity. In fact, the novel ends by introducing an entirely new minor character: a boatman, allegorizing Death, whose first-person narration leads us away from the aging couple with which the novel began while also heralding their literal end. Waverley’s personal development ultimately mediates the nation’s in what Esty has described as the “soul-nation allegory of emergence,”¹¹² but Ishiguro’s multi-narrational cast are irreconcilably split among the young and the old, the alive and the dead, the fictional and the meta-fictional (Sir Gawain makes an appearance), as well as, crucially, Britons and Saxons. By undoing the naturalized alignment between individual and national progress in England’s pre-history, Ishiguro’s metagenic critique also works to suggest the inadequacy of the traditional historical novel in guiding contemporary readers through a sense of world history.

The Buried Giant is the Asian Anglophone historical novel in its weakest form. Here, the belated narratives of all Ishiguro’s historical novels are stretched to their logical conclusion: his novel about pre-England estranges what readers take to be typical of the British, and later the Anglophone world by drawing out the mythical, elusive, and indeed generic origins of its national, which is also to say here ethnic, formation. To be generic is to be already somewhat belated; Ishiguro’s generic Japaneseness and historical genre fiction have dramatized this over and over again. While most nineteenth-century historical novels are narrated as though they unfold in the present, Ishiguro’s Asian Anglophone historical novels all feature anachronistic or aging protagonists who narrate

¹¹¹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), 297.

¹¹² In doing so, explains Ian Duncan, “*Waverley* subsumes the bildungsroman plot of individual sentimental and moral formation to the plot of national history” (“History and the Novel after Lukács,” 391).

history from the perspective of a later present—a perspective that comes, increasingly, to capture both Japan and Britain in the era of late twentieth-century American empire. In narrating twentieth-century Japanese or British history as a retrospective formation, Ishiguro simultaneously emphasizes this belated narration as already immanent in the nineteenth century historical novel's narration of the past. As Esty's reading of what he calls the belated or aging forms of the bildungsroman reminds us: "to read the bildungsroman in a cross-cultural or transhistorical way serves not so much to enshrine a genre's European origins but to underscore the iterative, belated quality of its conventions even in their supposedly original form."¹¹³ Similar to its generic cousin, the historical novel's subsequent adaptations do not simply eclipse their European origins, but instead, underscore the genre's already iterative and belated qualities through the process of reproducing them. As already mentioned, Ishiguro's historical novels mobilize the genre's flexibility over the course of an oeuvre that grows both more generically speculative and less racially Japanese. Yet given that narrative speculation is already built into the genre's originary form, I've proposed that we read Ishiguro's trajectory not as an increasingly decontextualized rejection of nineteenth-century historical novel realism, but instead, as a series of contemporary iterations that increasingly test the genre's initial Eurocentrism by using the deadening, over-reproduced ethnicized tropes immanent to its very form.

¹¹³ Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 208.

Chapter 2

Chinese Sentiment: Ang Lee's Tears and Global Digital Melodrama

“What do you know of my heart?”
—Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)

“What do you know of my heart?”
—Ang Lee, *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994)

“What do you know of my heart?”
—Ang Lee, *Gemini Man* (2019)

While searching in 1994 for someone to film Emma Thompson's adaptation of Jane Austen's 1811 novel *Sense and Sensibility*, producer Lindsay Doran sent the script to what seemed an unlikely candidate: Ang Lee. Born in Taiwan and having then only directed Taiwanese American arthouse films, Lee himself was surprised to receive the screenplay. “When I opened the script and saw Jane Austen's name on the title page,” he later told Doran, “I thought you guys were crazy.”¹¹⁴ But upon reviewing it, Lee changed his mind: “I read the script and I understood it in my heart.”¹¹⁵ Released in theatres on December 13, 1995, Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* was nominated for seven Oscars—and though Lee notably did not receive a Best Director nomination, the film nonetheless launched him onto the world stage as a director of not only independent Taiwanese films, but also popular Anglophone period pieces.

Echoing the director's own initial skepticism, critics did not take Lee's successful handling of Austen's text for granted. Instead, most reviews either rationalized or balked at the dissonance between a male Taiwanese director and a female Regency-era novelist. *The New York Times* retroactively described Lee's previous film *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) as having “had the irresistible good sense to combine Austen-like acuity with Chinese food.”¹¹⁶ While Hollywood trade journal *Variety* seemed baffled at how Lee's achievement “with such foreign material is simply well beyond what anyone could have expected and may well be posited as the cinematic equivalent of Kazuo Ishiguro writing *The Remains of the Day*.”¹¹⁷ These contrasting readings—one arguing for and the other against Lee's compatibility with Austen—suggests the interpretive malleability afforded by the diasporic Taiwanese-born director. As Shu-mei Shih argues, Lee is exemplary of the flexible subject of global capitalism, whose international success emerges from his negotiation of being “a national subject [in Taiwan] and a minority subject [in America] simultaneously.”¹¹⁸ Lee's affinity with Austen might have always already been there in his earlier Taiwanese domestic dramas (just “with Chinese food” added). At the same time, Lee's historical and, implicitly, ethnic distance from “such foreign material” renders his *Sense and Sensibility* so improbable as comparable only to a

¹¹⁴ Qtd. in Emma Thompson's *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay & Diaries* (Newmarket Press, 1995), 15.

¹¹⁵ “In conversation with Ang Lee,” *Harper's Bazaar UK* (Jan 18, 2013).

¹¹⁶ Janet Maslin, “In Mannerly Search of Marriageable Men,” *The New York Times* (Dec 1995), 15.

¹¹⁷ Todd McCarthy, “Sense and Sensibility” Review, *Variety* (Dec 3, 1995).

¹¹⁸ Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 47.

contemporary Japanese novelist writing about British butlers in English. Since then, there have been increasingly more Asian writers publishing English-language literature and more Asian directors working in Hollywood, as my third chapter on contemporary Asian American novels begins to show. But the *Variety* comparison connotes something unique to 1995, in which the notion of an Asian artist directing a British period piece was so improbable as to require referencing an Asian artist working in an entirely different medium.¹¹⁹ Thus while likening a Japanese British novelist to a Taiwanese American filmmaker minoritizes both in terms of their generic Asianness, it also clarifies how Lee, following Ishiguro, enters the Anglophone cultural market during the late 1990s by capitalizing on nostalgic forms of imperial Britishness.

Lee's own visceral response to Thompson's script speaks to the cultural capital of Jane Austen, which lies in the affective legibility of her generic romance plots. As Doran put it, *Sense and Sensibility* possessed all the literary qualities that make good cinema: "wonderful characters, a strong love story (actually *three* strong love stories), surprising plot twists...and a heart-stopping ending."¹²⁰ Drawing on the eighteenth-century novel of sentiment, Austen finds a sympathetic reader in the modern day Lee, who, having "understood it in [his] heart," aims to make a film that will further "break people's hearts so badly that they'll still be recovering from it two months later."¹²¹ Like the film's producers, Lee appeals to an emotional universalism that cuts across historical, national, and even medium differences to imagine a timeless circuit of affect that both precedes and exceeds his personal experience of Austen's story. At the same time, this circuit of feeling is also specific to Lee's position as a diasporic Chinese director entering the 1990s international film circuit by drawing on the "affective histories of Chineseness," as Lily Wong describes it, within the global economy of transnational Sinophone cinema.¹²² As Lee frequently remarked in press interviews, Austen's England might even be closer in spirit to turn-of-century Taiwan than modern England itself: "In my films I've been trying to mix social satire and family drama. I realized that all along I had been trying to do Jane Austen without knowing it. Jane Austen was my destiny."¹²³ Shih interprets Lee's frequent comparisons between Victorian England and contemporary China as a flexible strategy that evokes Anglophone universalisms in service of Chinese minoritizations. Yet Lee's analogies can also be read as a strategic reclaiming—and potential defamiliarization—of hyper-legible universalisms for contemporary Chineseness.

Over the past three decades, Lee has risen on the international film circuit by taking up a range of vernacular cinematic genres while increasingly mobilizing an array of digital filmmaking techniques.¹²⁴ From Lee's debut Taiwanese arthouse films to *Sense and Sensibility* to subsequent

¹¹⁹ While Ishiguro's breakthrough novel, *The Remains of the Day*, was published at the height of Japan's long postwar downturn and tells an analogous story about Britain's own postwar decline, it is perhaps appropriate then that Lee enters the global film scene by adapting a British novel that presents a version of empire still optimistic about its futurity. That is to say, if Ishiguro's novelistic representation of postwar Britain inflects a backwards glance that simultaneously speaks to Japan's contemporary waning, then Lee's film set in early nineteenth-century Britain might be said to resonate with contemporary "rising China," as well as, specifically for Lee, Taiwan's aspirations for economic modernity. Often representing both China and Taiwan to the Anglophone world, Lee's flexibility as a kind of generic Asian lies in his capacity to inhabit different generic forms.

¹²⁰ Thompson, *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay & Diaries*, 11.

¹²¹ Ibid., 15.

¹²² See Lily Wong, *Transpacific Attachments: Sex Work, Media Networks, and Affective Histories of Chineseness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹²³ Kroll, Jack. "Jane Austen Does Lunch." *Newsweek*, December 18 (1995), 66-68.

¹²⁴ My use of "vernacular" cinematic genres here draws from Miriam Bratu Hansen's influential theory of "classical Hollywood cinema" as a form of "vernacular modernism" that is at once a product of the mid-twentieth-century modernity of mass production as well as the quotidian, generic, and "vernacular" experiences of the everyday. As

Hollywood Westerns, CGI superhero blockbusters, and action thrillers, the diasporic filmmaker's body of work has become difficult to classify in terms of both genre and geopolitics. As Lee continues to explore new digital effects filmmaking, his later films appear to depart from his initial Taiwanese indie films, which prominently featured Chinese characters in Chinese plots. If anything, these ongoing technological experimentations often imply the distortion or deconstruction of "authentic" bodies that once marked his earlier work. Lee's most recent two films, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2016) and *Gemini Man* (2019), for instance, were not only explicitly marketed as high-tech digital productions featuring spectacular visual effects; they were also implicitly marketed without any discernibly Chinese characters. There is, then, one other reason that Lee rarely gets discussed alongside contemporary Taiwanese film auteurs like Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, and Tsai Ming-liang, besides his association with popular middlebrow genres or even digital filmmaking. The seemingly progressive incoherence of Lee's canon has as much to do with how his digital turn coincides with the progressive absence of what had been his aesthetic signature: recognizably Chinese bodies doing purportedly Chinese things.

This chapter focuses on three films across Lee's eclectic oeuvre—*The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Hulk* (2003), and *Gemini Man* (2019)—to argue that the disappearance of Chinese bodies alongside the emergence of digital effects marks, in fact, the flexibility of Lee's auteurism. Reading Lee's heterogeneous canon under the broader context of the melodramatic mode, I show how his more recent CGI Hollywood blockbusters adapt his earlier Taiwanese family melodramas in a more globalized context—or, we might say, for a more generic audience. Yet such generic adaptation, as we shall see, requires some complex formal shaping. While melodrama's aesthetic flexibility allows it to move through different mediums, its Manichean worldview that posits good versus evil renders it inflexible in other ways. Emerging alongside the modern nation-state, melodrama is a narrative convention of affective excess and moral legibility that historically told stories about national identity—sentimental tales that were, as Lauren Berlant has shown, simultaneously national allegories. In an era of increasing globalization, melodrama's status in global film markets and popular global genres still "come first by way of the mode's relationship to nationalism," as Carla Marcantonio writes in *Global Melodrama*.¹²⁵ Even Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill's recently coedited collection *Melodrama Unbound*, for instance, which seeks to "unbind" melodrama "in the many cultures of a globalizing world," predominantly frames its transnational dissemination and translation as shifting from one national context to another.¹²⁶

In Lee's trajectory toward films where Chinese bodies seem increasingly and conspicuously absent, his prior aesthetic signature of "Chineseness" reemerges in his later CGI blockbusters not through Chinese bodies, but instead what I call the "generic feelings" of melodrama. What is more, these hyperlegible generic feelings—the pathos and sentimentality that mark melodrama's affective excesses—are, I argue, enhanced rather than undermined by digital filmmaking. Lee's more recent films therefore explicitly engage new digital technologies—and their affordances for manipulating bodily and affective representation—to enable and mediate a new form of what I call digital global

Hansen emphasizes, her reference to classical Hollywood cinema as a "vernacular" modernism avoids "the ideologically overdetermined term 'popular'" in favor of how "the term vernacular combines the dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity, and translatability" (60). It is the flexibility of the term "vernacular," that implies both vernacular languages and vernacular literary practices, that I seek to keep in mind for my conceptualization of "generic" Asianness. See Miriam Bratu Hansen's "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism" *Modernism/Modernity* 6.2 (1999): 59-77.

¹²⁵ Carla Marcantonio, *Global Melodrama: Nation, Body, and History in Contemporary Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 7.

¹²⁶ Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill, eds. *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 2.

melodrama. Here it is precisely the way bodies are indexically and, at times, racially under- or even un-marked that allows them to typify not simply a national but a more global generic subject.¹²⁷

I. Stereotypeface

In translating the Great British Literature of Jane Austen for the movie screen, Lee's global Anglophone debut restages one of the primal scenes of Orientalism. In his influential reading of Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Edward Said describes the novel's relationship to empire and race as one that is everywhere felt, yet nowhere seen.¹²⁸ Gauri Viswanathan's important study *Masks of Conquest* expands on how British colonial rule in India was crucially enforced not only through military and economic conquest, but also cultural imperialism—one result being the institution of an English literary canon as a “universal” marker of civilization both abroad and at home.¹²⁹ If Viswanathan's “masks of conquest” refers to a British façade of universal literary prestige otherwise cloaking the disciplining face of Victorian colonial rule, then Lee's contemporary film adaptation drawing from that same literary canon works instead to mask—or is it to mediate—a new genre of Asianness. The journalistic foregrounding of Lee's Chinese heritage as relevant to his unlikely cinematic visualization of Austen's novel, of course, complicates Viswanathan's metaphor, and suggests the entangled inter-ethnic and inter-medial matrices through which both cultural value and racial stereotyping increasingly circulate. For while stereotypes of Oriental inscrutability have, as Rey Chow theorizes, historically collected around reading “the face of the Chinese person and the face of Chinese writing” in terms of “(sur)face, image, and ideographic writing,”¹³⁰ Lee's role in directing *Sense and Sensibility* models a different expression of Chineseness through the aesthetic surfaces and forms of his British period piece.

Lee's directorial scrambling of cultural codes and visual cues speaks to broader concerns about the history of racial representation and Oriental stereotyping, as well as the changing conditions of their reproduction in the current moment of Chinese economic ascendance and the progressive globalization of mass media. Eric Hayot has traced the origins of Western tropes about the “hypothetical Mandarin” in eighteenth-century European literature,¹³¹ but contemporary Orientalism has since migrated both to the American empire as well as other aesthetic mediums. Scholars of American Orientalism such as Richard G. Lee, Gina Marchetti, and Christina Klein, for instance, emphasize how Oriental stereotypes in American mass culture have shaped how Americans have come to understand themselves as a world power throughout the twentieth century.¹³² Yet, postwar East Asian economic expansion—as exemplified first by Japan then the

¹²⁷ My reading of Lee's Taiwanese American films as allegorizing and, at times, embodying the material circuits of the capitalist flow between Taiwan, China, and America is indebted to Joseph Jonghyun Jeon's scholarship on what he calls “Korea's IMF Cinema,” which similarly draws on CGI and digital filmmaking to dramatize South Korea's transitional moment at time of U.S. decline and Chinese ascension. See Jeon, *Vicious Circuits: Korea's IMF Cinema and the End of the American Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹²⁸ See Edward Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 80-96.

¹²⁹ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

¹³⁰ Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 64-66.

¹³¹ See Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹³² On stereotypes of Asianness in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century American popular culture, see Robert G. Lee, *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999). On stereotypes of Asianness in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century American theatre, see James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the*

“Asian Tigers” and now China—has increasingly modulated the transnational construction and representational dynamics of the Oriental Other.

In describing China’s emergence during the fin de siècle of the American century, Sheldon H. Lu posits that the new “global position of China in political and economic terms can be visibly measured”¹³³—not just as representations of China, but by an economically ascending China as well. Much of Chow’s scholarship theorizes the ongoing relationship between visibility and Chinese modernity, but her recent work specifically examines how post-1980s contemporary Chinese cinema stages the “global problematic of becoming visible” by taking “Asianness itself as a commodified and reproducible value”—that is, Asianness as not just an aesthetic, but also a capitalist, form.¹³⁴ Similarly, Shih’s concept of the Sinophone situates the unprecedented visibility of the contemporary Chinese diaspora as shaped by and traveling alongside the flows of capitalism.¹³⁵ Western tropes about Chineseness have always concerned the Asiatic’s potential for economic development and cultural legitimacy. Yet, China’s current geopolitical expansion has precipitated a rise in the circulation of visual products not only “made about China,” but, increasingly, “made in China,” “made by” diasporic Chinese artists, and even “made for” China’s growing blockbuster film market, that has rendered the circuits of contemporary Orientalist form all the more difficult to parse.

Lee fittingly enters the international scene in 1995, then, with a filmography already transnational in scope and transmedial in composition. Whereas Ishiguro, for instance, immigrates from Japan to England as a young child and has lived almost entirely in England since, Lee’s departure from Taiwan to study theatre at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign at the age of 25 tracks a more cyclical diasporic itinerary that involves multiple subsequent returns to both Taiwan and mainland China over the course of his career. After earning his MFA in film production from New York University, Lee went on to make his first two films, *Pushing Hands* (1991) and *The Wedding Banquet* (1993)—both films about the Taiwanese American experience abroad whose production was crucially made possible only after Lee’s screenplays won first and second place respectively in a Taiwanese government-sponsored competition. Following the success of *The Wedding Banquet* (which, counting worldwide sales, beat out *Jurassic Park* as the most proportionately profitable film of its year), Lee returned to Taiwan and filmed *Eat Pray Man Woman*, which remains his only film set in his nation of birth. The generic tenor of Lee’s first three films—which balances domestic traditionalism against the individualistic drive of capitalist modernity—is also what drew Lee to the attention of the producers behind *Sense and Sensibility*. As with Lee’s first two films, *Sense and Sensibility* also existed in the in-between status of a potential screenplay long before it was greenlit to be filmed—a middling textual stage between literary fiction and visual film that almost all of Lee’s subsequent films would repeat.

For while Lee’s films have increasingly experimented with both different genres and filmmaking techniques, they have continued to maintain a kind of fidelity to narrative fiction. Following Lee’s Taiwanese trilogy and starting with *Sense and Sensibility*, all of Lee’s subsequent eight films have been based on pre-existing texts, with only one of them—*Taking Woodstock* (2009), adapted from a memoir—not based on a work of fiction. From Lee’s American Westerns *Ride with*

Chinese in America (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1993). On representations of Asians in twentieth-century Hollywood film, particularly during the postwar period, see Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*.

¹³³ Sheldon H. Lu, *China, Transnational Visibility, Global Postmodernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 1.

¹³⁴ Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 13, 12.

¹³⁵ As Shih writes: “To situate visibility within this unprecedented scattering of capitalism is, first of all, to emphasize that images and other visual products travel and scatter with ever greater intensity and speed, and travel to a large extent alongside and with capital” (*Visibility and Identity*, 12).

the Devil (1999) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005); to his Chinese period pieces *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Lust, Caution* (2007); to his CGI (computer-generated imagery) blockbusters *Hulk* (2003) and *Life of Pi* (2012); to even his recent war drama *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2016) famously shot at the extreme HFR (high frame rate) of 120 frames per second, the eclecticism of Lee's genre work often obscures his ongoing investment in fiction. And even as Lee's oeuvre might initially appear incoherent, a glance at the date stamps above suggests that there is nonetheless a chronological arc—if slightly syncopated—to Lee's canon as one that gradually moves from realist or even seemingly ethnographic films about “ethnic” experiences to what we might call generic Hollywood genre films. As with Ishiguro, we might also say that Lee's oeuvre grows more “generic” over time, especially as its early exercises in film genre draws from the more classically realist tradition of the American Western before eventually moving to more fantastical CGI blockbusters. Similar to Ishiguro's emergence as a writer of Asian Anglophone fiction, then, Lee's rising status as perhaps the most popular Asian filmmaker working in Hollywood also tracks onto his progressive use of popular genres. As Lee's films grow both more generically and technologically experimental, however, their literary and textual antecedents inversely recede. What has retroactively emerged, instead, is an understanding of Lee as flexibly moving across different film genres, and which underplays—even despite his ongoing investment in both literary texts and new film technologies—the geographical and medium specificity that underwrites them.

Lee's extravagant genericness, we might say, has often made it difficult to place—often quite literally—the director. As such, much of the scholarship on Lee (as with that on Ishiguro) divides his filmography as either between the early Taiwanese art-house films and the later Hollywood blockbusters *or* between the diasporic Sinophone-oriented films and those on more explicitly Anglophone subjects. In doing so, Lee's body of work often gets routed through the individual racialized body of the director himself—a way of reading Lee's auteurism not in terms of cinematic aesthetics, but through the racially mediated author function of his own body. Essays framing Lee as a diasporic filmmaker emphasize his geopolitical “flexibility,” yet notably contain their readings largely to films, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, that exemplify this diaspora as both nationally and visually “Chinese.”¹³⁶ Shih's reading of Lee's flexibility expands to consider his work on the Anglophone dramas *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Ice Storm*, but only cites them as negative examples of Lee's “minoritization” in Hollywood. Occasional essays that read Lee's Anglophone films in terms of his diasporic position—such as Chris Berry and Mun-Ho Lo on *Brokeback Mountain*, or Gina Marchetti on *Hulk*—also nonetheless route these films' “Chineseness” through readings of their ideological adherence to Confucianism, Taoism, or, in Lo's case, Asian “forbearance.”¹³⁷ In drawing out the Chinese diasporic conditions underwriting Lee's Anglophone films, these essays ultimately threaten to re-inscribe a kind of stereotypically philosophical Chineseness upon them. Such scholarship on Lee's diasporic flexibility thus stops short at reading his films primarily in terms of their ideological-national flexibility.

¹³⁶ Readings of Lee's diasporic flexibility draw from a larger discourse about global capitalism, and in particular what sociologist David Harvey describes as our post-Fordist age of flexible accumulation, which anthropologist Aihwa Ong has further developed into a more human-oriented theory of Asiatic “flexible citizenship.” See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990); Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*.

¹³⁷ See Chris Berry, “The Chinese Side of the Mountain,” *Film Quarterly* 60.3 (2007), 32-37; Mun-Ho Lo, “Backs Unbroken: Ang Lee, Forbearance, and the Closet,” in *The Brokeback Book*, ed. William R. Handley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2011), 52-78; Gina Marchetti, “Hollywood and Taiwan: Connections, Countercurrents, and Ang Lee's *Hulk*” in *Chinese Connections: Critical Perspectives on Film, Identity, and Diaspora*, eds. Tan See-Kam, Peter X Feng, and Gina Marchetti (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 95-108.

This chapter argues, in contrast, that Lee's geopolitical flexibility must be thought alongside his films' ongoing aesthetic and technological flexibility as well. One could read Lee's trajectory of increasingly hyper and multi-mediated filmmaking as a reflection of his globalization as a transnational filmmaker who cannot be pinned down. Consider, for instance, how his Oscar-winning *Life of Pi* is speculative at the level of both genre and CGI animation. Yet, it is also Lee's growing experimentation with bleeding-edge digital filmmaking—that is, the technological conditions of his more speculative genre films—that ultimately renders the genericness of these later films visually uncanny. While Lee's work in digital film technology has advanced in scale and scope, the aesthetic effects of this filmmaking have not always seamlessly worked to heighten the intended effects of immersion or, indeed, “realism.” From *Crouching Tiger, Tiger Hidden Dragon* to *Gemini Man*, Lee's successive trials in CGI, 3D, and HFR do not produce a sequence of seamless technological advancement and integration. Instead, these films map an uneven visual terrain that produces the uncanny effects of digitally enhanced melodrama and its expression of generic feelings. Here, the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and expressive content nonetheless refer back to their technological means of cinematic reproduction. In doing so, however, Lee's imperfect experiments with new filmmaking media are also, I argue, what allow us to analyze his oeuvre as one that eschews a model of seamless globalization and economic expansion, but which visually enacts the thematics of belated modernization that characterize his early family melodramas about Taiwanese American immigration.

Rather than read Lee's filmography in terms of a teleology of modernization and assimilation, this chapter, as with my first on Ishiguro, argues that Lee's genericness can only be grasped if we consider his canon as a dialectical and overlapping system that must be viewed in its totality. In doing so, I suggest a metonymical relationship between Lee's eclectic filmography and the broader shifts of Chinese uneven development during its post-1990s era of economic expansion. For if Ishiguro's more legible oeuvre could be read as allegorizing the coherence of postwar Japaneseness as a national trope, then contemporary Chinese diaspora—shaped by the processes of Taiwanese and Hong Kong de- and re-unification—might in fact better be encapsulated through Lee's more circuitous and transnational filmmaking career. In thinking about Lee's oeuvre as a dynamic system rather than a series of progressive stages, however, my readings suggest how the thematics and visuality of Chineseness in Lee's early Taiwanese films get remediated and patterned in his later CGI Hollywood genre films. In doing so, we can moreover better grasp how Lee's reproductions of vernacular genres intersect with the reproducibility of racial stereotypes, which, as Chow explains, are also structured through a machinery of reproducibility and repetition. As a body of work that doesn't simply visualize racial stereotypes, but which instead increasingly dramatizes the mechanicity of stereotype's reproduction at the level of the technological film apparatus, Lee's oeuvre does not reify, but in fact perpetually recodes the mechanicity of racial tropes.¹³⁸ Whereas “Chineseness” might have initially been located in the human faces of Lee's earlier films, I argue that his later work remediates what we might call Chinese sentiments through generic feelings of what I term “global digital melodrama.” Rather than simply read Lee's contemporary racialization of Asianness through the lens of techno-Orientalism, which typically describes the conflation of Asian subjects with high-tech tropes, I instead understand Lee's representation of Chineseness as more dialectically located in the ambivalence between film visual relationship to—and oftentimes obfuscation of—ethnic identity.

¹³⁸ Whether these Oriental stereotypes start to signal something entirely different by the end of Lee's career remains one of this chapter's open questions—especially given that Lee's most recent film, *Gemini Man* visualizes not the tropes of diasporic Asianness, but of American Blackness.

II. Generic *Austen*

Crucially, Lee has always presented audiences with technologically enhanced generic feelings, even in his early domestic melodramas. Both *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *Sense and Sensibility* employ a sentimental line that is subsequently, and self-reflexively, reiterated in *Gemini Man*: “What do you know of my heart?” A sentence directly out of Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, this generic platitude is meant to convey Elinor Dashwood’s affective inscrutability. Yet Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility* inversely renders this truism about the depths of subjective feeling as explicitly embodied—externalized through a show of Elinor’s heartfelt tears. Indeed, the film’s staging of Elinor’s uncontrollable sobs upon learning of Edward’s rescinded engagement is arguably its most striking embellishment: a scene that could be read in terms of cinema’s necessary visualization of novelistic interiority, if not for the fact that Austen’s novel includes no such equivalent moment.

Lee’s melodramatic modernization of Austen’s sentimental novel is made further explicit in the film’s emotional climax when Marianne weeps upon the blustery Devonshire moors while mournfully surveying Willoughby’s estate. Here Lee’s retroactive manufacturing of novelistic interiority occurs not only at the material level of the actor’s tears but also at the technological level of the scene’s cinematography. While stormy weather functions as the spontaneous objective correlative to Marianne’s romantic spirit in Austen’s novel, it was anything but organic in Lee’s film. As the director explains in the DVD special features, *Sense and Sensibility* marked his earliest use of digital film effects, and Marianne weeping on the rainy moors is an especially artificial scene of pathetic fallacy (Figure 2.1). Not only were rain and fog machines used to generate the tempestuous English weather but so, too, was the very sky reconstructed from digitally enhanced images. Sold as a naturalistic adaptation of a domestic novel, Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility* rather anticipates his subsequent CGI action blockbusters, in which the entanglements between bodily and technological expression grow more overt.



Figure 2.1 Marianne weeping in the rain. *Sense and Sensibility*.

Even so, Regency-era sentimental fiction and twentieth- or twenty-first-century digital filmmaking might not be as jarring bedfellows as they may at first seem. As Kristen Whissel examines in *Spectacular Digital Effects: CGI and Contemporary Cinema*, the recent “digital turn” foregrounds film’s ongoing imbrication with other technologies in producing hybrids of old and new

media.¹³⁹ While scholars predominantly discuss digital effects in the context of Tom Gunning's history of early cinematic "attractions"—which arrest narrative through astonishment, shock, or wonder—Whissel grounds these new effects in an older literary tradition. Instead of focusing on the effects' production of spectacle or affective intensities, Whissel emphasizes the "signifying power of digital visual effects" to articulate complex concepts central to both the film's narrative and its broader historical context.¹⁴⁰ Drawing on the tradition of early modern emblem books, which featured images exemplifying key concepts or abstractions, Whissel organizes her study around a series of what she calls "effects emblems": digital objects or images that operate as sites of intense narrative signification and often allegorical expression in films, even as they might also produce feelings of awe or shock.¹⁴¹ Whereas Whissel examines large-scale emblems, such as computer-generated monsters or hordes, the rest of this chapter attends to the more modest scale of the tear as Lee's signature emblem that not only allegorizes but also materially enacts the expressive entanglements between bodies and technologies.

In Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*, the digitally enhanced weather that amplifies Marianne's melodramatic tears not only alters how we interpret Austen's Regency heroine but also reveals the hazards of mobilizing a previous empire's affective discourse in our current era of global capitalism and technological convergence. Whereas tears in the sentimental novel tradition signaled an overflow of legible feeling, in the climactic scene of Marianne's uncontrollable weeping, tears' claims for referential indexicality collapse. As Eugenie Brinkema explains in *The Forms of the Affects*, tears become increasingly unreliable over the course of twenty-first-century modernity, shifting from that which conveys the private interiority of a weeping subject to be "regarded principally as an exteriority and as something that must be interpreted or read."¹⁴² Brinkema focuses on the shower scene in *Psycho*, in which the tear (or is it a water droplet?) that falls down Marion's lifeless face is surely one of Alfred Hitchcock's most emblematic flourishes. Mediated through film, tears become intense sites for interpretive scrutiny: synecdochal signifiers for bodily expression and emotional truth, cinematic tears simultaneously signify how deceptive film bodies can be, especially as their purported physical realism hides their technological constructedness. Unlike Marion's tear, Marianne's tear is actually more difficult to apprehend as an emblem that points to its own unreliability. Lee's auteurism is rarely associated with the Hitchcockian touch that rewards what D. A. Miller describes as "too-close reading."¹⁴³ Yet if we look closer at Lee's cinematic tears, we'll see that their apparent legibility—supplemented, in Marianne's case, with CGI weather—masks their aesthetic mediation and technological distortion. In fact, it is the presumed legibility of Marianne's tears that makes them emblematic of the opposite: the fundamental problem of how to read bodies, especially bodies humanized through generic feelings, in Lee's films. Already in *Sense and Sensibility*, the heightened expression and extension of sentimental interiority by way of CGI weather suggests broader representational challenges in contemporary global capitalism. Whereas Lee's Regency-period piece obscures the digital effects surrounding Marianne's tears through its naturalization of gendered feeling, the ontological status of these generic feelings grows more fraught as Lee's later melodramas marshal the genres of CGI superhero, fantasy, and action thrillers in a globalized context.

¹³⁹ Kristen Whissel, *Spectacular Digital Effects: CGI and Contemporary Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 1.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴² Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

¹⁴³ D.A. Miller, *Hidden Hitchcock* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 51.

As Lee's recent CGI action thrillers continue to externalize the sentimental novel's interior affect as a technological effect, we can read his oeuvre as flexibly pivoting from national to global melodrama. While Lee's early Taiwanese domestic melodramas might appear to portray seemingly authentic Chinese bodies and stories, they nonetheless repeatedly externalize Chinese characters' sentiments through forms of analog technology, such as telephones, cassette tapes, and photographs. Similarly, Lee's later CGI melodramas externalize these same generic feelings, now through digitally manipulated effects and, in particular, the computer-generated effect of the morph. The aesthetic affordances of the digital morph reside in a technological flexibility that affords realism: in its ability, as Lev Manovich puts it, to "cut, bend, stretch, and stitch digitized film images into something with perfect photographic credibility."¹⁴⁴ At the same time, the morph's capacity for photorealism, while skirting the laws of physics to which photographic film images are subject, renders its images increasingly uncanny. "Morphing generates our physical and cultural 'double,'" explains Vivian Sobchack, "making formally visible the very formlessness at its center" and thus destabilizing the dominant categories, hierarchies, and genres of Western metaphysics.¹⁴⁵ If, in tracing the tears from Lee's first Taiwanese melodrama to his latest CGI thriller, starring Will Smith's digital clone, the increased reliance on morphing technologies gives priority to certain imperialist fantasies of social mobility and bodily flexibility, then it also preserves an uncanny double of the diasporic melodrama that it displaces and from which it is derived.

In connecting Lee's earlier analog melodramas to his later CGI melodramas, this chapter foregrounds the director's ongoing technological mediations of affective interiority. Whereas Lee's early Taiwanese family melodramas externalize diasporic interiority through forms of analog technology, Lee's later CGI melodramas externalize this interiority through digitally manipulated bodies. In doing so, his body of work instead accumulates a spectacular excess—of bodies, genres, technologies, and tears—that forces the viewer to contend with experiences of global alienation and contradiction as much as diasporic loss. We might even say that Lee's oeuvre follows the more general logic of global capitalist accumulation and postmedium digitization, such that his generic and technological flexibility now appears to eclipse his original and more nationally oriented contexts. Many critics regard this as Lee's progressive commodification or selling out under global capitalism, and perhaps some version of such claims is incontrovertible. But Lee's Hollywood melodramas are global not only because of an affective legibility that makes flexible marketing easier; their globalism lies in how they mobilize affective excess to materialize bodies (Chinese, diasporic, or otherwise) in ways that cannot be contained to a local or national frame, in terms of either a discrete geography or cinematic tradition. The weeping bodies of Lee's films not only refer back to their subjective interiorities but, through their visual and technological externalization, also point outward to suggest the Chinese diasporic body's geopolitical flexibility.

¹⁴⁴ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001), 295.

¹⁴⁵ Vivian Sobchack, *Meta-morphing: Visual Transformations and the Culture of Quick-change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xii.

III. Border Tears

Often called his “Father Knows Best” trilogy, Lee’s first three Taiwanese films drew the attention of Sense and Sensibility producers for their representation of an older patriarchal mode of Chinese governance adjusting to a new era of economic and cultural globalization. But it was *The Wedding Banquet* in particular that spoke to Mirage film executives for its generic negotiation between the “romantic” and the “funny”¹⁴⁶ (15)—that is, the characteristic dialectic of not just Lee’s Taiwanese trilogy but also Austen’s marriage plots. *The Wedding Banquet* begins with a classic scene of novelistic interiority: a letter is being read. Yet rather than represent this scene, as film often does, through a voice-over reading paired with images of the text being read, Lee visualizes literary interiority through technology contemporary to the film’s early 1990s setting. *The Wedding Banquet* opens by presenting the aural before the visual: the voice of a woman speaking in Mandarin plays over the film’s initial credit sequence, which is set against a black background (Figure 2.2). For non-Mandarin-speaking Anglophone viewers, however, this introductory voice-over is paired with a



Figure 2.2 *The Wedding Banquet* (Good Machine, 1993).



Figure 2.3 *The Wedding Banquet* (Good Machine, 1993).

visualization of its translation into English subtitles: “It’s been a long time since I last wrote.”¹⁴⁷ The film’s opening translation across media—between the aural and visual, spoken and textual—is thus compounded by a more conventional translation across languages. This initial voice is not

¹⁴⁶ Qtd. in Emma Thompson, *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay & Diaries* (Newmarket P, 1995), 15.

¹⁴⁷ While the English subtitles do not translate this, the film’s voice-over opens by signaling its epistolary status by beginning its address with Wai-Tung’s name: 《偉同, 好久没给你写信。》.

subsequently visualized by its embodiment on-screen but is ultimately revealed to be the audio of a letter recorded on a cassette tape.

The evocation of the cassette tape adds yet another layer of mediation: an analog technology in Lee's analog film that conveys what viewers soon learn to be a Taiwanese mother's message to her Taiwanese American son. For *The Wedding Banquet* opens by visualizing not the speaker but the son, who listens to her tape through headphones while exercising at a gym in New York City. The film's first shot, however, crucially does not figure even the son's body but rather a close-up of an exercise machine that looks plausibly like a close-up of the recording machine (Figure 2.3). In doing so, Lee's opening shot suggests a potential confluence between the interiority communicated by the mother's letter and the internal machinery of its technological transmission. The material and historical specificity of the conjured tape here draws attention to its mediating function: not only between epistolary interiority and its cinematic representation (both aural and visual) but also between the Taiwanese mother and the Taiwanese American son. Over the course of this drawn-out introduction, the communicative distance between Taiwanese and Taiwanese American diaspora is dramatized through the unfolding layers of technological mediation that translates epistolary interiority onto the film screen.

By playing the audio transmission of the mother's letter over images of the son Wai-Tung's mechanical disciplining of his own body, the film also opens by juxtaposing interiority against externalizing objects of technological reproduction. Especially since the film portrays Wai-Tung as listening to the cassette over a Walkman headset—and thus its sounds as presumably internal to his private experience—the film's audio reproduction of the letter for Lee's audience further blurs subjective interiority with its visual externalization. Rather than representing the scene's sounds as wholly diegetic (and thereby visualizing Wai-Tung's listening of the cassette tape as silent), *The Wedding Banquet* merges the ambient sounds of the gym's exercise machines with the mother's recorded voice. Lee's use of nondiegetic voice-over thus frames this scene as not mimetically reflective of what his viewers see but with a soundtrack that approximates Wai-Tung's private experience of the moment. That the mother's lilting Mandarin affects the *melos* of melodramatic voicing at the level of aural form, if not of linguistic content (at least for the English-speaking viewer), renders this scene all the more intimate. While the mother's initial voice-over suggests a private experience of sentimental interiority, the film's opening scene, which takes place in a relatively public setting, reveals the various technological devices that enable its transmission and (potentially interfere with) its reception.

The Wedding Banquet marks one of Lee's earliest cinematic exercises in manipulating technology to externalize a cinematic language for affective interiority. Indeed, its plot about two traditional Taiwanese parents who desire their (yet unbeknownst to them) gay Taiwanese American son to marry a woman and have a child enables many instances of such uneasy externalization. As the film revolves around Wai-Tung's attempts to hide his queer domestic life in New York City from his visiting Taiwanese parents, *The Wedding Banquet* dramatizes many scenes of what D. A. Miller has theorized in terms of the "open secret."¹⁴⁸ The film is organized around a series of highly theatrical set pieces that culminate in the eponymous wedding banquet between Wai-Tung and his Chinese tenant Wei Wei, in which Lee's cinematography must visually externalize what cannot be verbally stated. In particular, Lee's film incorporates the medium of still photography to mediate between the contradictory desires of Wai-Tung and his parents. Following its initial evocation of the cassette tape, Lee's film continues to draw on formal aspects of other analog media, such as film photography, to express, if not always through words, the distance between Taiwanese parents and their diasporic children.

¹⁴⁸ D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 205.

The film engages the expressive affordances of still photography early on, when Wai-Tung, his white American boyfriend Simon, and his Chinese tenant Wei Wei rearrange Wai-Tung and Simon's house to appear as though it belongs instead to Wai-Tung and Wei Wei. In preparation for a visit from Wai-Tung's parents, who are under the impression that their son is about to finally marry a "nice Chinese girl," the three work swiftly to erase any visible signs of queerness from his domestic space. One crucial step in straightening the house is to replace all photographs of Wai-Tung and Simon in what appear to be spontaneous postures of queer elation with ones of Wai-Tung and Wei Wei in contrastingly staid poses of composed heterosexuality (Figure 2.4). Here photographs work to emblemize what so-called genre of bodily desire is on display. These overly staged photos recall melodramatic tableaux, whose origins in stage melodrama as the silent poses

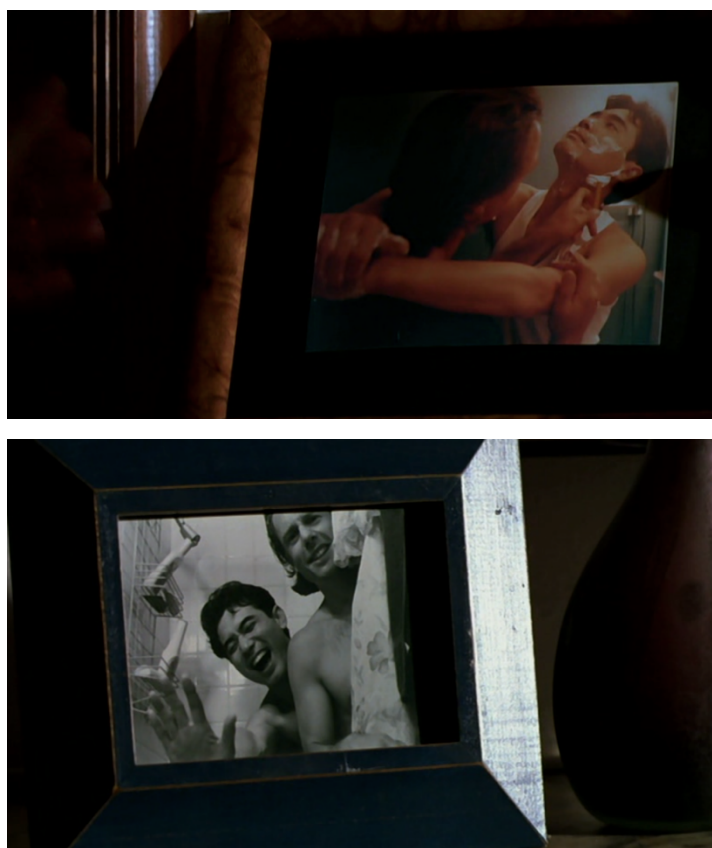


Figure 2.4 *The Wedding Banquet* (Good Machine, 1993).

that interrupt action further helps situate Lee's cinematic "moving pictures" in a longer melodramatic tradition. As Carolyn Williams explains, "the 'pointed style' of melodrama—gestures coming to their points in the 'attitudes,' plot coming to its points in the charged 'situations'—culminates with the dramatic action coming to its points in the tableaux."¹⁴⁹ The staged photographs of *The Wedding Banquet* draw on the melodramatic tradition of stage tableaux in suggesting the many ways in which a bodily "attitude" might imply a certain type of character or situation. While all photographs are, of course, to some extent staged, the initial shots of Wai-Tung and Simon suggest a more authentic form of liberated expression in contrast to their solemn replacements. Yet in portraying a rather frenetic behind-the-scenes montage of their restaging, Lee also troubles such an

¹⁴⁹ Carolyn Williams, "Melodrama" in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46.3-4 (2018), 770.

easy binary. If anything, the montage's emphasis on the replacement photographs as counterfeit representations of a counterfeit romance points to bodily postures in still photographs as especially unreliable emblems of subjective desire.

While this montage represents melodramatic tableaux in terms of the staged photograph, other scenes in *The Wedding Banquet* emphasize Lee's own film camera as the framework of melodramatic staging. As the director explained in interviews, the modest budget for *The Wedding Banquet* restricted its capacity for complex shots, and the film's naturalistic sets and classical cinematic mise-en-scène reflect this. Partly because of such financial limitations, Lee's mise-en-scène typically captures indoor and relatively static scenes that are especially reminiscent of classical stage melodrama. Indeed, many scenes block characters in tableaux-like format, with groups or individuals spread across both the foreground and the background of the filmed space, and which communicates multiple levels of dramatic action in one scene. In doing so, Lee's film takes advantage of domestic spaces with visual depth, such as hallways and corridors, as though spatially compensating for the absence of camera movement. The multiple zones of action in these shots convey a sense of naturalistic and almost neorealist unfolding, yet the frequent stasis of Lee's camera also has the effect of emphasizing the scene's potential theatricality. Thus, while the movement of multiple bodies in interior space sometimes gives the impression of realist—indeed, almost ethnographic—happenings, the cinematic framing also threatens to reveal their theatricality. Lee's use of melodramatic tableaux might be said to frame architectural interiors as reflective of characters' affective interiority—as containers, whether spatially or bodily, that threaten to exceed their formal boundaries.



Figure 2.5 A wedding picture is being taken in *The Wedding Banquet* (Good Machine, 1993).

The climactic wedding scene of *The Wedding Banquet* ends with an especially self-conscious staging of melodramatic tableaux in which characters' affective interiorities get visualized as both technological and bodily excess. Acting as Wai-Tung and Wei Wei's official wedding photographer, Simon attempts to take a photo of the newlyweds with Wai-Tung's parents. As Simon focuses his camera on the family, however, his viewpoint collapses with that of Lee's film camera, as we see the photographic crosshair emerge into the center of the film frame (Figure 2.5). In taking the photograph in a long hallway, Simon's attempt to make the image come into focus is contingent upon negotiating the depth of field of the space with the family at its foreground—a tension between spatial depth and characterological focus that concerns Lee's own cinematic framing throughout the film. While the four bodies being photographed remain still, Simon's—and thus Lee's—camera moves in and out of focus, as if to enact the suppressed emotional unease of those he photographs. The photographic crosshair here literally points to the “pointed style” of melodramatic tableaux. For just when Simon is about to take the photo, as though on cue, does Wai-Tung's mother begin to cry: an externalization of melodramatic pathos that interrupts the decorum of the pose but also “resolves” its charged affective situation. Simon drops the camera, the crosshair disappears, and Lee's camera returns to capturing the vagaries of what appear to be real life, as it travels between the multiple faces of various characters in unwitting discomfort. As with the film's opening scene, the technological externalization of interior affect is simultaneously framed as a technological disciplining of the Chinese body. Instead of resolving into catharsis or confrontation, the mother's weeping unfolds like a performance that knows not when or why it ought to stop. As she continues to cry, and as Lee's camera continues to capture it, the tears turn from what might be an irrepressible excess of true feelings to something more like an uncomfortable and ambivalent spectacle. These overflowing tears begin to present a surplus of interpretive options. As a response to Wai-Tung's marriage, one might interpret his mother's tears to be of happiness, yet what seems to spur them is the notion that this courthouse wedding is not extravagant—not theatrical—enough for the occasion it marks. As perhaps an authentic expression of protest against the lack of matrimonial exhibitionism, then, the mother's tears interrupt not only the photograph's but the film's own understanding of its proper mimetic function.

The Wedding Banquet ends with a deconstruction of the heterosexual marriage plot where, instead of one happily wedded couple of two, we have what might be described as a surplus of potential relations: Wai-Tung and Simon are once again an openly gay couple, and Wai-Tung's parents have come to accept this because Wei Wei—after accidental impregnation by Wai-Tung on their wedding night—is carrying their biological grandchild, which Wai-Tung and Simon are welcome to coparent. Before Wai-Tung's parents board their international flight back to Taiwan, the five bodies gather around a photo album and reminisce over Wai-Tung and Wei Wei's wedding banquet (the spectacle event in response to the mother's earlier spectacle of tears). Lee's camera also joins them, taking the perspective now not only of Wai-Tung but of the entire newly reconstituted queer family, as they look over the captured poses and attitudes—the melodramatic tableaux—from what everyone now understands to have been a fake wedding. What is finally being acknowledged here is less the authenticity of the photographs' contents, however, than their formal capacity for capturing the spectacle of sentimental affects.

While a more traditional marriage plot might conclude with these postures of conjugal happiness—a closure that would coincide with the closing of the wedding album—Lee chooses instead to end his film with what critics have pointed to as a moment of interpretive ambiguity. Upon shutting the wedding album, Wai-Tung's mother announces that “we really should be going” and proceeds to walk with Wai-Tung's father down a long airport corridor toward their security gate. As though in emotional continuation from Lee's earlier wedding ceremony corridor scene, Wai-Tung's mother once again begins to weep. Instead of tears of protest, this time she tells Wai-Tung's

father that the tears are “because I’m happy.” Yet, as with her earlier tears, these tears present a surplus of interpretive possibilities. Whether out of happiness, preemptive mourning, or something else entirely, these are tears, as suggested by Wai-Tung’s father’s questioning of them, that demand to be read. At the other end of the corridor, too, is Wei Wei, also crying, in affective mirroring. While the emotional content of these tears remains unclear, the fact that they are shared between the homebound Taiwanese mother and the leftover Chinese daughter-in-law emphasizes the relative mobility of the former. The mirroring tears might appear to collapse the two women in mutual recognition, but the fact that one is on her way home, while the other must remain, implies a national distance between the two. Wei Wei’s body might materially carry the future of Chinese diaspora, but the queering of this marriage plot ends with her as characterologically unnecessary—both geopolitical remainder and biological surplus—to the film’s central Taiwanese American male pair.

Yet this concluding scene of surplus sentiment, surplus tears, is almost as soon contained as it is conjured, as *The Wedding Banquet* concludes, rather against genre, with a more ominous image of photographic capture. Diasporic context notwithstanding, even the traveling mother’s tears must be disciplined—short-circuited and halted—at the border. The last shot viewers are left with is one in which Lee’s film slows down and finally freezes on Wai-Tung’s father standing at his security gate with his arms raised, his back to the camera, and an X-ray scanner hovering over his body (Figure 2.6). *The Wedding Banquet* is framed as a sentimental marriage plot, but its final scene ends not with the expected domestic enclosure or settlement but with a melodramatic tableau of an aging Taiwanese body in gestural suspense. In this closing image, the central union between Wai-Tung and Simon (and Wei Wei) is finally displaced by the broader transnational alliance between Taiwan and America, which were at the time contemplating their own potential future geopolitical union.¹⁵⁰ Framing closure not as domestic bliss but at the uneasy edges of a transpacific border, Lee’s film ends by considering its plot of Taiwanese American assimilation in the context of Taiwan’s potential Americanization—a telos of assimilation that hints at the arc of Lee’s later career. Perhaps appropriate to the uncertainty surrounding this potential transnational union, *The Wedding Banquet* concludes by staging the distance between Taiwan and America as one of simultaneous connection and prohibition: of transpacific mobility and border control, in which the body scanner is evoked to assert the limited flexibility of the diasporic Chinese body.



Figure 2.6 *The Wedding Banquet* (Good Machine, 1993).

¹⁵⁰ See Kuan-Hsing Chen, “America in East Asia: The Club 51 Syndrome,” *New Left Review* 12 (2001), 73-87.

It is also the generic ambivalence of this final scene—as simultaneously one of comedy and melodramatic ambiguity—that spurred the interest of the producers of *Sense and Sensibility*. As suggested by its title, *The Wedding Banquet* is, like all of Austen’s novels, a marriage plot, but it is also, as with *Sense and Sensibility* specifically, a kind of comedy of remarriage. Similar to Lee’s film about 1990s Taiwanese American relations, Austen also organizes her plot of remarriage around individual character’s adjustments to larger shifts in a modernizing capitalist world order—that is, in her case, between the classical “sense” of eighteenth-century moral judgment and the “sensibility” of a new Romantic nationalism. As Lee and producer James Schamus frequently emphasized in press interviews for *Sense and Sensibility*, early nineteenth-century England and turn-of-century Taiwan might be closer in spirit than even nineteenth-century England and contemporary England. Lee, in particular, understood the dialectics between “sense” and “sensibility” as already at play in his earlier Taiwanese films about the tensions between filial piety and individual aspirations—a dialectic he would once again bring up when describing his next film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which he pitched to Michelle Yeoh as “*Sense and Sensibility* with martial arts.” Whereas Lee’s early career is marked by realist domestic films such as *The Wedding Banquet* and *Sense and Sensibility*, his later digitally manipulated action films—while seemingly more invested in spectacles of externalization—nonetheless continue to remind viewers of the technological and, moreover, racialized labor that produces visual ornamentations.¹⁵¹

Starting with the martial arts wuxia film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Lee’s career is marked by an ongoing interest to what it means to be cinematically “made in China.” As scholars have observed, the Hollywood success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* rests in its translation of “Chineseness” as a cultural commodity that can be visually consumed. Chinese audiences were, for instance, thrown off by the different Mandarin accents of the film’s four leads—a glaring phonetic unevenness atypical to the traditional wuxia genre, which historically seeks to present, as Shih puts it, “an illusion of an eternal China and an essential Chineseness.”¹⁵² In contrast, Anglophone audiences consumed the film’s dialogue through the visual text of English subtitles and, as such, remained unaware of its idiosyncratic suturing of accents. As such, English-speaking viewers focused more on the viscosity of Lee’s cinematic style, and in particular, the wuxia fight scenes that featured what



Figure 2.7 *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Columbia Pictures, 2000).

¹⁵¹ On the relationship between aesthetic ornamentation and the discourse of Orientalism, see Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁵² Shih, *Visuality and Identity*, 3.

appeared to be physically impossible scenes of bodily levity and flight (Figure 2.7). As Rich has examined, the U.S. marketing for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* emphasized the visual over the linguistic to such an extent that the U.S. film trailer featured no dialogue and, instead, paired with its ethereal cello soundtrack, featured scenes of leaping bodies that were linguistically un-marked but visually Chinese.¹⁵³ The trailers showed a racialized world that appeared to float—sometimes literally—in a cinematic space of both “pure” Chinese genre and, we might say, generic Chineseness. Indeed, Americans read the film’s often physically and gravitationally unrealistic feats of bodily flight in terms of a kind of Chineseness—not just because of the film’s representation of Chinese bodies and landscapes, but also because of how its unrealistic mimeses of bodily movements echoes Western tropes about what it means to be “made in China.” While America has, since the 1970s conceptual coalescence of *Japan, Inc.*, increasingly understood Japan as the leader of East Asian technological and cultural innovation, it has continued to view China as the mass manufacturer of derivative, cheap, and bad copies.

If commodities made in China are always commodities imperfectly made, then the uncannily flying Chinese bodies of Lee’s wuxia film appropriately fit American assumptions about Chinese reproducibility. Such stereotypes about contemporary Chinese capitalism can be, moreover, traced back to Karl Marx’s “Asiatic mode of production,” described as basically cyclical, or without “cumulative” or “dynamic” development due to the absence of private property in land.¹⁵⁴ Without knowledge of the wuxia genre’s literary and cinematic genealogy in representing soaring bodies as philosophically “enlightened,” American audiences viewed the flying Chinese bodies of Lee’s film as generic not in terms of wuxia, but as typifying stereotypes about Chinese mimeses.¹⁵⁵ Whereas Chinese audiences criticized *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* for its unrealistic linguistic suturing of different Mandarin accents, American audiences instead praised the film in terms of its unrealistic suturing of bodily movements in space. Ironically, Lee’s film actually used very few special effects in rendering its Chinese bodies in seeming aerial flight. Instead, his action sequences were created by suspending the actual bodies of the actors on wires—as per the Hong Kong “wire-fu” genre exemplified in Tsui-Hark’s films—which were digitally removed during post-production. In referencing a long tradition of Hong Kong action filmmaking techniques, Lee’s typically “Chinese” wuxia film made for a global Hollywood audience nonetheless dramatizes a larger circuit of distribution and influence that can be traced in other blockbuster Hollywood films such as Lana and Lilly Wachowski’s *The Matrix* (1999) and McG’s *Charlie’s Angels* (2000).

The cinematic special effects of Lee’s wuxia genre film, then, are not to be found in the digital manipulation of its visually Chinese bodies, but in the environmental infrastructures surrounding these bodies that are only retroactively erased. As such, the Chinese bodies on screen actually maintain an indexical continuity to the original bodies of the actors; it is only the *space* around them that is being digitally manipulated and redrawn. As we know, this work of retroactively editing environment and landscape is moreover already present in *Sense and Sensibility*, where the outdoor landscape shots of meant to reflect Marianne’s wild and organic romantic spirit are in fact a result of Lee’s earliest use of digital effects. Whereas the digitally manipulated rain in *Sense and Sensibility* produces the pathetic fallacy that speaks to organic emotional interiority of its English heroines, however, the digitally altered environment of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* only points

¹⁵³ B. Ruby Rich, “To Read or Not to Read: Subtitles, Trailers, and Monolingualism” in *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, eds. Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 153-69.

¹⁵⁴ Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1974), 483.

¹⁵⁵ On the literary history of the martial arts novel, see John Christopher Hamm, *Paper Swordsmen: Jin Yong and the Modern Chinese Martial Arts Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006) and Petrus Liu, *Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Post-Colonial History* (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Series, 2011).

back to the hyper-theatricality of its Chinese bodies. Put another way: the romantic individualism of Lee's English bodies incorporates and domesticates their surroundings, whereas the Chinese bodies of Lee's wuxia film are read as national allegories about what it means to be "made in China." In drawing attention to their constructedness, however, Lee's wuxia bodies literally foreground not only the incoherence of the genre's assumed representation of "eternal" China, but also the unsettling potential of Oriental stereotypes. Here, the Chinese body becomes its own sensational form, whose extravagant corporeality can nonetheless be traced—much like the digitally erased material wires—outward, to the technological and economic supports that enable their unreal flight and suspension.

For while Lee's Chinese wuxia bodies might allegorize China's "bad mimesis," the economic history surrounding Chinese capitalism maps a more complex global entanglement, in which China's commercial productions cannot be disentangled from America's dependence upon them. Rather than read Lee's Chinese bodies as merely playing to American stereotypes about Chinese mimesis, then, situating the film in Lee's broader oeuvre also allows us to understand these tropes about Chinese reproducibility through the spectre of not only Chinese, but also American bodies. While *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* tropes on the bad mimesis of the Asiatic mode of reproduction through the manipulation of floating Chinese bodies, Lee's subsequent Hollywood blockbuster *Hulk* uses digital technologies to mediate Chineseness through, we might say, the generic body of an American comic book superhero.

IV. *Hulk Sob*

Despite *Hulk*'s blockbuster status, Lee saw the film in logical continuation with his earlier Taiwanese arthouse films, going as far as calling it "the biggest independent film ever made."¹⁵⁶ During press tours, the director even cited *Hulk* as his new "Green Destiny"—a reference to the sword at the dramatic center of his previous film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.¹⁵⁷ And while development for a *Hulk* film adaptation had begun as early as 1990, producers approached Lee upon seeing his wuxia action sequences, thinking a martial arts director might be the right fit for an American superhero film that also represents bodies that sometimes appear to fly. Transitioning from a Chinese wuxia film to an American superhero blockbuster, Lee's flexibility as a director who can move between different national genres also implies a highly lucrative aesthetic flexibility. In contrast to the limited use of special effects in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the \$137 million production budget for *Hulk* was used to bring the larger-than-life creature onto the big screen. *Hulk* remains one of Lee's most financially expensive projects in terms of production, released as a summer blockbuster with the hope of a large financial return. Casting the relatively unknown Eric Bana to portray *Hulk*'s human alter ego, Dr. Bruce Banner, Lee emphasized that the film's biggest expense was not its less than star-studded cast but *Hulk*'s embodiment as a digitally manipulated creation. As Lee put it in an interview, "*Hulk* the CGI actor is the biggest star."¹⁵⁸ In contrast to Mark Ruffalo's *Hulk* in later Marvel reboots, which were filmed solely through motion capture, Lee's *Hulk* was a more technologically fragmented and materially uneven cinematic creation that

¹⁵⁶ Rebecca Traister, "Crouching Budgets, Hidden Profits: James Schamus, Columbia Professor, Bets \$137 on Ang Lee Epic" *New York Observer*, June 22, 2003. <https://observer.com/2003/06/crouching-budget-hidden-profits-james-schamus-columbia-professor-bets-137-million-on-ang-lee-epic/>.

¹⁵⁷ Devin Gordon, "Anger Management" *Newsweek*, June 15, 2003. <https://www.newsweek.com/anger-management-137697>.

¹⁵⁸ Paul Fischer, "Ang Lee Tackles the Hulk" *Film Monthly*, June 14, 2003. <http://www.filmmonthly.com/Profiles/Articles/AngLee/AngLee.html>.

involved both CGI and motion capture animation. Not only did it take George Lucas's visual effects company Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) a collective 2.5 million hours of labor from more than 180 different technicians to generate Hulk the CGI actor but Hulk's emotional expressions were modeled off of Lee's own embodied performance. Lee, who began as an actor at Indiana University, took the opportunity of filming Hulk to don the motion capture suit and provide the initial data points for the computer rendering of the monster. As J. D. Connor puts it, "the protagonist was not simply a plausible allegory of the director but was actually—that is, kinetically—him."¹⁵⁹

The difficulty in visualizing Hulk, explained Lee in interviews, was that he wasn't a typical CGI monster: he was, rather, a human body that simply grew slightly bigger, bulkier, and greener in scale to the average man. Part of why it took so much ILM manpower, so to speak, to create Hulk was because Bana's gradual transformation into the green monster entailed three different CGI Hulks of increasingly greener hue and bulkier size. Modelled off the human form, the visual realism of *Hulk* depended on a careful negotiation between the digital possibilities of CGI and the scalar limitations entailed by the typical human body. As with Frankenstein's creature or King Kong, Hulk's characterological legibility as a humanized creation somewhere between man and monster rested on his sympathetic mirroring, both emotional and visual, of other people. In fact, Hulk's biological and emotional plausibility was so important to Lee that he often asked the visual effects team at ILM to redo Hulk's movements when their CGI renderings appeared too smooth. For Hulk to appear realistic, Lee explained, his digital reproduction had to be flawed and uneven. The aesthetic realism of Lee's CGI monster, in other words, depended on its technological imperfections—which paradoxically created more work for the workers at ILM. The alignment between good realism and digital badness hints at one of the central contradictions of Lee's project, which is that even as Hulk was sold as a big-budget CGI monster, Lee's special effects team worked overtime to render this monstrous body legible in human and humanizing terms.

The technological unevenness of Hulk's half-man, half-digital body points back to the literary mythology that constituted the creature in the first place. For the theme of bad technological reproduction is built into all levels of Hulk's DNA: from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to Stan Lee's postwar comic books to its later CGI film adaptations. The original 1962 *The Incredible Hulk* Marvel comics tell the story of military scientist Bruce Banner whose exposure during a gamma bomb test allows him to transform into a destructive monster whenever angered. Lee's film adaptation shortens Hulk's title but gives him a longer backstory: whereas Hulk in *The Incredible Hulk* absorbs inhuman superpowers only in adulthood, Lee's Hulk inherits his powers from birth due to the scientific experiments his father David Banner, a military scientist, conducts on himself during the 1960s. Lee thus externalizes the split logic of Hulk's monstrous body by fragmenting it across two generations of injured bodies: the father, who then passes it on to the son. Lee's film further formalizes this new backstory by opening with an extended overture that narrates Hulk's origin story as one of bad family romance: after David Banner's failed military experiments give birth to the monstrous Hulk, his attempt to destroy the son before he gets too big results in the inadvertent murder of the mother in a traumatic childhood scene that later triggers Hulk's adulthood outbursts. If the postwar Hulk comics depict a Frankenstein's monster created at the technological crosshairs of U.S. military experimentation, then Lee's twenty-first-century cinematic reproduction returns the monster to his literary origins in late Romantic fiction (Shelley's novel was published only seven years after *Sense and Sensibility*) by emphasizing Hulk as a man of deep feeling.¹⁶⁰ Lee's film

¹⁵⁹ J.D. Connor, *Hollywood Math and Aftermath: The Economic Image and the Digital Recession* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 183.

¹⁶⁰ Lee explicitly cites a longer literary genealogy as influencing *Hulk*, which he described as "a modern-day myth" inspired by texts such as "King Kong, Frankenstein, Jekyll and Hyde, Beauty and the Beast, Faust, and a lot of Greek

does not merely translate the comics into cinematic moving pictures but further supplements and complicates Hulk's emotional interiority as a narrative act. In turning Banner into a "round" character with both biological and literary predecessors, Lee adapts the lowbrow superhero genre into what he described as "psychodrama."¹⁶¹

In drawing out the psychology of a superhero known precisely for his physical outbursts, Hulk dramatizes the entanglement between affective interiority and external embodiment that characterizes all Lee's films. In being a CGI body, moreover, Hulk's highly externalized expressions of internal turmoil are also highly technologically mediated externalizations. Hulk differs from Lee's prior analog melodramas by representing its sentimental hero as a technological construction in terms of both narrative content and digital form. The film's ongoing entanglement between narrative and cinematic form is both allegorized and technologically enacted during Hulk's first transformation, when a traumatic recollection at his Berkeley science lab prompts Bana's body to rip through his clothing, as he morphs into what Lee calls "Hulk the CGI actor." Given that Bana's morphing relied on computer software first developed at ILM, Lee's adaptation of the Hulk myth is not only profoundly literary but also a uniquely cutting-edge Bay Area technological feat. As Hulk proceeds to smash the surrounding science lab, which is quickly becoming too small to hold his expanding body, so does Lee's *mise-en-scène* begin to exceed its conventional framework, as the screen splits into multiple frames, scattering the film's narrative focus in an overflow of visual information that is impossible to take in at once. As though formally absorbing the aftereffects of Hulk's uncontrollable physical expansion, Lee's splitting screens do not only multiply in visual frames but also enact a kind of frenzied visual multiplication of action between them. When a canister goes off in one panel, for instance, it explodes with such force as to ricochet not only across the room but also across the frames of Lee's discrete panels. Lee uses the digital morph to generate not only Hulk but the subsequent splitting screens that remediate the visual layout of the comic book panel. As Manovich notes, the aesthetic of morphing allows such digital composites, which substitute for an older aesthetic of continuity, exemplified by the montage. In remediating the comic book panel layout, Lee's visual simultaneity gestures at what Alexander Galloway describes as the "formal logic" of contemporary control society, in which distributed networks reappear as visual style.¹⁶² "Hulk smash" here emerges as an uncanny hybrid of technologically enhanced generic feelings. At once angry and sad, Bana's complex affective interiority morphs into Hulk, who sets off excess morphing effects that consume the entire look of the film. The frenetic visual surface of Hulk at once expresses and enacts the splitting of its protagonist's body—a hypersensitive man of feeling that Lee's *mise-en-scène* represents as nearly impossible to frame or contain. Here, too, we might recall Lee's earlier difficulties in framing bodily gestures and affects in *The Wedding Banquet* that culminate in a tearful good-bye scene that quickly morphs into a freeze-frame of a Taiwanese male body who wishes to cross a transpacific border.

For while the morph heralded fantasies of freedom—especially from the fixed categories of our world—so, too, does it threaten a monstrous entanglement between the human and the technological that no one man can begin to control or parse. Hulk's increasingly unwieldy aesthetic of excess, erratic morphing suggests the mental cost to such bodily transcendence. As Hulk bounds through the science lab, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake, he finally comes upon the ostensible object of his wrath: the gamma ray bomb that is, in the comic book version, the

mythology." See Benjamin B, "Gemini Man: Building a Virtual Face," *American Cinematographer*, November 12, 2019, <https://ascmag.com/blog/the-film-book/weta-virtual-face-for-gemini-man>.

¹⁶¹ Jennifer Vineyard, "Director Ang Lee on *Life of Pi*, Petting Tigers, and His *Hulk* Regret" *Vulture*, November 19, 2012, <https://www.vulture.com/2012/11/life-of-pi-ang-lee-interview.html>.

¹⁶² Alexander R Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 119.

technological source of his monstrous body. Upon unhooking the gamma bomb, however, Hulk turns to find what is, in Lee's film adaptation, its biological source: his father, David Banner, who has been watching him all along. Faced finally with what is both his biological and scientific creation, David approaches Hulk and cautiously reaches out to stroke his face—a simultaneous gesture of wonderment and tenderness that prompts what appears to be a single teardrop to fall down Hulk's cheek (Figure 2.8). The ontology of Hulk's teardrop, however, remains ambiguous, not just because it might be an effect of the water sprinklers set off by his angry outburst, but also because—irrespective of whether these are true tears or only sprinkler water—the fact that Hulk is ultimately a CGI actor makes any liquid dripping down his face only a digital effect. Hulk's tears, as with all tears in Lee's films, figure an excess exteriority that demands to be read, and one that becomes volatile in the face of any efforts to contain it. These tears are emblem effects of the digital technologies that compose them, allegorizing not only the hopelessly impossible entanglement between man and machine but also the unruly excesses that inheres within it.



Figure 2.8 Hulk's CGI tears. *Hulk* (Universal, 2003).

Hulk's tear here is perhaps one of the most emblematic instances of Lee's auteurism, given that the director's own tears formed one of composite elements for Hulk himself. Finding expressive inconsistencies among the different CGI animators who used their own faces as various templates for Hulk's digitally composite facial reactions, Lee decided that the most efficient way to film Hulk's expressions as he envisioned them was to put on the motion capture suit himself and reenact all of Hulk's scenes for the animators. But in the very act of trying to convey individual emotions at a literally larger (and more monstrous scale), Lee also performs the violent erasure of expressive particularity within this expansion (Figure 2.9).



Figure 2.9 Ang Lee as Hulk the CGI actor.

In mediating his own bodily expressions through Hulk the CGI actor, Lee inadvertently restages the fundamental allegory of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*—one of the primary literary intertexts for Lee’s Hulk, as well as the primary text for what is frequently viewed as the analog cinematic precursor for the morph, Rouben Mamoulian’s classical 1932 adaptation of the novel. Just as Mamoulian used optical and special effects for Dr. Jekyll’s monstrous metamorphoses into Hyde, Lee used digital computer animation to allow his own body to morph into Hulk. Yet whereas Jekyll sought to transcend the prescribed norms of Victorian London, Hulk’s desire to escape the military–industrial complex of postwar America sends him on a journey that ultimately exceeds national borders.

Stan Lee’s Hulk externalized his primary affect of rage through architectural smashing, but Ang Lee’s Hulk is a man of feeling who feels more than one way. Attending to Hulk’s tear as an effects emblem, we can better read Hulk’s body (and Lee’s hidden performance of it) alongside other theatrically weeping Chinese bodies, such as Wai-Tung’s mother and Wei Wei. While *The Wedding Banquet* externalizes sentimental interiority through forms of analog technology, Lee’s visualization of Hulk’s larger-than-life feelings—whether in the form of “Hulk smash” or “Hulk sob”—is only made possible by the many behind-the-scenes laboring bodies at ILM. It is labor, moreover, that becomes increasingly felt over the course of the film, as Banner’s existence as a timid scientist living alone collapses when the return of past traumas forces him to grow, both emotionally and literally, into his new body as Hulk. Accordingly, ILM’s three versions of Hulk, each scaled to be slightly larger and greener than the last, also come progressively into play over the course of Lee’s film, which culminates in an extended chase sequence where the largest version of Hulk evades a military dragnet that seeks, like his father once did, to destroy him. This final action sequence begins with Hulk breaking out of the military confinement where he is being held, only to return to the military base of his traumatic childhood home. While the domestic is typically melodrama’s privileged space of innocence, it is perverted here into one of peril, as military helicopters soon bomb the house entirely. U.S. military intervention is not only the primal scene of Hulk’s trauma but also that which later returns to set him running again. For it is seeing his blasted childhood home that sends Hulk visually flying into the Mojave Desert, where the size of his body, which previously loomed so large over the childhood home that can no longer physically contain him, becomes increasingly difficult to gauge.

In placing Hulk's most gigantic form amid the desert, Lee's mise-en-scène plays with the spatial logics of relative scale, in which the desert's overwhelming lack of coordinates renders the size of Hulk's body difficult to grasp, for both the military and the viewer. The relative absence of spatial coordinates in finally mapping Hulk's body suggests the difficulty of properly reading or controlling this now all-too-flexible body. In visualizing Hulk's ongoing exodus from military surveillance as also his perpetual transgression of classical cinematic spatial scale, Lee frames Hulk's bodily flexibility as a technological and aesthetic one. From his bodily expansion in space to his bodily movements across space, Hulk's continually labile body emblemizes what Whissel describes as the "protean possibility" of the morph.¹⁶³ Spurred by the trauma of bad family romance, Hulk ends with its flexible CGI action hero, who, in contrast to the Chinese diasporic body suspended in mid-air that concludes *The Wedding Banquet*, transcends the limitations of not just the Chinese body but any body, in becoming an exemplary generic body.

V. *Crying Clones*

While Hulk frames diasporic flexibility in terms of a spatially expanding body, Lee's most recent CGI action thriller, *Gemini Man*, takes this expansion to its logical conclusion by splitting the technologically flexible body into two: the recently retired fifty-one-year-old military sniper Henry Brogan (Will Smith) and his twenty-three-year-old military clone "Junior" (CGI + Will Smith). In so doing, it offers a solution, if an inelegant one, to the problem of diasporic intergenerational inheritance thematized in *The Wedding Banquet* through the conceit of the genetic clone. As with Hulk, Junior is also a CGI actor, and thus the diegetic figure of genetic clone self-reflexively finds its material equivalent in the extradiegetic technology necessary to procure it. Yet whereas Hulk's three CGI bodies depended on a scalar reference to the body of Eric Bana (and that of Ang Lee), Junior's CGI body depends instead on an aesthetic reference to the past body of a younger Will Smith. Both Hulk and Junior are CGI creations whose visual surface realism is based on a prior human model—works of technological reproduction that *Gemini Man*, per its title, makes explicit in its clone. In literally doubling the protagonist's (which is to say, the actor's) body, *Gemini Man* simultaneously extends him across a broader spatial cartography. Organized around an international CIA clone conspiracy, Lee's most recent film is also his most geographically global one to date. After a sniper mission in Belgium almost goes wrong, Brogan decides to retire at home in California, only to be quickly sent out on a worldwide chase sequence, ranging from Colombia to Budapest, throughout which he is being unwittingly tracked by his own clone.

As with *Sense and Sensibility* and *Hulk*, *Gemini Man* existed in preproduction script form for a long time before Lee finally took on the project. If *Gemini Man*'s government clone conspiracy plot feels somewhat dated for a 2019 release, then this is because the screenplay was first conceived in 1997 (one year after Dolly the sheep's birth), only to remain in development limbo due to producer's dissatisfactions with its potential digital avatars. Given how its long production history allegorizes Lee's central problematic of technologically enhanced bodily expression, it is perhaps no surprise that it was finally Lee who turned *Gemini Man* into cinematic reality. Previous attempts to render the film's clone ranged from casting two actors of different ages to early experiments in cinematic de-aging, but by the time Lee signed on to the project in 2017, part of the appeal for the director involved the new technological possibilities for visualizing Junior that need not resort to these options. The film's belated realization, moreover, helps contextualize its historical status as a very

¹⁶³ Whissel, *Spectacular Digital Effects*, 131.

contemporary Ang Lee project, at a moment when both Lee's cultural capital as a prestige filmmaker and Taiwan's geopolitical status as an emerging U.S.-adjacent power have both waned. While *Gemini Man* was not explicitly presented as a film depicting recent history, its conspiracy plot (which takes place across the United States, Colombia, and Budapest, with aims to end with an American takeover of Yemen) maps a more generic pre-1990s Cold War geopolitical conflict.

As such, *Gemini Man* can be productively compared to *Sense and Sensibility* in at least feeling like a period piece whose generic setup references an earlier imperial situation. Lee's updated screenplay even acknowledges this resonance, again, when Junior echoes Elinor's question "what do you know of my heart?" in the self-reflexive moment that further triangulates *Gemini Man*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Eat Drink Man Woman*. While the geopolitical coordinates of *Gemini Man* suggest a slightly prior world order, its cutting-edge digital effects technology—exemplified by Junior's CGI body—enables Lee to externalize generic feelings through the exemplary generic body of the clone. In the context of Lee's flexible oeuvre, Junior's CGI body not only externalizes his own sentimental interiority but can be read as reenacting Lee's prior experimentations with national or diasporic melodrama on a more global scale. Indeed, Junior's CGI tears mark the spectacularized reproduction and technological perfection of Lee's generic feelings, now remediated through a global secret agent who is born from no one and ultimately belongs nowhere.

Lee's choice to shoot *Gemini Man* at the frame rate of 120 fps, panned as a technological gimmick in his previous film *Billy Lynn Halftime Walk*, is crucial for understanding how his investment in digital global melodrama comes at the cost of a prior legible auteurism. Lee's investment in cutting-edge filmmaking is motivated by a desire for cinema to approach reality, but the exacting crispness of the ultrahigh-frame-rate image also meant that it would fail to accommodate anything but the real Will Smith. As such, Brogan's (and we might also say Smith's) clone could not be rendered through digital de-aging but had to be an entirely CGI body. In creating Junior, Lee nonetheless relied on the many technological reproductions of Will Smith, watching Smith's entire body of work (Ang Lee is an artist, after all) as well as taking Smith's real face as a generic template for Junior's digital one. Rather than digitally de-age Smith, Lee had his leading man wear a motion capture helmet with infrared LEDs and cameras to model the "finite parts of [facial] expressions with very finite muscle movements" to create a virtual "facial puppet" to model Junior's facial expressions.¹⁶⁴ The one aspect of Junior's CGI performance that approaches something like the real, or that is at least traceable to a real body part, is necessarily affective and lives specifically in Smith's face. In putting on the motion capture helmet, Smith can also be said to reenact Lee's own behind-the-scenes performance in *Hulk*. Whereas Lee's facial expressions become the affective template for *Hulk*, Will Smith's facial expressions become the affective template for, well, Will Smith. In removing the possibility of Smith's embodied performance as Junior, moreover, *Gemini Man* emphasizes Smith's facial expressions—the body's privileged site for reading affect—as that which make the digital clone feel real.

The CGI melodrama of *Gemini Man* thus can be understood not only in terms of the film's technological spectacularized action sequences but also in terms of its technological spectacularization of feeling. The film featurette on "Will Smith CGI" spotlights a scene of family melodrama in which Junior confronts his adoptive father (played by an emphatically underexpressive Clive Owen) over the truth about his origins as an experiment of the U.S. military state. "Can't you see how not OK I am?" implores Junior, right before a single tear falls down his face as visual confirmation. Junior's tears are meant to be read as diegetically real—the emblematic sign of affective interiority that tells father that he is indeed a real boy—but their visualization on-screen can only be achieved through digital special effects. Here too, we might recall the ontologically

¹⁶⁴ Benjamin B, "Gemini Man: Building a Virtual Face," 2019.

ambiguous effects emblem that was Hulk's single CGI teardrop (or was it a water droplet?). What the behind-the-scenes featurette makes visible, moreover, are Smith's tears, which are the material template for Junior's digital tears (Figure 2.10). As with Wai-Tung's mother behind the photographic crosshairs or Lee's performance of Hulk's tears, Smith here similarly brings the drama—indeed, arguably overbrings it—in a tearful performance that feels all the more real because of the real tear's redundancy. Yet, given that Junior's CGI tears were one of the film's most difficult and thus expensive scenes for Weta Digital (“a few hundred people had worked on it”), the featurette's acknowledgment of Smith's behind-the-scenes performance also works as an intertextual supplement for how we might read them. Here Junior's tears become metonymic not only of affective interiority or its digital interface but also of the breadth of technical labor required to produce it.

Junior's virtual tears are the effects emblem that allegorizes the necessary, but necessarily hidden, labor of so many bodies in the era of increased digital filmmaking; they do so precisely because they threaten to render the physically crying body all but irrelevant. It is only in Junior's ongoing encounters with Brogan, then, that this labor begins to be acknowledged at the surface of the film, as their escalating confrontations result in Junior finally acknowledging that he is nothing but an incredibly expensive technological experiment. In this scene of heightened generic feeling, we might take Lee to be, even if unconsciously, reflecting on the expressive limitations of digital filmmaking. In narrative climaxes of melodramatic recognition during which Junior desires, above all else, to be a “real boy,” Lee's CGI hero unwittingly acknowledges that one trade-off of spectacular digital effects is the loss of emotional and expressive particularity.



Figure 2.10 Will Smith's tearful performance as Junior in *Gemini Man* (Paramount, 2019).

If Junior makes visible to Brogan a traumatic childhood past that he would rather forget, then Smith's Brogan, in juxtaposition to Junior, embodies the hidden labor of affective expression that animates his clone's digital surface. United through Smith's overacting, scenes between Junior and Brogan become the film's clearest instantiation of visualizing diasporic subjectivity as externalized. In recognizing each other as manifestations of the same heart, Brogan and Junior together expand a diasporic subjective interiority onto a broader spatial cartography. If Hulk allows us to understand the diasporic subject in more properly spatial terms, then *Gemini Man* furthers this logic by turning the subject into two and thus spatializing diaspora's flexible subjectivity always in terms of an ongoing relation. From Wei-Tung to Hulk to Junior: the relatively modern diasporic body remains haunted by its inheritance of intergenerational trauma, which is, after all, also the source of these generic bodies. Not only do Junior and Brogan dramatize a kind of diasporic flexibility as they track each other across the world but they also share a kind of geopolitical flexibility between one another. Through the sympathetic mirroring between Brogan and Junior, *Gemini Man* stages technologically enhanced generic feeling at a globalized scale.

In the era of increased global capitalism and digital convergence, Lee's late style suggests finally a necessary contradiction of digital global melodrama. For while digital effects filmmaking might allow Lee to externalize generic bodies at a global—and, in the case of Brogan and Junior, multiply embodied—scale, such expressions also come at the cost of increasingly diminishing returns. In spectacularizing the emotional communication between Brogan and Junior as increasingly overwrought (we might say overly melodramatic) expressions that carry not even the frisson of ambivalence, as in *The Wedding Banquet*, Lee also reveals a potential trade-off in the use of digital special effects. The clone offers the promise of perfect communication, understood here in digital terms as perfect transfer of genetic material without loss, but this comes at the cost of a different kind of empty interiority that cannot be externalized, no matter how many spectacular special effects are involved. In becoming increasingly fixated on emotional legibility, Lee takes digitally enhanced interiority and makes generic feelings all surface. This allows greater spatial coverage, to be sure, but what becomes less knowable (in a new way) is whether there is any affective there to be mined. Indeed, CGI Junior, in being the flexible global and digital subject, knows no longer what or how to feel as a melodramatic character.

VI. Generic Auteur

Lee's late style of bleeding-edge high-tech digital filmmaking is largely recognized for its spectacular failures. Billy Lynn's *Long Halftime Walk* and *Gemini Man* are primarily known for being shot at the extreme high frame rate (HFR) of 120 frames per second. Even the Oscar-winning *Life of Pi* sits uncomfortably in Lee's canon, viewed as a kind of moral and political failure specifically around the subject of special digital effects. Yet, in being expensive flops, films such as *Hulk* and *Gemini Man* only clarify all the more the massive labor, financial investments, and technological supports that underwrite Lee's ongoing investment in cutting-edge filmmaking. As Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski argue in their recent collection *The Global Auteur*, the figure of the auteur remains a powerful hermeneutic for analyzing twenty-first-century cinema precisely because of the increased difficulty of making political cinema and autonomous art under global capitalism: "Paradoxically, the medium that is most closely related to global capitalism is also the one that can

occasionally bite the hand that feeds it.”¹⁶⁵ In an era of rising corporate commodification and digital convergence, it is no longer the individual or autonomous artist who exemplifies the global auteur but rather, we might say, the generic one.

For Jeong and Szaniawski (2016, 5–6), global auteurs “can capture, embody, and typify a ‘concrete universality’ of today’s world (cinema)”¹⁶⁶ because of how they constellate the global matrix of discourses, institutions, and commercial ventures in which they are necessarily embedded. While *The Global Auteur* overlooks Ang Lee, Ang Lee’s oeuvre might be said to exemplify such “concrete universality” in constellating not only a matrix of global genres but also various digital technologies paradigmatic of twenty-first-century filmmaking. Lee’s universalism lies in his flexible capacity to typify a range of genres—a form of concrete universality that has become so general, so generic, that it is difficult to perceive it as belonging to the authorial agency of Lee himself.

Lee’s transition from diasporic analog melodramas to global digital melodramas represents not only increasingly flexible technological experimentations with special effects but, inversely, a decreasing flexibility in affective expression. In his ongoing attempts to externalize matters of the heart, Lee’s more recent CGI melodramas dramatize and enact the limits of technologically enhanced generic feelings. While *Gemini Man* allows Lee to visualize diasporic relations at a flexibly global scale, the emotional trade-off is a central story—a central hero—that lacks, for lack of better words, any heart. Instead, CGI Junior does not become the vehicle of perfect emotional communication (afforded by digital filmmaking) but rather continually enacts and bemoans his failure to connect. Junior’s problem is that his generic feelings have been rendered too generic by digital filmmaking, such as the CGI externalization becomes to determine the expressive limits of interior content. This is one reason why it is crucial that *The Wedding Banquet* is a coming-out story: a genre of expressive externalization whose narrative formalization is analogous, to some degree, with narrative content. The apparent waning of Lee’s auteurist touch is finally less a product of wavering artistic commitments—less one about changing his heart. If anything, it is Lee’s aesthetic commitment to technologically enhanced expressions of feeling that is now being tested and potentially undermined by the technologies of expression themselves.

¹⁶⁵ Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski, eds., *The Global Auteur: The Politics of Authorship in 21st Century Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 16.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 5–6

Chapter 3

Generic Protagonists: Asian Americans and the Future of the Novel

Who will be the protagonist of our coming era? In the current global shift from U.S. to East Asian economic power, this is a question that has emerged with renewed urgency. The chapter to follow begins to find answers by examining two commercially and critically successful contemporary Asian American novels: Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) and Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* (2020). In both of these novels, old literary forms—and especially forms associated with traditional novelistic realism—must accommodate Asian American subjectivity at a moment when the relation between Asia and America is, once again, imperiled. Indeed, the post-1970s era of American economic stagnation and capital accumulation in a rising East Asia has only intensified the return of earlier yellow peril tropes in popular media: the alien invader, the indistinguishable horde, the deviant spy, the contagious pollutant.¹⁶⁷ These persistent tropes are all subgenres of what might be the reigning genre of Asian stereotyping: the inscrutable Oriental. As one of the trickiest figures in the history of aesthetic criticism, the inscrutability of the Oriental other has historically hinged on the scrutiny of those who are not themselves racialized as Asian. The rising cultural capital of Asian American literary productions, however, has engendered an Asian American fiction in which, I argue, the inscrutable Oriental is perversely—and at times inscrutably—reanimated by Asian authors themselves.

The problem of the inscrutable Oriental, whose insistent opacity limits or defers interpretation, continues to be an object lesson in the colonial gaze. Born from the imperial fantasies of Western discourse, earlier iterations of this trope lacked plots of their own, appearing as stereotypes that infused European literary genres with mystery, artifice, and suspense. A form of simultaneous projection and compensation, the inscrutable Oriental now pervades Anglo-American narrative fiction (typically as minor characters) while also underwriting the West's theoretical unconscious.¹⁶⁸ In *Orientalism*, Edward Said famously inaugurated an entire discourse in which the opposition between East and West hinged on the unknowability of an Oriental other, specifically in the realm of nineteenth-century British and French literature. The theory of Orientalism, as well as its enigmatic central figure, has taken on multiple afterlives in European postcolonial and American literary studies alike, as the discourses of prior empires continue to circulate through contemporary racialized imaginaries.¹⁶⁹ The resilience of Orientalist forms—and Orientalist critiques—is no doubt

¹⁶⁷ William Wu's study *The Yellow Peril* focuses on the depiction of Chinese characters in American fiction between 1850 and 1940 as variously threatening—whether in the form of potential international military invasion from East Asia or in perceived competition from Asian workers domestically. See William Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850-1940* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1982). For important studies of Asiatic stereotypes in American popular culture, see Lee's *Orientalism*, which focuses on six dominant images of the Oriental: pollutant, coolie, deviant, yellow peril, model minority, and gook.

¹⁶⁸ See Hayot's *The Hypothetical Mandarin*, which traces the origins of Western tropes about “the Chinese” in eighteenth-century European literature, where the pain of the “hypothetical Mandarin” compels the “sympathetic transformation” of the European's liberal humanism, 6. See also R. John Williams, *The Buddha in the Machine: Art, Technology, and the Meeting of East and West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Lydia Liu, *The Freudian Robot: Digital Media and the Future of the Unconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹⁶⁹ For postcolonial studies that examine the afterlife of Victorian genres as taken up in India, see especially Yumna Siddiqi, *Anxieties of Empire and the Fiction of Intrigue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Novel*. For an influential account of how Oriental tales and genres (such as pseudo-ethnographies, sexual fantasies, and political satires) influenced the rise of the Victorian novel, see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment*

already familiar to many. As an example, let me recall one representative instance of Oriental inscrutability's sticky persistence even in canonical critical theory.

In her essay "How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory," Rey Chow explains how Jacques Derrida's groundbreaking critique of phonetic writing in *Of Grammatology* reproduces an age-old idea of Chinese as an ideographic language. The "globalizing move" in Derrida's deconstruction of Western logocentrism, as Chow puts it, rests on a common misconception of Chinese writing "as mere graphicity"—abstract symbols without ontological depth.¹⁷⁰ In other words, the radical epistemic rupture known as deconstruction relies on an ironically essentializing move, whereby Chinese characters—and Chinese people, by association—remain inscrutable at the level of visual surface. Chow deconstructs Derrida's assumptions about the inscrutability of Chinese writing, however, not to point out its Eurocentrism (many have done so already), but to draw out the representational and conceptual affordances of cross-cultural stereotyping:

Translated into the context of high theory and philosophy, "inscrutable Chinese" is no longer simply the enigmatic exterior of the oriental but also *an entire language and culture reduced to (sur)face, image, and ideogram*. [...] Insofar as Chinese writing is both a visible entity (one can see it as an object, as calligraphy) and the figure of graphicity (a "nonphonetic language") to which Chinese civilization is consistently reduced by Westerners, and insofar as Chinese writing can also be read as a kind of face (surface, exterior, and also the face of a person), the notion of inscrutable Chinese is, perhaps, the cross-ethnic stereotype par excellence.¹⁷¹

Chow reads the character of Chinese inscrutability as working overtime in Derrida's theory, functioning both as flat, enigmatic surface *and* as an over-representative figure for an entire language and culture. At once unreadable and highly signifying, the inscrutable Chinese represents more than the sum of its parts (as "surface, exterior, and also the face of a person"), even becoming representative of all other stereotypes ("the cross-ethnic stereotype par excellence"). Moreover, the surplus signification behind this seemingly reductive stereotype is what ultimately renders Oriental inscrutability difficult to see *as such*. In the case of Derrida, the trope of Chinese inscrutability threaded through *Of Grammatology* is so well-worn that what distinguishes Derrida's stereotyping is how the stereotype finally gets put "under erasure."¹⁷² Here, the inscrutable Oriental remains hidden in plain sight through its ongoing proliferation—an aesthetic strategy of disappearance that paradoxically draws on the trope's pervasiveness. Or, to hazard a cliché about inscrutability: you know it when you can't really see it.

If Chow reads Derrida's inscrutable Oriental as marking a silent boundary between East and West, then "Generic Asians" asks what happens when that figure gets internalized and recaptured by contemporary Asian diasporic artists themselves. As my prior chapters have shown, the categorical ambivalence of Oriental stereotypes—their simultaneous familiarity and unknowability—enables their uncanny reproduction in new forms of Asian self-representation and subjectivity. Popularized by the literary texts and print media of the British empire, generic Asians continue to proliferate now not only in literature, but also film, television, and other forms of new media.¹⁷³ Whether through

Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). For postcolonial scholarship on semi-colonized East Asia nations, see Jini Kim Watson, *The New Asian City: Three-Dimensional Fictions of Space and Urban Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). For studies of American Orientalism, see Lye, *America's Asia*.

¹⁷⁰ Rey Chow, "How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory," *PMLA* 116.1 (2001), 70.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 73.

¹⁷² Ibid. 73.

¹⁷³ The visibility of Oriental stereotyping is already implicit in Derrida's image of the "inscrutable Chinese as "surface" and "ideogram," and is further examined in Chow's scholarship on Chinese cinema and visibility.

the flat narrators of Kazuo Ishiguro's historical romances (chapter 1) or the repressive superheroes of Ang Lee's film melodramas (chapter 2), these contemporary expressions of Asiatic character are not inscrutable because of their protagonists' affective ambivalence. Rather, the interpretive difficulty of these texts lies in their generic flexibility—their capacity of adaptation to the generic expectations of both literary categories and ethnic stereotypes, often playing these two “genres” off one another.¹⁷⁴ As my prior chapter has shown, high-tech film technologies only render this work of generic adaptation even more difficult to parse, as the layers and masks of Asiatic forms and feelings get encoded not just in narrative, but in the very material apparatuses that give cinematic life to these generic Asians. Contemporary Asian Anglophone artists present Oriental inscrutability as a problem of generic inscrutability, as Ishiguro and Lee repeatedly confound any categorical impulse to locate or define the Asiatic subject, character, or body at the center of their texts—whether at the level of plot or technological-material infrastructure. If Derrida's inscrutable Chinese marked the outer limit of Western knowledge—a kind of second-order stereotype—the stereotyping in popular Asian American texts is now, I propose, coming from inside the house.

I. Stereotype & Realism

This chapter unfolds the inscrutable Oriental's slippery afterlife, following how minoritized stereotypes in both genre fiction and film genres reappear as protagonists in contemporary Asian American novels. In these generic stereotypes—generic as in Oriental stereotypes but also generic as encoded into the fabric of popular genres—I contend that we can begin to answer the question of who might be the protagonist in our coming era. The impulse to locate “protagonicity,” as Fredric Jameson recently calls it, in the figure of the stereotype might appear counterintuitive, even perverse, given the habit of criticism to refute demeaning stereotypes as unrepresentative of ethnic subjecthood.¹⁷⁵ Yet the persistence, and even persuasiveness, of stereotypes is exactly why we must take their aesthetic durability and reproduction seriously. From Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995) to Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), the ongoing reappearance of Orientalist stereotypes in canonical Asian American literature begs critical scrutiny, even and perhaps especially when Asian American criticism seeks to disavow such tropes.¹⁷⁶

The recycling of Oriental inscrutability by contemporary Asian artists presents an especially critical opportunity for Asian American study, given that the category of Asian American is itself, as

¹⁷⁴ Asian American adaptability—or what I call “generic flexibility” throughout my dissertation—has been theorized in multiple ways by the field, and often in relationship to what Colleen Lye describes as the “economism of Asian racial form” (102). Nguyen's *Race and Resistance*, for instance, reads the “flexible strategies” of Asian American novelists and characters, a concept he derives from Aihwa Ong's mode of the “flexible citizen” (4) exemplified by the subjects of late capitalist Chinese diaspora. See Lye, *America's Asia*; Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*.

¹⁷⁵ In *The Antinomies of Realism*, Jameson claims that the nineteenth-century realist novel experienced a “waning of protagonicity” that now characterizes contemporary fiction. Jameson argues that the nineteenth century saw a decline in protagonicity alongside the historical devaluing of individualism, while simultaneously what we might think of as “background” elements—such as minor characters, description, and most broadly affect—moved to the fore.

¹⁷⁶ Frank Chin et. al.'s “Preface” to *Aiiieeeee!* emphatically rejects Orientalist stereotypes with the aim of establishing a realist practice in writing Asian American literature; See Chin et al., *Aiiieeeee!* Recent Asian American scholarship that contends with the resilience of demeaning stereotypes largely emphasize the potential humanism of racial characters or deconstructs the Oriental inscrutability as a form of impersonation or obfuscation. See Sunny Xiang's “Global China as Genre,” which picks up on Tina Chen's *Double Agency*. On the trope of the Oriental spy and impersonation, see also Parikh, *An Ethics of Betrayal*. My aim in reading Oriental stereotypes, however, seeks to read the stereotype *as* a positive aesthetic form, and as the constituting form of Asian American realism.

previously noted, a weak construct.¹⁷⁷ A pan-ethnic identity formed during the cultural nationalism of the late 1960s, “Asian America” is a genre, we might say, that has been variously theorized in terms of “heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity” (Lisa Lowe), as an impossible “subjectless discourse” (Kandice Chuh), or, indeed, a “fiction” (Susan Koshy).¹⁷⁸ In the wake of 1965 immigration reforms, the catachrestic nature of Asian American identity has grown even more fragmented and plastic, as the growing transnationalization of contemporary Asian American existence increasingly places pressure on the conceptual coherence of an Asian *America*.¹⁷⁹ The “children of 1965,” as Min Song aptly calls them, have continued to diversify an already heterogeneous category—not just in the growing diversity of their ethnic types, but in their experimentation with new genres and cultural forms.¹⁸⁰ If the generic contours of Asian America have grown increasingly inscrutable, it is not in spite, but because of the recent expansion in the different forms, mediums, and genres of Asian American and Asian diasporic cultural representation.

The dialectic between familiarity and unknowability—a nationally recognizable “inside” and an elusive external “outside”—thus structures the “Asian American” as well as the inscrutable Oriental. Just as postcolonial literary studies conceptualized the Oriental other as marking a boundary between East and West, Asian American studies has theorized the Asian immigrant through figures of the “unassimilable alien” or “forever foreigner,” who test the limits of American assimilation. Rather than disavow the marginalizing tropes that have long haunted Asian American identity, I argue that we must precisely attend to these stereotypes, which have formed a typical, and perhaps the “generic protagonist,” of Asian American realist fiction. These stereotypical Asians, moreover, might even be the generic protagonist of our coming era.

Indeed, the generic Asian remains one of the most pervasive characters structuring contemporary Anglo-American novelistic realism. This is in part because the generic Asian finds its origins not only in the dreamscapes of twentieth-century American genre fiction and films, but in the hegemonic genre that is nineteenth-century British literary *realism*. Take, for example, what is often considered a foundational text of the British genre fiction: Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868). Known for the formal and narrative innovations in its multi-character epistolary plot, *The Moonstone* has long informed theories of the novel. But it has also been important for postcolonial theory precisely because of the conspicuous peripherality of its “three Indian jugglers” whose appearance both precipitates the start of its plot and resolves it—bookending the novel by magically entering England (from India) and then disappearing (back to India). Here, minor, stereotypical Asians explicitly frame the novel, delimiting its narrative edges as also national ones.

¹⁷⁷ Susan Koshy argues that Asian American literary studies is itself a weakly constituted theoretical field: “Although substantial historical scholarship has been produced, the field has been weak in theoretical work, especially when compared to Chicano, Native American and African American Studies”; see Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” 316).

¹⁷⁸ In addition to Koshy, two foundational ways in which Asian American literature has been theorized are in terms of Lowe’s model of “heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity” and Chuh’s appeal to imagine the Asian American studies “otherwise” as a “subjectless discourse.” See Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*.

¹⁷⁹ While Asian American study built itself around the inclusiveness of a heterogeneous and invented pan-ethnicity, turn-of-the-century scholarship finds itself, as Rachel Lee describes it, “relishing the fragment,” “plastic transformations,” and “weak ethnicity” of Asian racialization. See Rachel Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 8-9. More recently, Cathy Park Hong’s popular memoir *Minor Feelings* draws on Sianne Ngai’s theory of the “ugly feelings” or “minor affects” of late capitalism. See Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 56; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 9.

¹⁸⁰ Song, *The Children of 1965*.

Constituted from partiality, the Oriental stereotype's aesthetic and representational schematics are evoked through synecdoche, association, and personification. By contrast, traditional theories of the novel, such as those of Ian Watt and Michael McKeon, understand realism as representing social and economic paradigms through the figure of the representative individual. In my focus on stereotype, I follow Georg Lukács's and Fredric Jameson's more capacious conceptualizations of realism as the mediation of collective and social affects through literary form.¹⁸¹ Whereas Lukács understood what he called the "typical" character, detail, or event as the representative aesthetic form of realist totality, I propose that the *stereotypical* character—precisely through its historical repetition—forms a new kind of exemplarity in the future of the novel.¹⁸² Returning to these clichéd figures and figurations of my introduction—and in particular the minor character of Biggers's Charlie Chan—this chapter begins to develop an account of how recent Asian American writers have begun to restructure contemporary realism. Put bluntly, the ongoing congealment of all-too-familiar stereotypes in Asian American literature serves as a large-scale intervention in contemporary realist characterization. My approach to reading Asian American literature understands the generic tropes of Oriental stereotypes and the genre of realism to be now one and the same: the inscrutable Oriental is neither an outlier nor a minor figuration, but in fact typical of contemporary novelistic realism.

The inscrutable Oriental of contemporary Asian American fiction enacts the return of traditional European novelistic realism with a vengeance. Yet this return of the repressed has not entirely occurred through the forms that Asian American studies or novel theory might have predicted—that is, not by rejecting the demeaning stereotype in order to reclaim individual subjecthood. While contemporary Asian American realism does not explicitly foreground the deep interiority or bourgeois subjectivity of their Asian protagonists, it is uniquely Asian American in form for *how* it takes up European realism as a structuring narrative form. Reading for the reappearance of traditional realist form in contemporary Asian American fiction offers an alternative way to understand the postracial aesthetics of racially unmarked characters in novels such as Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft* (2004) or Ed Park's *Personal Days* (2008)—not as necessary assimilation, loss, or exclusion, but as a highly mediated process of aesthetic formalization in our still uncertain present.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ For traditional theories of realism: Ian Watt's influential account which correlates the rise of the novel with "formal realism," which is the "full and authentic report of human experience" (32) or Michael McKeon's reading of modern realism in *The Origins of the Novel* as relative and mediatory; see Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*; McKeon, *The Origins of the Novel, 1660-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). In contrast, Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism* more recently defines realism not primarily in terms of reference or form, as one might expect, but as the tension between two temporal poles: the narrative impulse of chronological past-present-future time (also known as *récit*) versus the dilatory present of what Jameson surprisingly calls "affect." Jameson's argument is most significantly influenced by Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* (1916) which claims that the modern novel coincides with capitalist production as a formal genre that works to resolve the false totalities that besiege the contemporary world. See Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*; Georg Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), trans. Anna Bostock. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

¹⁸² My approach to novelistic type and typicality draws especially on Lukács theory of the "typical" protagonist as theorized in *The Historical Novel*. Here, the typical or middling protagonist negotiates between individual desire and the social collective: they are "typical characters nationally...in the sense of the decent and average"; see Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Beacon Press, 1962), 36. At the same time, because the generically flexible protagonists of contemporary Asian American fiction often spans multiple national contexts, I am also indebted to scholarship by Christopher Lee and Yoon Sun Lee, who take realism not as an ideological technology of subject formation, but as an aesthetic and epistemological literary mode that gives form to the historical contingencies surrounding Asian American identity. See Lee, *The Semblance of Identity*; Lee, *Modern Minority*.

¹⁸³ See, in particular, Stephen Hong Sohn, who theorizes postracial literature through the figure of "racial asymmetry." Sohn reads Asian American writing as an aesthetic "restlessness" that is produced by the multiple forces of expectation, and especially those demanded by the market. See Sohn, *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

This is the case even, and perhaps especially, when what Asian American novels formalize appears to be the very disappearance of their typically racialized persons. Precisely due to the aesthetic flexibility of Orientalist forms, Asian American writers risk disappearing into the dominant cultural forms once propagated by Western empires. While Asian economic power is more legible than ever, the trope of Oriental inscrutability has not disappeared, but will, if anything, become even more pervasive and thus more distorted.

II. Immanent Protagonists

Drawing together Orientalist tropes about Japaneseness (chapter 1) and Chineseness (chapter 2), what follows is a reading of two contemporary Asian American novels—Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* and Charles Yu’s *Interior Chinatown*—that formalize Oriental inscrutability as contemporary realism. Ozeki is a Japanese American Canadian writer, who has previously worked as an art director on both low-budget horror films and documentary-style Japanese television programs; and Yu is a Taiwanese American novelist, who has also worked as a television scriptwriter for prestige genre shows like the science-fictional HBO series, *Westworld*. Ozeki and Yu are the focus of this final chapter partly due to their generic flexibility: both have worked in other film and television media, have self-reflexively incorporated other mediums and genres into their novels, and have also incorporate science fictional tropes into their award-winning literary fiction. But in their generic flexibility, Ozeki and Yu are also representative of the prestige boom in contemporary Asian American genre fiction and global Anglophone genre fiction more broadly. As an Asian Anglo-American writer, Ozeki was nominated for a Man Booker Prize after writing *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013); while Yu’s *Interior Chinatown* (2020) more recently won the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction. In their straddling of genre fiction and award-winning literary fiction, Ozeki and Yu both harken back to Ishiguro’s career as an exemplary Asian Anglophone novelist, while also heralding new trans-medial and trans-national narratives for contemporary Asian American fiction specifically.

The Japanese North American Ozeki and the Taiwanese American Yu not only self-consciously redeploy specific stereotypes about their respective Asiatic identities in their fiction; they also play these two ethnic types off one another. The generic cross-over between Japaneseness and Chineseness is hardly surprising, given how these two national types have historically figured as key threats to Anglo-European power, their overlapping rise and fall over the past three centuries looming large in the imagination of Western empires.¹⁸⁴ In fact, Chow’s own careful deconstruction of how Derrida puts the inscrutable Chinese—what she calls “the cross-cultural stereotype par excellence”—under erasure works by ultimately putting the inscrutable Japanese originally present in Derrida’s text under erasure. To quote Chow’s quote of Derrida in her essay: “nonphonetic scripts like Chinese or Japanese [...] remained structurally dominated by the ideogram or algebra and we thus have the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism.”¹⁸⁵ The rhetorical equivocation here—“Chinese *or* Japanese [...] ideogram *or* algebra” is symptomatic of a broader structure of inscrutability. The particular category of analysis might waver—from Chinese to Japanese, ideogram to algebra—but the larger organizing logic is always seemingly inscrutability. As such, my aim here is not to litigate which stereotype is more

¹⁸⁴ While Japan’s postwar period of high economic growth once heralded the potential future of an Asian hegemony, China has since the 1990s begun to take its place as the new economically “exceptional” Asian.

¹⁸⁵ Derrida, quoted in Chow’s “Inscrutable Chinese,” 70. Derrida’s original quote is drawn from, of course, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 90.

exemplary—more inscrutable—but to foreground how the logic of exemplarity, when it comes to the generalizing stereotypes of Orientalism, begins to fall apart. Instead, what is needed is a more nuanced and self-reflexive model for thinking through the complex meta-mediation and thickening of old genres in our present moment.

The logic of exemplarity is all the more fraught when it comes to Asian American literature, as its status as a minor ethnic literature also entails an outsized burden of representation that purports to speak on behalf of a pan-ethnic formation. In focusing on commercially and critically successful novels by Japanese and Chinese Americans, I do not mean to reify these figures as the most representative types of writers or ethnicities in the Asian American canon. Rather, I am interested in how these popular writers negotiate their over-representativeness by working through the heavy baggage of Japanese and Chinese stereotypes weighing on Asian American cultural representation more broadly. This is a question that seems increasingly important to ask, as these novelists' emerging popularity coincides with a moment when the heterogeneous category of Asian America is starting to falter under its growing internal contradictions.

Ozeki and Yu's novels unsettle the categorical coherence of Asian American by playing up a set of oppositions structured around the classic inside/outside binary embedded in nineteenth-century realist form: domestic citizen versus alien immigrant, public sphere versus ethnic enclave, America versus Asia. Upon first blush, these two novels appear to work on inverse trajectories. *A Tale for the Time Being* appears to spin outwards from the American scene—with one of its protagonists living in Japan against the backdrop of world historical and environment catastrophes like the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. Its scale is the global, arguably even the planetary, with references to a wider range of world-historical events from WWII to the American dot-com bubble and 9/11. In contrast, *Interior Chinatown* tunnels inwards: into the murky depths and dens of an American Chinatown, a uniquely Asian diasporic scene that takes place away from China. The artificial nature of this Chinatown is made all the more so by the fact that it is only a film set of a generic Chinatown—and one that continually shuffles between different media genres depending on what is being filmed.

Aggressively framed as meta-narrative riddles, Ozeki's and Yu's novels have both been read as experiments in American postmodern meta-fiction. But if we scale up just slightly and read them both through a longer, wider generic category—through the lens of nineteenth-century British *realism*—it becomes possible to see their generic experimentations as more generic, more typical, and, I propose, more typically realist. In classifying and analyzing contemporary Asian American novels as realist rather than fragmentedly postmodern, moreover, we are better able to situate their inscrutable Asians in their proper literary forms. Despite their seeming incompatibility, both novels end up sharing a formal logic in how they reproduce and remediate their generic Asian characters into realist form—and they do it not by shying away from, but by doubling back and doubling down on their generic Asian stereotypes.

III. *Disappearing Asians*

A Tale for the Time Being is a generically inscrutable work of literature, partly because Ozeki herself wasn't quite sure what genre the book was while writing it. By Ozeki's own account, she was about six years into writing the novel when the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami hit, and "suddenly everything was different."¹⁸⁶ "The fictional world was completely broken," as Ozeki tells it, prompting her to throw away half of what she had written and start revising: "Instead of writing a fictional character...I almost had to step in there to intervene in my own fiction and to respond to the events in a way that felt more real to me."¹⁸⁷ The result is a narrative that wavers somewhere between the novelistic and the autobiographical, between fictional characters and real people, between a Japanese teenager named Nao and a Japanese North American novelist named Ruth; or, we might say, between stereotype and realism.

Ozeki frames this generic ambivalence as a characterological one, as the novel alternates between the diary of Nao, who lives in Tokyo, and chapters about Ruth, who lives on a small island in British Columbia. The two women in their far-flung locales are magically drawn together when Ruth finds Nao's diary washed up on the Canadian beachside—an aftereffect, Ruth hypothesizes, of the Tōhoku tsunami that organizes the novel's historical background. In sharing both a first name and a profession with Ozeki herself, the character of Ruth functions, in a heavy-handed way, as a referential surrogate for Ozeki, who was also living in B.C. while writing the novel. In being the more "real" character of the two, Ruth's sections are perhaps appropriately more realist in tone as well, as her narrative is articulated through the traditional novelistic mode of omniscient third-person narrative appropriate to a character who is herself a novelist. Ruth's sections are characterized by the slow domestic everydayness of life in Whaletown, where she's been working on a memoir about her mother's death for the past decade. Her descriptions are nonetheless grounded in the familiar bourgeois interiority that Franco Moretti has theorized in terms of its pleasurable "comfortableness": Ruth and her husband Oliver drink beer and shuck oysters by the beach; their cat nuzzles between them in bed at night.¹⁸⁸ By contrast, Nao's diary is handwritten "mostly in English, with some Japanese characters scattered here and there," in a chatty, clipped, girlish first-person ("Hi!", begins her first entry).¹⁸⁹ In addition to Nao's rhetorical superficiality, her diary is populated by Japanese stereotypes, including the "fascinating life story" (5) of her 104-year-old Buddhist nun great-grandmother, the ghost of a WWII kamikaze pilot, and the multiple suicide attempts of her depressed dad. While largely written in English, Nao's rhetoric is nonetheless inflected with stereotypical Japanese phrases, such as when she describes her grandmother's "SUPAPAWA—!" (176). Here, not only is Nao's prose emphatically accented, but so too is the capitalization a visual troping on the generic medium of Japanese anime and comic books.

The juxtaposition between Nao's and Ruth's literary styles is not only characterological, but also national. For one way to read the discrepancy between Ruth and Nao's sections is as less a product of who they are but of where they live; that is, the difference between Ruth's North American Japaneseness versus Nao's Japanese Japaneseness. While both are ethnically Japanese, Nao emphasizes her Japaneseness through racial stereotypes (her diary opens by suggesting her imminent suicide), whereas Ruth's infrequent references to her ethnicity seem at first merely to

¹⁸⁶ Ruth Ozeki, interview by Eleanor Ty, "A Universe of Many Worlds': An Interview with Ruth Ozeki," *MELUS* 38.3 (2013), 162.

¹⁸⁷ Ruth Ozeki, interview by Sedge Thomson, *West Coast Live*, web 2013.
<http://www.ruthozeki.com/press/2013/12/26/ruth-ozeki-on-west-coast-live>.

¹⁸⁸ Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (New York: Verso, 2013), 44-51.

¹⁸⁹ Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 12, 3. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

trouble the presumptive whiteness of a largely racially unmarked character. By foregrounding what are aesthetic differences between Nao's and Ruth's sections as a difference in national type, Ozeki suggests a relationship between not just racial character and characterological complexity, but more specifically *national* character and characterological complexity. While Ruth's consciousness gets more richly focalized through Ozeki's free indirect discourse, Nao's juvenile prose and use of stock images renders not only her character, but also her world, as what we might call narratively "underdeveloped."

Over the course of the novel, however, Ozeki renders these stereotypes increasingly typical—increasingly generic—through their repetition. As established in her first diary entry (with which Ozeki's novel also opens), Nao actively understands herself as a creature of categories:

Hi!

My name is Nao, and I am a time being. ...A time being is someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one of us who is, or was, or ever will be. As for me, right now I am sitting in a French maid café in Akiba Electricity Town, listening to a sad chanson that is playing sometime in your past, which is also my present, writing this and wondering about you, somewhere in my future. (3)

Drawing out the coordinates of her "present" existence in terms of the categorical ("time being," "French maid café," "sad chanson," "your past," "my present"), Nao's introductory diary entry is acutely self-aware of the generality of this initial description. For almost immediately, she rewrites it, unhappy with its too loose abstractions of time and place. As Nao continues to thicken her self-description over the course of the chapter, it is only through the repeated layering of categories that—while more specific—are also more racially stereotypical: the "otaku salaryman" in the café who's "got a major schoolgirl fetish"; "some kinky girl's secret diary, filled with pink fantasies and nasty fetishes"; her "hundred-and-four year-old great-grandmother, who is a Zen Buddhist"; "foolish geisha crap" (4-6). Divided into four sections, Nao's first diary entry does not progress in linear fashion, but instead stutters and repeats, each time recursively clarifying the constructedness of its prior sections with yet more stereotypes about Japaneseness. What the second section rejects about the first ("Ugh. That was dumb. I'll have to do better." [4]), the third subsequently does to the second ("I just reread what I wrote [...] and I want to apologize. That was nasty. That was not a nice way to start." [5]). Ozeki's novel begins by testing the presumed transparency, or realism, of the diaristic mode through Nao's wavering first-person prose. As her entries continuously equivocate between different generic categories, something like characterological complexity (if not quite depth) emerges.

Nao repeatedly establishes an association between herself as Japanese character and broader Japanese clichés only to complicate it. "Assumptions suck," she writes early on, "They're like expectations. Assumptions and expectations will kill any relationship" (6). Ozeki's very rendering of Nao's diary as a physical object is an attempt to highlight the risk of such assumptions: originally a copy of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, it has since been refurbished so that new blank pages have been added and only the cover remains. Upon opening it, Ruth finds herself "entirely unprepared for the adolescent purple handwriting that sprawled across the page. It felt like a desecration" (11). Rather than ameliorate the reader's anxiety over such potential "desecration," Nao plays it up, explaining that she bought this particular diary because she knew "it would be an excellent security feature [...]" and besides, this book is exactly the right size to fit into my handbag" (20, 21). Pointing to the disparity between Proust's "philosophical masterpiece" and "an ordinary schoolgirl's pure diary," Nao emphasizes how the rhetorical contrast between the two literary genres is in fact what allows the former to mediate the latter:

There were a bunch of books with different titles for sale. Some of them were in English, like *Great Expectations* and *Gulliver's Travels*, which were okay, but I thought it would be better to buy a title I couldn't read, since knowing the meaning might possibly interfere with my own creative expression. ... I ended up choosing *À la recherche du temps perdu* because I figured it was probably French, and French is cool and has a sophisticated feeling. (21)

Instead of an English literary classic, Nao opts for a novel in language so foreign to her that she isn't entirely sure she can identify it ("probably French"). In prioritizing "feeling" over linguistic content, Nao's first encounter with Proust is similar to Ruth's initial reaction to Nao's own "adolescent purple handwriting." Rather than simply negate Ruth's assumptions, however, Nao continues to emphasize the jarring discrepancy between Proust and herself by describing herself in even more stereotypical terms. Imagining Proust's ghost, Nao wonders what he would think of her filling his "important book" with "typical dumb schoolgirl stuff, like my crushes on boys (not that I have any), or new fashions I want (my desires are endless), or my fat thighs (actually my thighs are fine, it's my knees I hate)" (22). Nao uses the "typical dumb schoolgirl" to mediate between minor variations on a stereotype—some of which she rejects ("not that I have any"), some of which she absorptively multiples ("my desire are endless"), and some which she slightly tweaks ("actually my thighs are fine, it's my knees I hate.") In doing so, she does not dispel the stereotype of the "typical dumb schoolgirl," so much as illustrate the potential complexity not despite, but because, of her generic flexibility.

In emphasizing Nao's stereotypicality—indeed, in generating Nao through the multiplication and qualification of stereotypes—Ozeki creates a fictional character more grounded in genericness than in realist typicality. As Catherine Gallagher argues, realist fictional characters emerge in their imaginary typification of plausibly real people, but the fictionality of Nao's character emerges primarily out of her constitutive genericness—that is, out of her self-definition around tropes that seem too stereotypical to be real.¹⁹⁰ Ozeki generates Nao out of a series of stereotypes not to reify them, however, but to draw out the aesthetic potential of generic forms for the writing of contemporary realism. The generic inscrutability of Nao's diary literally displaces the rich interiority of Proust's realist protagonist, whose infamously detailed and protracted narration has been a lynchpin for theorists of narrative complexity and affective weakness.¹⁹¹ As Nao's character emerges through the self-recursive layering of stereotypes, Ozeki generates a fictional protagonist who is weak not in the Proustian sense of detailed descriptive minutiae, but in her generic ambivalence. Extending this characterological weakness to its potential obsolescence, Nao explains how "I don't mind thinking of the world without me because I'm unexceptional" (25). Extravagantly stereotypical, but so unexceptional as to potentially be overlooked, Nao embraces the generic flexibility of Oriental inscrutability.

Rather than negate her plausibility as a fictional protagonist, however, Nao's characterological weakness is precisely what enables her to mediate among the novel's multiple fictional worlds. And as the novel unfolds, Ruth becomes wholly fixated on close reading Nao's diary, such that it comes to overtake Ruth's otherwise realist storyline. Put another way, Nao's

¹⁹⁰ On the relationship between type and fictionality, see Catherine Gallagher's "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," *Representations* 90.1 (2005), 61-74; and Gallagher's "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel*, vol.1, ed, Franco Moretti (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 336-363.

¹⁹¹ See, in particular, Dora Zhang's reading of Proust and weak theory in *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), which draws on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reading of atmosphere in *The Weather in Proust* (Duke University Press, 2011).

stereotypically Japanese character in fact emerges as the central plot—and central problematic—of Ozeki's Asian American realism.

Scholars largely read *A Tale for the Time Being* as a novel about world-historical events or global environmental disaster, and, as such, frequently read its parallel narratives in terms of political or ecological interconnectedness.¹⁹² These interpretations largely take the Ozeki's narrative at face value, and read Ruth's frame narrative as the key for understanding Nao's diary. While such readings allow scholars to theorize the novel's staging of ecological crisis and uneven development (between America, Japan, and a B.C. island) in terms of world-historical events and real-world phenomena, their focus on political content overlooks the novel's aesthetic form.¹⁹³ More, readings that prioritize Ruth's frame narrative also risk overlooking the realist aesthetics of Nao's diary. This has consequences, as it misses how the novel stages a crucial switch in concepts.

As Ruth becomes more obsessed with finding Nao, *A Tale for the Time Being* frames its initial generic imbalance as an epistemological disequilibrium that Ruth seeks to realign by way of realist narrative. Here, we can read Ruth in a longer tradition of Asian American realist writing, which, as Yoon Sun Lee argues, orients the ethnic memoir in realism as a political response to ethnic reification.¹⁹⁴ While Ruth seeks to recuperate Nao's diary by conjuring Nao into her own realist world, Nao keeps receding from her narrative horizon. Drawing on the novelistic potential of the ethnographic realism, Ozeki is indebted to historically foundational Asian American texts such as Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), which are primarily understood in terms of memoir writing. *A Tale for the Time Being*, however, writes realism not by locating her writers (whether Ruth as novelist or Nao as diarist) in realist typicality, but—through doubling down on Nao's stereotypicality—in generic racial form. The novel can be read as both literally and formally embracing stereotype through Ruth's Nao-obsessed half of the novel.

Indeed, the realist potential of Nao's genericness might be measured by how desperately Ruth wants to make her, quite literally, real. As Ruth grows increasingly concerned that Nao might be in immediate danger of self-harm, she attempts to track her down over the internet—a digital form of contemporary totality that, despite its lack of geographical boundaries, nevertheless fails to summon Nao. Instead, the internet only reveals literary examples of the generic forms in which Nao writes. Ruth's internet search for “Yasutani Jiko” and “Zen” and “nun” and “novelist” and “Taishō” and “Miyaki” (i.e. the “generic” keywords of Nao's diary) results in an academic article titled “Japanese Shishō and the Instability of the Female ‘I’” (148). Besides this article, the closest Ruth gets to finding Nao is through emailing a Stanford Comparative Literature professor who might have known Nao's father. These references to academic writing work to thicken the realism of Ruth's chapters, while further suggesting the historical relationship between American literary scholarship and an Asian American literary practice. Yet even the academic essay eventually disappears from the internet before Ruth is able to read it—a sign that even the realist institution of

¹⁹² On ecological and environmental readings of *A Tale for the Time Being*, see Michelle N. Huang's “Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20 no.1 (February 2017), 95-117; and Petra Fachinger's “Writing the Canadian Pacific Northwest Ecocritically: The Dynamics of Local and Global in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*,” *Canadian Literature* 232 (2017), 47-63. On the novel's relationship to world-historical events, see Guy Beauregard's “On Not Knowing: *A Tale for the Time Being* and the Politics of Imagining Lives After March 11,” *Canadian Literature* 227 (2015), 96-112.

¹⁹³ Yana Ya-chu Chang's essay, “Making (Non) Sense: On Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*,” *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies* 9 (2018): 62-63, shares my reading of the entwined and parallel plots in Ozeki's novel, though ultimately reads Nao's stereotypicality in terms of its negation of sense, and thereby more in line with Xiang, Chen, and Parikh's understanding of the Oriental Other in terms of impersonation and obfuscation.

¹⁹⁴ See Lee, “Type, Totality, and the Realism of Asian American Literature.”

academia might fall prone to futuristic speculations on the fate of digital archives in the end-times. As Ruth continues to search for Nao—to make Nao’s character real, if not yet entirely realist—Ozeki’s realism can be better grasped through its representation not of typically realist protagonists, but generic ones.

Despite how stereotypical Nao might appear to Ozeki’s reader, she remains immanently real to Ozeki’s realist protagonist. And as Ruth’s plot becomes wholly dependent on what happens next in Nao’s diary, we can see how Oriental stereotypes not only carry both of their plots, but organize their narrative forms. Ruth limits herself to reading only one entry from Nao’s diary a day, in hopes of modeling her own daily existence by enacting a formal limitation derived from Nao’s. Yet, as Ruth approaches the end of the diary, Nao’s elusiveness becomes literalized in the fact that her diary entries start disappearing, the “end” of her story receding from Ruth’s horizon. After a clunky *deus ex machina* that involves Ruth entering Jiko’s temple in what appears to be a dream, the novel finally resolves: not with Ruth finding Nao, but with Ruth reaching the end of Nao’s diary, as what had previously appeared to be an endlessly self-proliferating text finally stabilizes into a closed textual form. Here, Nao’s seeming endless narrative totality finally finds its limit—and it is one that precipitates a conclusion to Ruth’s (which is to say Ozeki’s) novel.

Because *A Tale for the Time Being* concludes with the disappearing act of Ozeki’s inscrutable Japanese schoolgirl, one might assume that it ends by leaving us in the properly realist world of a realist Asian American protagonist. The novel’s ultimate disappearance of Nao might be read as analogical for broader trends in Asian American literary representation that views postracial form as the disappearance of Asian stereotypes for more emancipatory aesthetic forms. Nao’s vanishing act might thus be read as a traumatic working through of the Oriental stereotypes that have long haunted Asian American writing. Yet to read this as emancipatory on behalf of confirming Ruth’s realism is to misread how the realism in Ozeki’s novel has unfolded.

A Tale for the Time Being does not reject Nao in order to recuperate realism; if anything, Ozeki’s realist novel ends at the moment Nao disappears. The novel thus finds its form through conforming Nao’s knowability as a purely textual formation. Nao’s generic flexibility thus demands that she remain finally as aesthetic form, rather than literary character. Yet in mediating Nao’s genericness through Ruth’s realist narration, Ozeki’s novel also enables the reader to see this disappearance as that which produces the emergence of an Asian American realist form.

For while Nao might appear throughout the novel to be endlessly stereotypical to Ozeki’s reader, her disappearance is marked as a tragedy for Ruth. *A Tale for the Time Being* ends by overwriting Nao’s Japanese past entirely over to Ruth’s North American realist present, but it also allows the reader to understand that handover in terms of a necessary limitation entailed by the novel form. The failure of Nao to emerge finally in Ruth’s literary world is staged not as rejection, but as loss. Reading Nao’s disappearance as merely a melancholic hangover in Ruth’s realist present, however, is to assume that the realism of Ozeki’s novel lies in narrative style or content.¹⁹⁵ Ozeki does not stage Nao’s disappearance as necessary for Asian American realist form. Instead, the novel explicitly stages the gradual process of Nao’s disappearance through a realist narrative to show the reader how the disappearing Asian structures the reappearing act of contemporary realism.

¹⁹⁵ For an influential account of Asian American racial melancholia, see Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). While I am indebted to Cheng’s psychoanalytical model of Asian American racial melancholia, this project departs from her understanding of the racial stereotype as that which must ultimately be rejected and disavowed.

IV. Reappearing Acts

Interior Chinatown initially appears to be the inverse of *A Tale for the Time Being*: it delves into the enclosed boundaries of an ethnic enclave instead of extending outward in narrative time and space. But despite this superficial contrast, *Interior Chinatown* manifests even more clearly a strategy that recuperates Oriental stereotypes for Asian American realism. Whereas Ozeki draws on tropes specific to Japaneseness and Japanese history, Yu's novel turns to what might be the primal scene of Asian American mythology: Chinatown. The product of anti-immigration and antimiscegenation laws, American Chinatowns have been historically figured as sites of disease and deviance—the space of the Chinese “alien ineligible to citizenship” who is nonetheless present amid the urban tumult of city centers. Chinatowns are perceived to be “ethnic islands,” as Ronald Takaki writes *Strangers from a Different Shore*—racialized zones of containment that are geographically internal to, but symbolically segregated from, the American landscape.¹⁹⁶ In contrast to the marked disappearance of Japantowns since internment, the endurance of American Chinatowns presents a different kind of Oriental inscrutability: not as a lacuna generated through evacuation, but rather a dense, proliferating zone of fictionality.

Yu's Chinatown is made all the more fictional in remaining emphatically generic. As the novel's opening epigraph by Bonnie Tsui tells us: “If a film needed an exotic backdrop...Chinatown could be made to represent itself or any other Chinatown in the world. Even today, it stands in for the ambiguous Asian anywhere.”¹⁹⁷ Drawn from Tsui's sociological study *American Chinatown*, this quote emphasizes Chinatown's aesthetic flexibility as a space of representation, which not only “represent[s] itself or any other Chinatown,” but “the ambiguous Asian anywhere.”¹⁹⁸ Yu's choice of epigraph—whose sociological voicing and tautological sentence structure smacks of a Jane Austen narrator—is moreover curious for how it slyly transports a universalism about “any other Chinatown in the world” to further “stand[] in for the ambiguous *Asian* anywhere.” Tsui's description of Chinatown here contains multitudes, representing any generic “Chinatown in the world” as well as the generic “Asian anywhere.” A figure that signifies at once a spatial and racial category, Chinatown might be understood in terms of Fredric Jameson's theory of “the stereotype [as] [...] the place of an illicit surplus of meaning.” In the case of Tsui, the conflation between generic Chinatowns and generic Asians enacts an almost inscrutable synecdochal shift in scales, allowing Yu's ethnically specific Chinatown to represent “the ambiguous Asian anywhere,” which in turn highlights Chineseness's generic aspect as an Asian American category. Taking this epigraph almost as a dare, what unfolds is a novel that largely takes place on the backlot film set of a fictional Chinatown. For while Tsui's *American Chinatown* focuses on five specific Chinatown neighborhoods, *Interior Chinatown* does not have an identifiable geographical location. Instead, Yu's fictional Chinatown “exists in a mental space,” as he described it to *The Los Angeles Times*, “a kind of collective imagination for Asian Americans who grew up in my generation, feeling like you don't exist fully inside of America.”¹⁹⁹ Born in Los Angeles in 1976, Yu is one of Asian America's many “children of 1965,” as Song calls them, whose mediated, eclectic writing of contemporary Asian American fiction draws on an array of literary forms (fiction, poetry, graphic novels) and genres (memoir, avant-garde writing, science fiction). This imagined Chinatown quickly turns generic in

¹⁹⁶ See chapter 6 of Ronald Takaki's *Strangers From A Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little Brown, 1989).

¹⁹⁷ Charles Yu, *Interior Chinatown: A Novel* (New York: Penguin, 2020), 1. Subsequent references are cited in the text.

¹⁹⁸ Bonnie Tsui's book focuses on five different Chinatown neighborhoods: San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Honolulu, Las Vegas. See Tsui, *American Chinatown: A People's History of Five Neighborhoods* (Free Press, 2009).

¹⁹⁹ Steph Cha, “Charles Yu knows the world isn't black and white,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 19, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2020-02-19/charles-yu-interior-chinatown-interview>.

Yu's novel, becoming the backdrop for a series of different movie and television Chinatowns, while its Chinese protagonist, an actor named Willis Wu, takes on a series of generic minor Asian bit-parts.

Divided into seven acts, *Interior Chinatown* is written in the form of a teleplay, absorbing the narrative beats and tropes of popular television series and films. In its reference to police procedurals and detective shows, we might see a practical enactment of Yu's own highly mediated imaginary of Chinatown's role in American popular culture. In doing so, Yu is also, we might recall, drawing from the same shared media landscape that popularized the demeaning Oriental stereotypes previously rejected by the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* and *Charlie Chan is Dead*. If Chin and Hagedorn felt the need to kill figures like Charlie Chan in order to inaugurate a legitimate Asian American literary canon, then Yu now draws on these very same stereotypes to reanimate contemporary Asian American fiction. Indeed, what unites its various acts, which range across different film sets, historical eras, and narrative frameworks is the character of Willis himself, whose second-person narrative voice guides the reader as he moves in and out of various Chinatown sets (INT. Chinatown and EXT. Chinatown). The title of the first act, "Generic Asian Man," is also an implicit introduction to Willis Wu, the generic protagonist of Yu's novel who, as a bit-part actor, is generic in more ways than one. While Lukács's typical protagonist negotiates between individual desires and social collectives, Yu's protagonist mediates across a broader range of social and story worlds. Indeed, Wu might be seen as the second coming of Charlie Chan—brought back to life not as minor character, but as the middling protagonist of Yu's contemporary Asian American novel.

Willis splits his identifications across multiple characters, especially as his characters get repeatedly killed or curtailed due to the quality of roles available to him. For Willis is more precisely an "(Asian) Actor"—the official title on his resume—an ethnic subcategory of Actor limited to subordinate, minor, or non-speaking roles. As he explains early on, the Asian actor "must work [their] way up [...] from the bottom" (11) and even provides a handy list:

5. Background Oriental Male
4. Dead Asian Man
3. Generic Asian Man Number Three/Delivery Guy
2. Generic Asian Man Number Two/Waiter
1. Generic Asian Man Number One. (11)

Reversing the usual ordering of a numbered list, the joke of this ranking is—at every level—about the inversion of expected hierarchies. If the "Background Oriental Male" is the most minor of these minor Asian roles, then "Generic Asian Man Number One" is the most exemplary—the *first* Asian man to appear in any given show. In contrast to "Generic Asian Man Number Two/Waiter" or "Generic Asian Man Number Three/Delivery Guy," the role of "Generic Asian Man Number One" is not just literally "Number One," but also unfettered by the supplemental characterizations of "Waiter" or "Delivery Guy"—details that do not particularize character, but only flatten it. In other words, "Generic Asian Man Number One" might be the closest a "Generic Asian Man," at least in this list, can get to approaching something like the universal *and* the specific—a uncanny concatenation of novelistic character shape. Here, Willis stages in condensed format how something like generic protagonicity emerges—and in fact must emerge—through the cumulative progression of stereotypes.

Upon providing this initial roadmap for aspiring Asian male actors, Willis almost immediately proceeds to tweak it in his own career. When the novel begins, Willis is, per his own list, "Background Oriental Male," though, as he admits early on: "Ever since you were a boy, you've dreamt of being Kung Fu Guy" (3). As suggested by the second-person address, this telos for the Asian boy actor is one that has long been internalized. For much of the novel, Willis struggles to

work his way up the ladder of minor Asian characters—from a series of Generic Asian Men to being, as he tells it,

a star, maybe not a real, regular star, let's not get crazy, we're talking Chinatown here, but perhaps a Very Special Guest Star, which for your people is the ceiling, is the terminal, ultimate, exalted position for any Asian working in this world, the thing every Oriental Male dreams of when he's in the background, trying to blend in.
Kung Fu Guy. (12)

The pinnacle of what an Asian man can accomplish in “this world” of cinematic Chinatowns, Kung Fu Guy turns out to be both more and less than the Generic Asian Man. The primary motivating force behind Willis's pursuit appears to be how few people have managed to occupy the role. “Kung Fu Guy” is, we could say, the dehistoricized generalization of the particular category that is “Bruce Lee”—the “legendary” figure of martial arts genre films whom Willis describes as “Too real, too specific to be a myth, the particulars of his genius known and part of his ever-accumulating personal lore” (24). If Lee is “too real, too specific” to be a figure of direct emulation, then Kung Fu Guy offers a more generically mediated route.

As a Generic Asian Man, Willis's progression from “Background Oriental Male” to “Kung Fu Guy” itself unfolds in and through other media genres and racial categories. Willis starts off mostly playing minor Asian roles on a television police procedural called *Between Black and White*, which centers around the exploits and simmering erotic tension between one black policeman and one white policewoman. “In the world of Black and White,” begins Willis's narration, “everyone starts out as Generic Asian Man. Everyone who looks like you, anyway” (10). The conceit of the show is simple: a cop television serial that follows a generic order (“There's a pattern, a form, a certain shape to it all” [38]) in which the narrative logic of each one-hour episode always moves toward restoring order (“Clues present themselves in order, one at a time. Two investigators, properly paired, can solve any mystery” [39]). When routed through the perspective of its most minor Asian character(s), however, *Between Black and White* starts to reveal alternate hidden plots—those that are weakly constituted, frequently inconclusive, and populated by middling characters. The joke here, as with most of the novel's jokes, hinges on turning what initially appears as an overly legible genre into a generically inscrutable one. For another way of saying what lies *Between Black and White* is, to borrow Claire Jean Kim's phrasing, all the other racial categories that have historically triangulated it.²⁰⁰

Willis initially plays non-speaking extras, in which his physical presence (much like that of the Chinatown itself) stands in as “exotic background,” or what Cheng might describe in terms of “ornamental personhood.”²⁰¹ Yet Willis's association with the space of “INT. CHINATOWN” persists even when he stops performing. After work, Willis remains inside Chinatown, living in what we soon learn to be a Chinatown SRO (“INT. CHINATOWN SRO”) with his family of actors: a father who currently plays “Sifu,” a mother who has played everything from “Pretty Oriental Flower” to now “Old Asian Woman,” as well as an older brother who plays “Everyone's Older Brother.” In *Interior Chinatown*, the boundary between the Chinatown one performs in and the Chinatown one lives in gets increasingly inscrutable, especially as Willis's parents start inhabiting their roles so completely that it becomes difficult to parse when they are in or out of character. This is especially the case for “Sifu,” whose entire performance rests on remaining hard to read. While Oriental inscrutability is mobilized in *Interior Chinatown* for both humor and narrative tension, this

²⁰⁰ Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics & Society* 27.1 (1999), 105-138.

²⁰¹ See Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, 3.

stereotype also comes to index the contradictions of historical movement through its defamiliarization. Reflecting on his father's long career playing different variations on a stereotype, Willis admits:

But the old parts are always underneath. Layers upon layers, accumulating. Which was the problem. No one in Chinatown able to separate the past from the present, always seeing in him (and in each other, in yourselves), all of his former incarnations, the characters he'd played in your minds long after the parts had ended. (20)

In Yu's novel, a litany of Oriental stereotypes reappear, not in increasingly hardened or reified form, but as *avowed* stereotypes. By acknowledging their highly mediated nature, Yu brings them to life again, carrying their historicity in their very forms.

For the generic space of Chinatown is also uniquely specific to the generic formation of Asian American fiction. Indeed, the canonization of Sui Sin Far as one of "the originators of Asian American literature in English," to quote Viet Thanh Nguyen, cannot be disentangled from her famous depictions of Chinatown in her short fiction.²⁰² Though the resonances of famous fictional Chinatowns are many in Yu's novel, from Frank Chin's meta-theatrical depiction of San Francisco Chinatown in his play *The Year of the Dragon* (1974) to Maxine Hong Kingston's deconstruction of tropes the same space in *China Men* (1980) to more sentimental depictions of San Francisco Chinatown as found in novels such as Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* (1989) and Myenne Fae Ng's *Bone* (1993). *Interior Chinatown* is, in other words, not only a play on the "INT. Chinatown" that is the film set backlot, but also plays on the centrality of the imagined space internal to the constitution of canonical Asian American novels.²⁰³ If the jamming together of various literary Chinatowns risks proliferating into impossible juxtapositions or postmodern pastiche, as characters spin off across what feels like an impossibly eclectic range of genres and character types, the drawing together of these fictional worlds through Willis's gravity and time-bound body also attests to the characterological flexibility of Willis as a generic protagonist. Routed through Willis's recent memory, these two forms of Interior Chinatown—one cinematic and the other novelistic—ultimately work to articulate the interiority of literary *character*. This is one reason why it is important that it is a teleplay—a textually written play—where interior thoughts can be represented even in characters who do not speak. Just as with stereotypes, different kinds of "interiors" accumulate over the course of Yu's novel, whether in the form of the interior of a physical space or setting, the interior of someone's mind, or even what we might call the interior world of a genre or atmosphere.

For instance, the "INT. American MOVIES-1950S AND '60S" that forms the generic template for the flashback of when Willis's mother arrives to America quickly bleeds into the "INT. THE MOVIE VERSION OF HER LIFE—NIGHT," which provides the reader the nostalgia-drenched cinematic image of a nightclub singer "in a wine red cheongsam, Mandarin collar, [and] short sleeves." While the reader might initially interpret this to be the Hollywood version of his mother's past, we soon realize that it is in fact the more realist framing of his mother past working on a Hollywood set. In fact, it is here that she meets the actor playing the role "ASIAN MAN/WAITER" who will become Willis's father. This realist re-situating of their meet-cute on a Hollywood set, however, soon gets even more real, we might say, as it bleeds into the yet even earlier historical context of his parents' life before immigrating to America. Yu interrupts Willis's storyline to gloss his parents' immigration stories, in which his mother begins when she arrives as a

²⁰² Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*, 180.

²⁰³ If there's a reason that Yu's Chinatown might feel more reminiscent of San Francisco Chinatown that of, for instance, the Los Angeles Chinatown, the literary tradition of S.F. Chinatown might be why.

nurse's assistant in Alabama in 1969, while his father's starts with the Taiwan's traumatic 2/28 Incident during the White Terror. While these backstories present a more historically grounded account of Willis's parents, they are nonetheless presented through generic characterizations: his mother's "Striving Immigrant" narrative routed through Hollywood melodrama, while his father's "is starkly different [...] born into Historical Period Piece, the role given to him was Child Victim of Oppression" (139).

Yu translates the significance of Taiwan's 2/28 Incident—one of brutal government suppression—for his American reader by momentarily resorting to a nonfictional genre. Here, the "Historical Newsreel Montage" presents a transcript that even embeds a quotation directly from *The New York Times*, describing the

"indiscriminate killing and looting. For a time everyone seen on the streets was shot at, homes were broken into and occupants killed. In the poorer sections the streets were said to have been littered with dead. There were instances of beheadings and mutilations of bodies, and women were raped."

By the evening of March 4, Taiwan has been placed under martial law. An uprising of the people continues for a number of weeks after, with Taiwanese civilians controlling much of the island. (140)

More than any other scene or event in Yu's novel, the White Terror triggers a generic switch—from popular Hollywood genres to that of documentarian or even ethnographic realism. One way to read this generic break is, as with Ozeki's novel, in terms of its nationally specific context. Rendered through montage form, the narrative voicing here is categorized under that of the "NEWS READER (V.O.)," whose voiceover expresses a disembodied omniscience that is totalizing in a way that is less realist than telegraphic. In fact, the inability—or the failure—to incorporate the traumatic events of Taiwanese history through Willis's fictionalized perspective figures as a kind of inverse Barthesian "reality effect."²⁰⁴ Nan Z. Da has theorized this reality effect in other contemporary novels by Chinese North American diaspora.²⁰⁵ Here, recent Chinese history functions as the ornamental textual object or form that cannot be properly incorporated into contemporary Chinese American fiction. It is precisely by pointing to the difficulty of incorporation that Chinese diasporic narrative effects a self-conscious indexing of the real.²⁰⁶

Instead of disavowing the stereotypes, Yu draws on age-old generic tropes about Chineseness that have been mediated through Asian American literature to generate a sense of historicity, however attenuated, in contemporary realism. Here, typicality is grounded through the weave and warp of stereotypes whose realist typicality emerges from their recycling across different national contexts and historical crises. Moreover, metafiction—or a second-order narration of stereotype—allows us to perceive Oriental stereotypes not as reified or static forms, but as aesthetic forms that can trace the ongoingness of historical motion. Thus, the recuperation of Asiatic

²⁰⁴ Roland Barthes's famous essay on "The Reality Effect" argues that superfluous details signify realism by virtue of remaining extraneous. See, "The Reality Effect" in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1989), 141-48.

²⁰⁵ Nan Z. Da, "Aspirational Conflicts and the Literature of Causation" (lecture, University of Pennsylvania, Nov 17, 2021), drawn from her forthcoming book *On Disambiguation*.

²⁰⁶ The mediation of the Asian diaspora's past through the journalistic might also remind us of the mediation of news from Asia in Ozeki's novel through Nao's diary. In both, "real-life" texts get recollected into the form of the contemporary realist novel and which commands space in the literary system. I'm grateful to Jed Esty for this observation.

stereotypes for contemporary Asian American realism needs a degree of meta-fictional framing in order for readers to see the weight and density of their reification as itself a historical force. To be sure, disappearance, invisibility, and minoriness are now seen as commonplaces of Asian American racialization. The trick of Yu's teleplay framing is allowing inscrutable Orientals to reappear again precisely through these marginalized forms. The inscrutable background Chinese character—and the Chinese character as background—is slowly brought into the fore in their ongoing focalization through the perspective of Willis, whose interior thoughts are represented by text that is tightly aligned to the right margin of the teleplay scripts. “You’re so deep in the / background, you’re / almost out of the frame,” goes Willis’s internal monologue during an episode of *Between Black and White* where he has no lines: “your only / action to sweep the floor” (72). The line breaks are necessary for Willis to represent his thoughts as separate from, or marginal to, the scripted dialogue. Though in this particular scene, they also visually enact the moment when Willis goes off script and decides to move from the “deep [...] background” into the fore—a breaking of character that is represented by a line break that moves Willis’s thoughts from the right margin to the left:

You step

into focus. (72)

This line break in the textual representation of his inner thoughts that precedes “into focus” is the prelude to Willis’s first line in the show: “I’m no one. But I might be able to help you” (73). Emphatically minor (“I’m not one”), Willis embodies Alex Woloch’s definition of the minor character, who is there “to help” protagonists resolve their narratives.²⁰⁷ While the episode soon ends—only to reboot onto an entirely different crime scene in the next—this line break is also, in a sense, a little career break for Willis. Speaking once, Willis gets to speak more and more, progressively taking on bigger roles, until he’s a recurring Asian, or “Ethnic Recurring,” as Act 3 is called. As a recurring ethnic, Willis is definitively not a regular character, but only someone who has regular work on the show. His roles still hinge on the recognizable racialization of his body, even as that racialization must be flexible enough to allow him to occupy a variety of roles. As Willis’s Chinese body becomes more narratively and visually central to *Between Black and White* (even if to be done away with by episode’s end), it inversely necessitates other forms of backgrounding that impair Willis’s ability to maintain centrality. Whenever one of Willis’s characters gets shot, he must take 45 days off from the show, since “it’s the minimum length necessary, just long enough for everyone to forget you existed. Because even though you all look alike, it’s still weird if you get murdered on Tuesday and by Thursday you’re showing up in the background of a street scene or as a bus boy” (129). Wu’s roles are emphatically flat and short-lived—a necessary quality of their minoriness—yet what crucially unites them is the Chinese body who plays all of them, who is at least recognizable enough to risk becoming too recognizable in his minoriness.

As a bit, any single one of these stereotypical roles might be played up for a punchline or as satire. (Think: Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.) But drawn out and repeated across the arc of a single character or actor’s body, the recurrence of demeaning stereotypes starts to take on a slightly darker affective resonance. For what makes these minor appear so unrealistic—so stereotypical—on their own is what makes them inversely feel so realistic when routed through one generic Asian protagonist. If Woloch’s theory of minor character focused on how minor characters, as the

²⁰⁷ As Woloch writes, “minor characters are the proletariat of the novel”—and this is especially so for the “realist novel—with its intense class-consciousness and attention toward social inequality.” See Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 27.

proletariat of the novel, work to enrich the interiority of the bourgeois protagonist, then Yu's novel asks what happens when there's no typically bourgeois protagonist around.

Instead, what happens is a slow unfolding of minorness building upon itself that generates Willis's potential as a generic protagonist, both in his career and personal life. During his period playing various "Recurring Ethnic" roles, Willis meets a Chinese actress named Karen with whom he falls in love off-camera. And as Wu takes on more and more narratively substantial acting roles, he also develops stronger personal feelings for Karen. These two trajectories—one that arcs toward one day landing the role of Kung Fu Guy, and the other that moves toward romance—are explicitly framed as oppositional. One would take Willis into the genre of martial arts, while the other is understood as not just domestic settlement, but as a kind of settling, at least when it comes to his career. Seeing Kung Fu Guy as the ceiling of what a Generic Asian Man can be, Willis initially overlooks the possibility of a Generic Asian Man becoming a Generic Leading Man.

The ending of *Interior Chinatown* is realist in perhaps the most typical or traditional sense of the genre. Giving up his dream of being a Kung Fu star, Willis chooses to live with Karen and their daughter Phoebe in the suburbs, which also requires that he finally leave Chinatown in all of its forms. In other words, the novel ends in the space and genre of the domestic bourgeois, and the interior space of heterosexual reproductive futurity. But in ending in the suburbs (or "EXT. CHINATOWN," as the final act is called), *Interior Chinatown* also suggests that the actual telos of Asian protagonicity, of making it as an Asian man in American cultural representation, is becoming a Generic Middle-Class Man. That is, in becoming the Generically Bourgeois Protagonist of the nineteenth-century novel form again.²⁰⁸

My approach to reading Asian American literature understands the generic tropes of Oriental stereotypes and the genre of realism to be now one and the same: the minor Asian character is neither an outlier nor peripheral figuration, but in fact constitutive of novelistic realism. Previously background characters, generic Asians have—through the genres they have long carried—progressively moved to the foreground of global Anglophone cultural production. Hidden in plain sight, they might just be the representative protagonist of our present era.

²⁰⁸ This is, also, it turns out, the ending of Ozeki's novel. When Nao's diary finally ends, Ruth also returns—much to her husband Oliver's relief—to her everyday life in Whaletown: shucking oysters, writing her memoir, and petting her uncannily domesticated cat.

Coda

Generic Practice

When I started working on this dissertation about the relationship between literary genres and genres of Asian stereotyping, my plan was to have it conclude with a chapter about Kevin Kwan's bestselling *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy (2013-2017). I had begun envisioning the project in 2018—about a year after the publication of Kwan's final installment—during a moment when the book series appeared to be unquestionably the most popular global Asian Anglophone literary product to date. That its commercial success had already precipitated plans for a series of Hollywood film adaptations (the first of which premiered later in 2018) only made its fit for this dissertation all the more obvious. This was, after all, a project about the contemporary globalization of Asian Anglophone popular culture by Asian novelists and filmmakers who were making a name for themselves by adapting popular Anglophone narrative genres. What better figure to exemplify this telos than a Singapore-born, UK-educated, American citizen who had written a hit book series about upwardly mobile global Asians that nonetheless relied on all the narrative DNA of imperial British fiction?

But what I thought was the singular specificity of *Crazy Rich Asians* turned out to be only a marker of its genericness. In the four years since, there has been a rising tide of such texts—novels and films and television adaptations that might just as well mark the culmination of “Generic Asians.” Or, at least, a generic dissertation filed in the summer of 2022 under the title of “Generic Asians.” Here is an incomplete list:

- Ling Ma, *Severance* (2018)
- Sigrid Nunez, *The Friend* (2018)
- Lee Chang-dong, dir. *Burning* (2018)
- Park Chan-Wook, dir. *Little Drummer Girl* (2018)
- Susan Choi, *Trust Exercise* (2019)
- Bong Joon Ho, dir. *Parasite* (2019)
- Lulu Wang, *The Farewell* (2019)
- Ted Chiang, *Exhalation: Stories* (2019)
- C Pam Zhang, *How Much of These Hills is Gold* (2020)
- Karen Tei Yamashita, *Sensei and Sensibility: Stories* (2020)
- Kevin Kwan, *Sex and Vanity* (2020)
- Chloe Zhao, dir. *Nomadland* (2020)
- Chloe Zhao, dir. *Eternals* (2020)
- Lee Isaac Chung, dir. *Minari* (2021)
- Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* (2021)
- Chang-Rae Lee, *My Year Abroad* (2021)
- Ruth Ozeki, *The Book of Form and Emptiness* (2021)
- Katie Kitamura, *Intimacies* (2021)
- Ryusuke Hamaguchi, dir. *Drive My Car* (2021)
- Kogonada, dir. *After Yang* (2021)
- James Wan, dir. *Malignant* (2021)
- Christina M. Kim, dir. *Kung Fu* (2021)
- Cary Joji Fukunaga, dir. *No Time to Die* (2021)
- Justin Cho and Kogonada, dir. *Pachinko* (2022)

- Jessamine Chan, *The School for Good Mothers* (2022)
- Hanya Yanagihara, *To Paradise* (2022)
- Domee Shi, dir. *Turning Red* (2022)
- Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, dir. *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022)
- Andrew Ahn, dir. *Fire Island* (2022)
- ...

That the dissertation's organizing thesis has been exemplified or illustrated in all these texts—some of which are more popular than others, and popular in different mediums or milieus—has been heartening. But rather than end on any particular example, I present them here in their aggregate as a sort of provisional thought experiment.

Instead of providing a discrete conclusion, let me offer a generic one: the sense of an ending, as well as the palimpsests of endings for this project that have been and perhaps still could be. This seems appropriate to the project, given that the generic Asian is itself a characterological figuration and aesthetic form that emerges through ongoing accretion, collection, repetition, and practice. The burgeoning “canon” of post-1970s Asian Anglophone literature and film is still being written, and hopefully will—like all ethnic canons that precede it—continue to be contested, revised, and rearticulated.

“Generic Asians” is neither prescriptive nor predictive; instead, it seeks to examine what is happening in the Asian Anglophone cultural production *now*, with aims to recontextualize the generic forms that constitute contemporary global Asian cultural production. That I am always apprehending or reading certain aspects of the present belatedly seems unavoidable. Only toward the end of writing this dissertation did I realize that all the texts in my archive might be categorized under the banner of historical fiction—a delayed insight about the genericness of this project. But the slightly syncopated, retroactive historicity of my dissertation's archive also suggests a broader story about the belated recognition and nascent emergence of a new mode of contemporary *realism*—one that we can begin to discern now in the collective, comparative accumulation of generic Asians in twenty-first century Asian Anglophone popular media.

Generic Asians is, on the one hand, about the future—about the specter of rising China and all our fears and fantasies about what that might entail. Generic Asians is also, on the other hand, about the past—about the residual power and purchase of conventional narrative genres from an earlier Anglophone empire. But between the two poles of this shifting dialectic, the project has always been about wherever we are in the present. In the last instance, Generic Asians is finally about providing a hermeneutic to help us describe some of the phenomena of our disorienting global present, and perhaps especially phenomena that might appear below notice or beyond description: the ethnic stereotypes and well-worn genres that often come to us seemingly already pre-read. Yet it is for their deceptive simplicity and knowability that we must attend to these genres all the more closely.

Looking at the list above, one might expect this rising tide of contemporary Asian Anglophone popular culture—that range from novels and short stories to film and television—to congeal into a greater aesthetic whole: a recognizable trope or generic type. But instead of a unified generic form, we only get more and more genres—excess that begets exponential excess. This is the mode of aesthetic reproduction that my work tracks, and it's one that characterizes our global present. If Oriental inscrutability was once typified by the minor Asian (whether in the form of a Fu

Manchu or Charlie Chan) that remained difficult to read, then the difficulty of contemporary Oriental inscrutability here is having, realistically, too much to read.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ This mode of cultural production—copies upon copies of genres upon genres—is synecdochal for the old Oriental trope of the “yellow peril” or “horde” as well. For example, Erich Schwartzel’s recent study *Red Carpet* examines the rapidly changing relationship between Hollywood and China in the post-1990s era of Chinese economic reform, during which China has not only absorbed the blueprints of Hollywood filmmaking, but has even now begun to surpass them. Schwartzel chronicles China’s capacity to copy American genres with Chinese characteristics, but also emphasizes how Chinese policies have begun to infiltrate Hollywood filmmaking decisions at the level of production, distribution, and representational content. See Schwartzel, *Red Carpet: Hollywood, China, and the Global Battle for Cultural Supremacy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022).

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