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Reframing Citizenship: Narratives of Undocumented Immigrant Exclusion

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Reframing Citizenship:

Narratives of Undocumented Immigrant Exlcusion

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Reframing Citizenship:

Narratives of Undocumented Immigrant Exclusion

by

Micaella Baltazar Libunao

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Lucy M.S.P. Burns, Chair

Given that undocumented immigrants cannot legally belong in the United States because of their "illegal" status, in what ways do they seek other modes of belonging—if this is even possible to begin with? This thesis seeks to argue that it is not only exclusionary laws that determine citizenship or "illegality" within the nation state, but also socio-cultural belonging or the absence of it. The thesis also specifically investigates the questions of citizenship and belonging through the undocumented immigrant figure within the Asian American population, and specifically the undocumented Asian American womxn. It interrogates citizenship and belonging through the examination of two novels: Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach* (1976) and Lisa Ko's *The Leavers* (2017)—novels that are about undocumented Chinese womxn in two different American eras, who trouble and challenge the notions of borders and belonging through time, but also what happens within the undocumented immigrant psyche.

The thesis of Micaella Baltazar Libunao is approved.

Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo

Victor Bascara

Lucy M.S.P. Burns, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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For my parents,

always

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INTRODUCTION

"Writ[ing] a genealogy of unbelonging": Hxstories of American Exclusion, Citizenship, and Undocumented Immigration

"It has been our lot to be people who are neither from here nor there."
-Guadalupe Gomez

"The border *es una herida abuerta* where the Third World grates against the first world and bleeds...The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half bred, the half dead; in short, those who crossover, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.'"
-*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa

In the beginning there were no borders. No lines. Just vast, endless land that European colonists claimed "new." Amid centuries of Indigenous genocide, land theft, slavery, revolutionary and civil wars, the idea of the human modeled after white man, manifest destiny, citizenship, exclusion, and national borders came to be.

This thesis seeks to argue that it is not only exclusionary laws that determine citizenship or "illegality" within the nation state, but also socio-cultural belonging or the absence of it. In that vein, Asian Americans, who were the first doubly excluded by way of immigration laws—specifically through gender, before the entire race—can still be applied today, as Asian Americans are still largely seen as a foreign Other. With the emergence of shifting identities encompassing a spectrum of "yellow peril" to "model minority," much of Asian heterogeneity is elided, leaving certain communities within Asian America "in the shadows" of poverty, a lack of acces to resources, and ineligiblity for citizenship—most exemplified by the undocumented immigrant population within the Asian American community. This exclusion also goes hand in

hand with how Asians, as well as other non-white races, are seen as forever foreign, racialized Others, which essentially became the general structure of the U.S. nation state. In other words, for one to be a U.S. citizen, another body has to be an "illegal alien" or undocumented immigrant; for one to be eligible for citizenship, another body has to be ineligible.

The thesis also investigates the questions of citizenship and belonging through the undocumented immigrant figure within the Asian American population, and specifically the undocumented Asian American womxn. I will interrogate citizenship and belonging through the examination of two novels: Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach* (1976) and Lisa Ko's *The Leavers* (2017). The two novels are about undocumented Chinese womxn in two different American eras, encompassing not only the question of borders and belonging through time, but also what happens within the undocumented immigrant psyche. The thesis ends with Jose Antonio Vargas's memoir, *Dear America*, to provide further discussion on what it means to be an undocumented immigrant in the present time, but also what citizenship, "illegality," and belonging has come to be, especially within the time of Trump and the covid-19 pandemic.

"THERE IS NO LINE!": Laws of Exclusion

In the context of this study, we can first examine legal exclusion by way of immigration in the United States through the Page Law of 1875, the first legislation to be passed that banned immigration on the basis of not only race, but specifically gender, ultimately excluding the (im)migration of Chinese womxn to America. Scholar Laura Hyun Yi Kang traces the passage of this law through the early racialized notion that the majority of Chinese womxn (and at times, men) were presumed to be prostitutes. In an 1869 *Overland Monthly* issue, written by Reverend A.W. Loomis, it was assumed that "unprincipled Chinamen, who having surveyed the

[American] ground, and taken notes of the situation, returned to China; but they soon came back, bringing with them the first of those women whose numbers have since increased from year to year, and whose presence is an offense to all respectable people, and a blot on the character of their own nation" (Loomis qtd. in Kang 119). Before the Page Law came to be, Kang also notes that the California state legislature passed the Act for the Suppression of Chinese Houses of Ill Fame in 1866. This legislation fought to challenge the increasing publicity of the "suspect Chinese female body" and "'declared Chinese prostitution to be a public nuisance" (Kang 119-120). This act also symbolized one of the first legislations that spatially regulated and contained Chinese bodies, as the act also extended to "gambling houses and opium dens," marking "'Chinatowns as a 'vice district'" (Kang 120). Chinese prostitution also subsequently became linked to not only risks in public health and venereal diseases, but also the moral "corruption" of the American youth.

Named after a California congressman who wanted to challenge the influx of Chinese prostitutes to America, the Page Law was enacted in 1875, beginning not only the ban of femxle Chinese (im)migration, but also the production of "an elaborate network of intelligence gathering and interrogation…[and putting] into place a dense transnational network of surveillance, judgment, and documentation, which would later be applied to monitor and control other Chinese migrants destined for the United States" (Kang 121). Seven years later, immigration exclusion extended to all Chinese laborers—with the exception of those in higher socioeconomic classes[1]—and "prohibited Chinese immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens" (Lee 2). This was, of course, embodied in the landmark legislation, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

[1] Those exempt from exclusion included Chinese "merchants, teachers, students, diplomats, and travelers" (Lee 4).

Furthermore, according to scholar Sujani K. Reddy, "their exclusion in 1882 was built upon the Page Act of 1875" and moreover, "the implementation of both Acts necessitated the creation of immigration enforcement, including the introduction of identification cards (passwords, green cards), rulings on detention and deportation that stand as the rule of law to this day, and the beginnings of the border patrol" (68). Thus, all these state mechanisms to control immigration, citizenship, deportation, the borders, can all be rooted back to the Chinese exclusion era. As Erika Lee significantly notes in *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era,* "Chinese exclusion reinforced the important part that the federal government was beginning to play in controlling race relations, immigration and immigrant communities, and citizenship" (10).

Interestingly, Reddy also attests that surveillance can be traced back to the beginnings of the actual southern border separating the United States and Mexico: "the 1,954 mile border," according to Reddy, is "a product of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo" (68). The Treaty not only gave the United States chunks of land after the Mexican-American War,[2] but it also let Mexico fall into the conquest of the U.S., as well as heightened the United States' utilization of policing and surveillance: "As Mexicans faced the consequences of conquest, the China Division of the U.S. federal government emerged as a force for patrolling the border for Chinese laborers, because they were the first group of migrants deemed inadmissible to the United States on the basis of race, nationality and class" after the passage of both the 1875 and 1882 legislations (Reddy 68).

This influx of Chinese (im)migrants in the southern border during the late nineteenth

[2] That is, California, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Wyoming, Texas up to the Rio Grande, and the majority of New Mexico and Arizona (Reddy 68).

century can be ascribed to the lack of efficacy that the U.S. initially had in enforcing their exclusionary laws within the northern and southern borders (Lee 173). After the exclusionary laws were passed, Chinese (im)migrants who traveled by sea and wanted to prove themselves as members of the merchant, teacher, student, traveler or diplomat class were subsequently held at immigration centers and detention barracks at Angel Island off the San Francisco Bay for intense interrogation and bodily inspections, which was due to the fact that they "were believed to be contaminated with parasitic diseases and other ailments considered dangerous and contagious" to the American public (Lee 4). Thus, because most of the immigration enforcement focused on the seaports, "America's restrictive immigration legislation was perceived as largely ignoring the country's lack of control over its own borders. As one border patrol inspector commented, the nation's immigration laws provided 'locked doors,' but there was no 'connecting wall between them' because of the open borders" (Lee 173). To fix this "lax enforcement," the United States "began to define as its prerogative the right to extend its immigration agenda to neighboring sovereign countries" (Lee 173). Of course, enforcing immigration laws onto Mexico and Canada were not entirely possible, so the U.S. decided to create, instead, "two new arms of imperialism in modern America: border diplomacy and border policing," with the hopes that it could "induce both countries to cooperate with the United States and adopt compatible immigration laws" (Lee 174). Because the U.S was more successful with convincing Canada to tighten immigration control along America's northern border, much of Chinese (im)migration became focused along the U.S. southern border, which, as Lee notes, "had always been marked by conquest and contestation between the United States and Mexico" as well as "inconsistent cooperation between the two countries" (Lee 179). It was not until the establishment of the U.S. Border

Patrol in 1925, which aimed to heavily limit "illegal" Chinese immigration to the U.S.,[3] that surveillance and regulation was intensified along the southern border (Lee 187).

Indeed, as Erika Lee notes, the Chinese were the first undocumented immigrants, "entering the country through the back doors of Canada or Mexico or engaging in a highly organized interracial, transnational business of fraudulent immigration documents" (Lee 13). And regardless of these stricter regulations, the movement of Chinese (im)migrants into the U.S. did not stop; on the contrary, Lee argues that it actually increased: "what happened instead was a profitable business that developed in its wake, with beneficiaries ranging from smugglers, to industry, and the newly formed divisions of the U.S. government dedicated to immigration enforcement" (189). Further, in *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940*, Robert Chao Romero writes that "as a means of resisting and circumventing the Chinese Exclusion laws, entrepreneurial Chinese invented undocumented emigration from Latin America and created a vast transnational smuggling network that encompasses China, Mexico, Cuba, and various cities throughout the United States" (31). Thus, Romero adds that "although in the present day undocumented immigration is closely correlated in the minds of many to the movement of native Mexicans and Latin Americans to the United States, ethnic Chinese were the first illegal aliens from Mexico" (32).

However, what is important to note here is that all of these efforts to exclude and deport and ban from citizenship those of the Asian race, beginning with Chinese womxn, is that these efforts helped to define and enforce Asians as a racial Other who were also additionally deemed

[3] Ironically, immigration patrols or inspectors disregarded Mexican migrants who were coming into the U.S. (mostly to work on railroads, mining, or construction); at that time, immigration bureau "described the Southwest as the 'natural habitat' of Mexicans, acknowledging, albeit strangely, Mexicans' claims of belonging in an area that had once been part of Mexico" (Ngai 64).

as a physical, sexual, moral, and public health threat to the American nation—and not to mention, a threat to the public resources of the United States, whether that be jobs that Asian Americans are "taking," or governmental resources such as welfare. Mai Ngai's *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* highlights that the creation of "illegal aliens" began after the Immigration Act of 1921, and later, 1924 were passed. The Acts not only restricted immigrant numbers through its quota system, but also "stimulated the production of illegal aliens and introduced that problem into the internal spaces of the nation," precisely because of the limited numbers of immigrants allowed to come to the U.S. (Ngai 57). In other words, the "numerical restriction created a new class of persons within the national body—illegal aliens—whose inclusion in the nation was at once a social reality and a legal impossibility" (Ngai 57).

Both Lee and Ngai also observe that after the Immigration Act of 1924, the U.S. began to see its "first large-scale deportation of an immigrant group" (Lee 4). Additionally, Ngai grants that "illegal" immigration "always resulted from exclusion," but the extent to which the 1920s saw "mass proportions and deportation assumed a central place in immigration policy" (57). Ngai also significantly notes that this era is also where we begin to see the "deserving" or "undeserving" narratives that are assigned to undocumented immgrants: "The application of the deportation laws gave rise to an oppositional political and legal discourse which imagine deserving and undeserving illegal immigrants and, concomitantly, just and unjust deportations" (58). *Impossible Subjects* asserts that "these categories were constructed out of modern ideas about social desirability, in particular with regard to crime and sexual morality, and values that esteemed family preservation" (Ngai 58). Unlike today, deportation was attached to potential

consequences of family separation which were deemed "unjust" (Ngai 58). Through this vein, Ngai offers that "just as the restriction and deportation 'made' illegal aliens, administrative discretion 'unmade' illegal aliens" (58). But of course, it is important to note that these binaries or categories also "had an important racial dimension" since inclusion and exclusion had different meanings and outcomes for European immigrants (Ngai 58).

After the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, unauthorized entry into the United States began to be enforced as a criminal offense: "In 1929 Congress made unlawful entry a misdemeanor, punishable by one year of imprisonment or a $1,000 fine, or both, and made a second unlawful entry a felony, punishable by two years imprisonment or a $2,000 fine, or both. Deportation thus amounted to permanent banishment under threat of felony prosecution" (Ngai 60). Important to note is that, just like today, immigration policy also deprived undocumented immigrants constitutional rights (Ngai 60). That being the case, those who came to the United States without any proper visas or documentation at all "rapidly became the largest single class of deportees, representing over half the total number of formal deportations and the overwhelming majority of voluntary departures by the late 1920s" (Ngai 60). Because of this, Ngai notes that one's legal or illegal status became "abstract constructions," and had more to do with numbers and documentation as opposed to human incentives on why (im)migration was necessary (61). This is explained through a simple equation where one's potential status "now rested on being in the right place in the queue—if a country has a quota of *N*, immigrant *N* is legal but immigrant *N + 1* is illegal—and having proper documentation, the prized 'proper visa'" (Ngai 61).[4]

[4] This system, Ngai notes, is the earlierst origin of the term "undocumented immigrant" (61), but also marks that it was "no accident" that the categorization emerged after WWI, "produced by hypernationalist immigration controls" (Ngai 10).

As such, in the earlier eras of exclusion, bodies were heavily inspected to make sure that they were free of disease; now in the early twentieth century, "visas were inspected, [and] not their bodies" (Ngai 61). This change points to a shift which categorizes legal status and the law of the nation-state as most important. Further this abstract change is exemplified in a response from the 1927 Immigration Bureau concerning an influx in smuggled Asian immigrants: "'The bootlegged alien is by all odds the *least* desirable. Whatever else may be said of him: whether he be diseased or not, whether he holds views inimical to our institutions, *he at best is a law violator from the outset*'" (qtd. in Ngai 62). In this perspective, the Asian immigrant's assumed threat to the nation's public health and morality comes only second and third to the assumption that they are first and foremost, a law breaker, which in turn, makes them the least desirable. It is here that the shift turns to proper legal documentation in order to belong to American society, without which they become almost inhuman. Ngai posits that "in this story, aliens were not only subjects—that is, the smugglers—they were also the objects, the human goods illegally trafficked across the border" (62). Likewise, Lee also notes that "the connections made between smuggled goods such as liquor and drugs and Chinese migrants also portrayed the Chinese as contraband commodities that did not belong in the United States" (149). Through this vein, the "illegal alien that is abstractly defined is something of a specter, a body stripped of individual personage" (Ngai 61). In *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lisa Lowe also conveys that the shifting categorizations of Asian Americans are a result of centuries of racialized classification of Asian immigrant identities (19). In the same manner, "'legal' and 'illegal,' 'citizen' and 'noncitizen,' and 'U.S. born' and 'permanent resident,' are contemporary modes through which the liberal state discriminates, surveys, and produces immigrant identities"

(*Immigrant Acts* 19). Of course, we know that despite the American need for these binary categorizations, one can still argue that until today, Asian Americans are still seen as foreign threats or forever foreigners regardless if they do or do not have the proper legal documents and visas. This is best exemplified by the increased surveillance and violent discrimination of South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh immigrants and citizens alike after 9/11, as well as the Chinese (and perhaps all of Asian America), at the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. But where does this Othering take its roots?

"Corporeal markings": Notions of Citizenship and Belonging

Under Congress, the Naturalization Act of 1790 exerted that only "free white persons" who had lived in the U.S. for two years and could exemplify moral character and uphold the Constitution were eligible for citizenship ("Acts of the First Congress" 103). In application, this meant that solely "white males" were allowed to become citizens through naturalization, excluding women, slaves, nonwhite "aliens," and indentured servants from gaining access to citizenship. Moreover, according to the *Immigration History* website by the University of Texas at Austin, the Naturalization Act also "produced the legal category of 'aliens ineligible for citizenship' which largely affected Asian immigrants and limited their rights as noncitizens to key realms of life in the United States such as property ownership, representation in courts, public employment, and voting." Scholar Karen Kithan Yau also asserts that "until 1790, there was no federal law that restricted immigration or defined who could qualify as a U.S. citizen" and that likewise, "until the U.S. started enacting laws targeting and restricting the Chinese in the 1870s and 1880s, there wasn't a comprehensive immigration enforcement system (Ho et al. 41).

Moreover, Erika Lee posits that underneath the narrative of Asian exclusion was the

pervasive ideology of maintaining white supremacy in the newly settled, paradisiacal West: "Californians had long envisioned their state to be an Edenic, unspoiled land where free labor might thrive. This image was disrupted by the 'Chinese Problem'" (27). Lee also notes that white colonials had just finished their conquest of Native Americans and Mexicans when Chinese (im)migrants arrived in California, attracted by the Gold Rush in the late 1840s (27). Their recent arrival posed another threat to their perceived "Edenic" and "unspoiled" terrain. Adhering to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, whites justified their racism and superiority through the constructed notion of a "homogenized Asia as one indistinguishable entity [which] positioned and defined the West and the East in diametrically opposite terms" (Lee 25). Because of this, Chinese (im)migrants, became targeted through racial discrimination and hate crime, and more importantly, seen as unfit and all the more "ineligible for citizenship."

Orientalist discourse allowed for white (men) to see the Asian (womxn) as an exoticized figure, that is, if they were not being seen as a threat—or both. Kang writes that even before the Chinese came to the United States, they were introduced to the American public by way of images in travel accounts or "Orientalist caricatures that were performed by non-Asians" (115-116).[5] Kang cites James Moy in conveying that "'the notion of Chineseness under the sign of the exotic became familiar to the American spectator long before sightings of the actual Chinese'" (Moy qtd. in Kang 116). Furthermore, Kang notes that "the imagined and performative hyperbolization against a corporeal absence" caused for an enthusiastic (and paying) American public, when the first Chinese womxn, Afong Moy and Pwan Yekoo, did finally come to United States as travelers and performers of a public sideshow in 1841, and a

[5] Namely, a performance of Voltaire's *The Orphan of China* in Philadelphia, 1755 (Kang 116).

"highly contrived and stylized *tableau vivant*" in 1850, respectively (116). As such, the first Chinese womxn were seen as not only a cultural commodity, but also as an exoticized spectacle. However, Kang asserts that it is also important to note that the Orientalist portrayals of Chinese womxn "are not yet shaped by a discourse of racial difference" (116). Rather, the "costumes, furniture, and other props that decorated the 'viewing rooms'" had justified for the American public, where these "alien corporealities securely belonged" (Kang 117). No one had predicted that the Chinese would later decide to settle. After the influx of Chinese (im)migrant men following the Gold Rush, Chinese womxn began to be seen as "'queer and diminutive specimens...bunched up in bandanna kerchiefs, werring blue shirts and big unmentionables, walking through the streets with as much delicacy as a turkey treading on hot ashes'" (*The Daily Alta* qtd. in Kang 117). Two years after Yekoo's *tableau vivant* performance, and already the Chinese public image had shifted from an awed spectacle to an animalistic figure, whose appearance and bodily movements were surveilled through the American gaze.

In a different, yet also Orientalist manner, male Chinese laborers were highly feminized by the American public, which distorted American notions of masculinity, and aforementioned, demonstrated unassimilable character and therefore, ineligible citizenship. Banned from working in mines, agriculture, and industrial labor, Chinese men began working in laundries, domestic services, and restaurants—all occupations that were traditionally assigned to womxn by the patriarchal (and American) imaginary (Lee 26-27). Likewise, the physical appearance and sexual ambiguity of Chinese men—whether it be their long braids or their loose garments—"disturbed American perceptions of proper gender roles," (Lee 27). In this way, they were deemed too strange and unfamiliar to be considered assimilable.

In order to uphold white supremacy, nativists also compared Chinese (im)migrants to Blacks, noting that both were "heathen, inherently inferior, savage, depraved, and lustful" in order to impose both races as a threat to the nation (Lee 27). Lee also notes that "the language and politics of the anti-Chinese movement closely followed other western campaigns [such as] the subjugation of African Americans and Mexicans" (29). This then became the underlying justification for the U.S. to close its borders to Chinese (im)migrants, and later the majority of Asia, as seen in the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 and the Immigration Act of 1924. The same narrative is also used to ban or incarcerate immigrants who pose a threat to the sovereignty of the United States, as seen in the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, the increased surveillance of South Asian and Arab populations post 9/11, the Muslim travel ban in 2017, as well as the incarceration of mostly undocumented Latinx immigrants in detention camps across the nation. Interrelated threats such as these "justified that legal barriers be established and that metaphorical gates be built and closed...in order to protect Americans" (Lee 29). However, as Ngai posits, the concept is nothing but a false notion that seeks to uphold white hegemony:

> The notion that migrants pose a potential threat of foreign invasion has become a familiar provocation and nationalist discourse. But immigrants have always been but a small percentage of the receiving countries total population, never approaching anything that could be considered an actual invasion. The association of immigration control with the state's authority to wage war reveals that sovereignty is not merely a claim to national rights but a theory of power. (Ngai 12)

Nonetheless, the continued reinforcement of white supremacy alongside its relationship with federal law helped to solidify Chinese exclusion beyond California in the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century (Lee 29). The relationship is noted as "one of the best examples of

what hxstorians have identified as a 'quintessentially western story' of westerners relying upon the federal government to solve the region's racial and class problems" (Lee 30). In order to get federal support and make the "Chinese problem" a national problem, anti-Chinese nativists posed that "Chinese immigration was both a 'local grievance' and a 'national question,' the 'darkest cloud' not only on California's horizon but on the republic's as well" (Lee 30). In other words, the gates of immigration had to be closed. By doing so, the U.S. was able to not only maintain its sovereignty, but also continue on with its imperialistic agendas:

> The United States responded by devising a border enforcement policy designed to assert its sovereignty and control over the northern and southern borders and to protect the American nation within. This policy was part of a larger extension of American laws, ideologies, and systems of control that characterized American imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, the subject of Chinese exclusion, traditionally defined within the confines of domestic or U.S.-China relations, spilled over many national boundaries. (Lee 173)

Imperialism then becomes strongly linked to Chinese exclusion as well as U.S. border control and surveillance. Indeed as noted above, Chinese exclusion became justified through the desired maintenance of white supremacy, as well as the negative perceptions of Chinese and subsequently all of Asian Americans as a national threat to both the American public and American sovereignty (Lee 173). Through this vein, "the ideology and administrative processes of gatekeeping dehumanized and criminalized immigrants, defining them as 'unassimilable aliens,' 'unwelcome invasions,' 'undesirables,' 'diseased,' 'illegal'" and more significantly, forever ineligible to American citizenship and belonging (Lee 22).

"More than pieces of papers": The Contemporary Undocumented Immigrant Experience

In the last year there was an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States (Ho et al. 33). Statistical data also shows that one out of seven Asian Americans is

undocumented (Leong 7). Moreover, although much of the media and dialogue in the country has focused on undocumented immigration within the Latinx community, Latinx (im)migration has actually faced a steady decline due to the Trump administration, which has "expressly sought to expand deportations of undocumented immigrants and weaponized fear within immigrant communities" (Ho et al. 35). On the contrary, it is Asian American undocumented immigration that has increased over the past years, "making it the fastest-growing undocumented group in the country" (Ho et al. 35).

The undocumented experience within Asian America is for the most part, diverse. Most arrive with visas (including but not limited to student visas, tourist visas, or worker visas), but overstay once their documents expire. Once this happens, it is almost impossible to get back on the legal path. Furthermore, expiration or loss of documentation affect beyond the undocumented individual, as a number of Asian immigration happen through filial networks. Moreover, this loss can happen in such ambiguous and complicated ways. kim and yellow horse explain that "some residents grow up with a documented status of dependents of parents with F-1, J-1, or H-1B visas and...lose their status when their parents can no longer claim them as a dependent or when they are unable to pay to sustain their visa status. Some will have applied for permanent residence, but those who don't are rendered undocumented and ineligible for DACA" (71). All in all, this demonstrates how undocumented status can at times be out of one's control and in a way, always in flux: "From the moment you set foot on U.S. soil, it changes over time. You can fall out of status, which is usually what happens with Asian immigrants" (Ho et al. 37).

Aforementioned, much of the undocumented immigrant discourse also focuses heavily on the "good immigrant"/"bad immigrant" narrative. Lee and Rubio also express that "the politics

of immigration reform have been dictated by the confining parameters of seeking legalization for a 'desirable' few in exchange for even greater criminalization and enhanced enforcement against the less desirable many" (Lee and Rubio 12). We can take, for example, the Dream Act or DACA, which favors certain undocumented immmigrants over others. Much of the narrative behind these immigration policies reinforce the model minority myth, "focusing reform efforts on DACA-eligible and college-bound youth" and "keep[ing] other undocumented immigrants in the shadows, living in fear" (kim and yellow horse 71). In addition, Lee and Rubio posit that both legislations are "invested in uplifting one group of people who best represent the neoliberal values, such as 'personal responsibility,' in order to sustain the illusion of U.S. racial liberalism" (12). The rest are deemed "undesirable." A burden to the U.S. nation.

As we can see in the general American media, dichotomies between "good" and "bad" immigrants can have severe consequences, such as painting false images of immigrants as criminal, animalistic, and overall, subhuman. As the public outcry against undocumented immigrants have increased after Trump's election, there has been a decline not only in (im)migration, but also in legal assistance, as since late 2017, "no one is able to apply for DACA for the first time" (Ho et al 36). Fast forward three years later, within the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, the undocumented immigrant population is more vulnerable, having little legal access to public health assistance—and not to mention that thus far, only California has made monetary funds available to the undocumented community for Covid-19 relief ("The Daily Social Distancing Show with Trevor Noah").

Much of the silence within undocumented immigration in the Asian American population also contributes to their vulnerability. Hsin notes that "the ethnic adversity that exists within the

Asian immigrant population has made mobilizing and coalition building difficult" along with the lack of awareness "about the undocumented immigrant population within the community" (Ho et al. 35). This then contributes to "their invisibility and the challenges faced by service providers and community-based organizations seeking to assist them" (Ho et al. 35). The stigmas around undocumented immigration also prohibit Asian Americans not only from seeking help, but also in revealing their status, for fear of getting ostracized within and outside their own community, or worse, getting deported. However, Concepcion Montoya postulates that "living as an undocumented immigrant is already fraught with danger" and that "from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the current immigration bills, anti-immigrant sentiment has ebbed and flowed with the politics of a given time" (118-119). If we do not speak now, then how will we advocate for the inclusion of undocumented immigrants—most of whom are essential workers—into the national narrative in which they have been a part of for decades in time, as well as their rights to access the benefits and resources that they justly deserve. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the undocumented immigrant expereince is that at times, silence can be a form of protection. But, we must continue to move out of the shadows.

"It Erupts in Culture": *Mulberry and Peach* and *The Leavers*

One of the ways in which silence can be countered is through literature and culture, and/or cultural productions. As Lisa Lowe states in the "Power of Culture," "The differentiation of Asian immigrants from the national citizenry is marked not only politically, but culturally as well" (11). In this way, the culture that is exhumed from the "historical 'unconscious'" becomes rearticulated through Asian American culture as an alternative to the present cultural hegemony ("Power of Culture" 11). Lowe further explains that because the state governs through legality to

maintain inequality, culture is used to challenge the dictates of not only the law but also society:

> The state governs through the political terrain, dictating in that process the forms and sites of contestation. Where the political terrain can neither resolve nor suppress inequality, it erupts in culture. Because culture is the contemporary repository of memory, of history, it is through culture, rather than government, that alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and practice are imagined...if the state suppresses dissent by governing subjects through rights, citizenship, and political representation, it is through culture, broadly defined, that we conceive and enact new subjects and practices in antagonism to the regulatory locus of the citizen-subject, by way of culture that we can question those modes of government. ("Power of Culture" 12-13)

In this way, culture and cultural productions critique "the narrative of American citizenship" and belonging ("Power of Culture" 13-14). It "displace[s] the fiction of reconciliation, disrupt[s] the myth of national identity by revealing its gaps and fissures, and intervene[s] in the narrative of national development that would illegitimately locate the 'immigrant' before history, or exempt the 'immigrant' from history" ("Power of Culture" 7). More significantly, culture becomes the way in which "the individual speaks itself as a member of the contemporary national collectivity" ("Power of Culture" 14). Although Lowe describes the immigrant's feeling of national belonging that is rearticulated through culture, the belonging of undocumented immigrants in America is not completely explored. Despite this, however, we can still apply Lowe's theory to the undocumented immigrant population as we see many examples of undocumented immigrants navigate their belonging, as well as their critique of the nation's notions of belonging and citizenship, erupting through culture.

Moreover, in the past and present world of exclusion, legality has become the utmost marker of inclusion to American society (although we can still argue that even then, citizens who are deemed a part of marginalized populations are still regarded as second class citizens). In the

same way, literature has also been a subject-maker for those who have been excluded. Citing Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, one of the early functions of the novel during its emergence was to fashion the human and what it meant to be human—however, this human was exclusively modeled after white man. Further, Sylvia Wynter's "The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism," states that "the epistemological shift of Renaissance humanism invented secular man, an achievement that was inherently flawed, since the human was invented on the basis of one 'type'—that of Western bourgeois man" (25). In this sense, in another article by Wynter, "Unsettling Coloniality," she expresses that the "problem with previous humanisms is in part that they were only 'partial humanisms,' 'ethnohumanisms,' constructed on the premise that Western bourgeois man was *the* human and incapable of giving us a 'history of the human'" (313). The challenging of this narrative shifts the fulcrum of the human from the white bourgeois man to the decolonial human produced not only by Black, Indigenous, and other writers of color, but also by other marginalized groups such as the undocumented population. Thus reading the works of Wynter, Ngai, Lee, Kang, and Lowe is important alongside the novels that I have chosen because of our need of a different lens to examine what it means to be human—and more specifically what it means to be an undocumented human and woman. Ngai and Lee give us the background of Asian American undocumented immigrants being at once, desirable, but legally, an impossible subject "who cannot be" (Ngai 5); Kang examines this through another microscopic lens that focuses on the undocumented Asian [American] womxn; Lowe interrogates what belonging and citizenship means through the eruption of culture produced by the marginalized Asian American immigrant; and Wynter begins the suggestion of looking at the human and human experience beyond the white bourgeois man, so that the lingering traces of that subject

can be unraveled from the present definition of the human, and consequently citizenship and belonging.

In the novels, *Mulberry & Peach* and *The Leavers*, the femxle undocumented immigrant protagonists attempt to navigate themselves within the ostracizing socio-political terrain of the United States, alongside the equally oppressive global patriarchy. The womxn, Mulberry/Peach and Peilan/Polly are triply excluded on the basis of their race, gender, and more importantly, citizenship status. Despite the fact that the end of these novels point to the protagonists' powerlessness to belong within the confines of the nation state, it is not so much a failure that can be imposed upon them, but rather, a critique of the failures of the U.S. system—a system that functions and prospers through perpetual exclusion.

It is important to note as well the doubles that exist within the characters themselves. Although it may appear that the doubles are a sign of assimilated identities in an attempt to belong to the nation-state, the doubles are more of a literary device to portray supranational belonging; in other words, the doubles more likely hint at DuBois's idea of double consciousness and Said's notion of contrapuntal identities—the ways in which our marginalized and colonized identities, multiple and divided, point not necessarily to our prescribed exclusion, but rather our belonging to nowhere, and thus, everywhere at the same time.

Thus, the next two chapters will investigate citizenship and belonging through the undocumented immigrant figure within the Asian American population, and specifically, through the undocumented Asian American womxn. Chapter One focuses on Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach*, and the ways in which transnational patriarchies and exclusion make belonging almost impossible for undocumented Asian American womxn. Then, Chapter Two discusses

Lisa Ko's *The Leavers* and how citizenship, belonging, and the border is blurred to trouble the dominant anti-immigrant narratives and stigmas of the nation. Furthermore, the fact that these two novels exist in different eras of American exclusion, speak not only to the question of borders and belonging through time, but also the effects of exclusion to the immigrant psyche and mental health of the femxle undocumented immigrant figure.

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Chapter 1

Life within Transnational patriarchies and Exclusion: Juxtaposing the Undocumented Femxle Body and carceral surveillance

"Whatever happens to the nation, it is always the female body that suffers most."
-Lydia Liu, "The Female Body & Nationalist Discourse"

"I am a stranger wherever I go."
-Peach, *Mulberry and Peach*

Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach* follows the journey of a refugee womxn from China turned undocumented immigrant, traversing across the United States during the late 1960s up until 1970, when the protagonist survives a car crash, escapes from Mercy Hospital, and wanders away with two split personalites: Mulberry and Peach. However, the car crash itself is not the climactic moment as the novel is told in non-linear fashion, beginning with Peach having a conversation with a white male immigration officer who has been investigating Mulberry and consequently denies the schizophrenic existence of Peach. Peach tells the INS agent that Mulberry is now dead, but he can only ask her about Mulberry if he accepts that Mulberry is in fact not living. And so begins the chase between Peach and "the Man from the Immigration Service" as he is called, where the ever elusive Peach sends letters to the officer from different parts of the country to offer clues about Mulberry's life before the United States and after her exile. The novel is thus divided into four parts, each beginning with Peach's letters. Each letter is followed by fragmented entries from Mulberry's diary which narrates her perilous journey beginning with the Japanese invasion of China in 1945; followed by the Chinese Civil

War—specifically during the Communist blockade of Beijing between the years of 1948 through 1949; then Mulberry's escape to Taiwan around 1957 to 1959, where she suffers under the Nationalist regime, hiding out in an attic; and finally, Mulberry's life in the U.S. as the INS agent surveilles and interrogates her undocumented status from the late 1960s until 1970. Accordingly, this chapter will argue that both the dual oppressions of patriarchal hegemony and socio-political exclusion that exist within a transnational scale forbid the undocumented Asian American womxn to fully belong in any society, as the undocumented femxle body experiences continued surveillance and subordination.

But first, it is important to go over particular hxstories. With the telling of controversial politics such as these, it is no wonder that the novel had undergone a "'tortuous' publication history" (FitzGerald 43). *Mulberry and Peach* first appeared in serialization in Taiwan during the early 1970s but had been forced to stop production midstream due to its pronounced criticism of the Nationalist regime, along with the femxle protagonist's explicit sexual relationships and encounters throughout the novel that were deemed too "pornographic" (Wong 224). *Mulberry and Peach* only found its way to full publication in Hong-Kong during 1976, but the novel continued to be banned in China. It resurfaced in 1980, after China and its relations with the Western world started to ease (FitzGerald 43). However, a significant chunk of the text was removed with the approval of Nieh—who wanted the novel out one way or another. It was not until 1988—after the death of Chiang Kai-shek's son and successor, Chiang Ching-kuo, that the ban on *Mulberry and Peach* was lifted[6] (Wong 224). Before that happened, the novel was

[6] It is also important to note that the post 1965 open-door policy allowed the United States to create influence in Taiwan with hopes of establishing a "foundation [for] future capitalist investments, political control, and cultural hegemony in Asia" (Cho 161). Thus Taiwan was largely infused with narratives of the "American Dream" which "was propagated through English language magazines, textbooks, radio programs, and Hollywood movies" (Cho 161). Moreover, the United States wanted to deliberately hold influence in Taiwan in order to "maintain its control

published in the United States through the New World Press (1981) and The Feminist Press (1986) but was largely incomplete since the translation was modeled after the abridged version of the Chinese book (FitzGerald 43). Even so, the novel was a success in the U.S., as the nation became more interested in non-Western, feminist cultural productions and "in literatures of discplacement and border-crossing" (Cheung 50). In 1998, the the full version of the text was finally published in the U.S. via The Feminist Press at CUNY.

Although the publication hxstory of this text is not the main scope of this chapter, it is important to discuss as the resurrection of texts seems to be a recurring theme in Asian American literature. We can take, for example, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* and John Okada's *No-No Boy,* which were both rediscovered and republished after a new consciousness transpired as an aftermath of the Civil Rights movement and the Third World Liberation strikes in the late 1960s. Through an entirely different context, the 1980s saw an immensely profitable business of human smuggling, especially concentrated in China, as many tried to escape the nation as refugees and gain asylum in the United States (Zhao 25-26). This may be a probable reason that the American public developed a growing fascination with themes of displacement and border-crossing during the late 1980s (Cheung 50). The Immigration Reform and Control Act was also passed by Congress in 1986, which allowed most undocumented immigrants a path to naturalization. In 1998, when *Mulberry and Peach* reemerged through The Feminist Press in the U.S., Bill Clinton had recently signed an immigration reform where immigration detention and deportation resulted in one of the most "fastest-growing and profitable sectors" for the United States (Reddy 72-73). Under the narrative of "felonization," immigrant detention centers had

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over Taiwan's strategic location in Southeast Asia [as well as] keep Communist China and the former Soviet Union in check" (Cho 162).

grown to a massive scale, along with the deportation of undocumented immigrants.

What then can we make with the hxstorical context that *Mulberry and Peach* was published and republished within? For literary scholar Saul-ling C. Wong, the "brief publication history shows [that] *Mulberry and Peach* is not a single book but an unstable textual complex that traverses multiple national, political, linguistic, and cultural borders. Each component of this textual complex, each episode in its reception, says something about the historical and cultural forces that have shaped this work" (225). Indeed, the subversiveness of the novel extends its critique of not only the U.S. carceral state but also the Nationalist regime of China which both continue to subordinate and police the lives of womxn through patriarchal hegemony. Moreover, the continuous reemergence of *Mulberry and Peach* is reminiscent of the hxstorical patterns that mirror the inclusion, exclusion of Asian Americans in the United States, as well as Asian America's simultaneous (in)visibility; it can be noted that the novel reappears when there is an influx of Asian immigrants coming into the United States, which is inevitably adjoined with the Asian question that the U.S. has asked itself numerous times before for almost three centuries beginning in St. Malo where the first Filipinxs settled. The answer is more or less the same: to exclude. In this sense, the novel's reemergence during times of questioning welcome and outright deportation is a symbolic stance against this often violent exclusion.

Although the actual reasons behind the several republications of *Mulberry and Peach* in the U.S. is not outwardly stated, we can assume that it perhaps embodies a feminist standpoint, as Cheung notes that the literary audience in the U.S became more interested in feminist productions outside of American literature. What remains absent and slips from the forefront, however, is the undocumented immigrant experience for the Asian American population, as

previous scholars have either briefly noted the fact, or have elided the experience altogether. The focus is thus on the marginalized and oppressed Asian American womxn subject, but not so much the *undocumented* Asiam American womxn. Now more than ever, amid escalating ICE detentions, deportations, and family separations all under the Trump administration (yet began long ago) it is important to talk about the continued marginalization and invisibility of undocumented Asian Americans and specifically, the undocumented Asian American womxn.

Although written more than four decades ago, *Mulberry and Peach* could have easily been published today, addressing topics such as "physical and cultural displacement, border crossing and identity formation, state control (whether feudal, totalitarian or capitalist) of the individual, inscription of the female body with the ideologies of patriarchy and nation, and madness as a form of spiritual transcendence in a world gone mad" (Wong 209). In this sense, the novel can be understood in several ways and although it is easy to fall into the trap of reading the Mulberry and Peach schism as emblematic of the duality or multiplicity that often results from immigrating to a new country, the novel transcends this particular immigrant narrative and can be read as an allegory of multiple political meanings.

Scholars such as Monica Chui have argued that "*Mulberry and Peach* is an allegory of how schizophrenic geopolitical divisions and internal, national conflicts often become embodied by immigrants, the psychosomatic consequences of national border crossing" (20); through this vein, "Nieh allegorizes political irreconciliation in Mulberry's doubled psyche, [where] Mulberry embodies ongoing, political chaos over self-, other-, and national- representation" (Chiu 24). Further, Jean Amato asserts that beyond East and West divisions, "Nieh creates two slippery, trickster-like narrators who slide in and out of constraining labels and fixed locatable positions"

(37). Amato also posits that the Mulberry and Peach schism actually symbolizes the ever-changing personalities that result from non-belonging, as well as the enforcement of stereotypes that one is supposed to fill or perform:

> The protagonist's continual movement between nation spaces, each imposing its own hegemonic insider/outsider parameters on the self, can naturally result in multiple subjectivities in the subject. Nieh allegorizes this push and pull with a split personality, not by dividing one immigrant subject into two distinct Eastern and Western dissociated personalities, trapped in a permanent chasm, but by placing her in a state of perpetual resignification. (Amato 37)

Drawing from both Chui and Amato, I extend the argument by adding that both the dual oppressions of patriarchal hegemony and socio-political exclusion that exist within a transnational scale forbid the undocumented Asian American womxn to fully belong in any society, as the undocumented femxle body experiences continued surveillance and subordination across international borders.

This surveillance and subordination of the undocumented femxle Asian American body in particular roots back to the first exclusionary laws in the United States. One could take the landmark legislation that is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 as an example, which not only barred immigration based on race, but also prohibited the Chinese from owning property, and more importantly, declared them ineligible for citizenship. However, it is important to remember that even before the Chinese Exclusion Act, there is the often overshadowed Page Act of 1875 which was *the* first exclusionary immigration law that restricted peoples based not only on race but also gender; through this fact, we can see that the first community that the United States tried to ostracize and exclude by immigration is indeed the Chinese womxn, the Asian womxn.

In *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women*, Laura Hyun Yi Kang

situates this exclusion through subordination and surveillance of Chinese womxn during the mid-19th century. Kang cites a post-Gold Rush issue (dated 1852) of the *Daily Alta California*, which reports close observation of Asian womxn "'walking through the streets with as much delicacy as a turkey treading on hot ashes'" (the *Daily Alta California* qtd. in Kang 117). This "animalizing metaphor" allows us to see that from the earliest times, Chinese womxn in America were not only scrutinized, but Othered, made to see as different, and for the most part, portrayed as nonhuman (Kang 117). Furthermore, most if not all Chinese womxn who came to the United States were assumed to be prostitutes: "Such eroticized gazing toward and disgusted turning away would soon reach virulent heights as all Chinese women in the United States were seen as (probable) prostitutes needing to be expelled and kept out" (Kang 118). These assumptions quickly led to the notion that sooner or later, the American population would be put in a dire risk of public health (Kang 123). Kang notes that "the vociferous sexual and moral panic around Chinese prostitution fortified xenophobic calls to ban all Chinese immigration" (126). Thus in 1875, the Page Act was passed, marking "the end of open borders" and the beginning of tyrannical surveillance of migrant border-crossing. The Page Law "was implemented largely against Chinese women" and "put into place a dense transnational network of surveillance, judgment, and documentation, which would later be applied to monitor and control other Chinese migrants destined for the United States" through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Kang 122). Indeed, it was the Chinese who were the first undocumented (im)migrants, making their way through an intricate and transnational smuggling network to cross the border from Mexico (Romero 31-32).

As always, class was a huge factor that enabled certain Chinese migrants to enter the

United States after the exclusionary legislations were passed; these migrants were mostly merchants, teachers, students, travelers, and diplomats (Kang 126). Thus, many Chinese womxn who either wanted to remain in America or enter the United States had to prove that they were not prostitutes or laborers.[7] More importantly, Chinese womxn were interrogated by white male commissioners, hxstorically symbolizing the surveilling and subordinating relationship between the white male and the Asian (American) femxle. Kang furthermore posits that "a tension is set up...between the immigrant woman's obligation to show her 'desire' for entry and the [white male] commissioner's overriding 'ability' to read and to 'describe' her beyond possibly false claims" (Kang 121). Moreover, the ever-shifting Chinese or Asian womxn public image made it much more difficult for Chinese and Asian womxn to fit into the desired national narrative. In one moment, the Asian womxn can go from a "cloistered spectacle" (Madame Butterfly and the like), to a "public obscenity," to an extreme "penetrating contagion" (Kang 123).

In the novel, the interactions between Mulberry/Peach and the immigration officer mirrors this hierarchical relationship. The opening of the novel situates the INS agent and Peach with nothing but the border of her doorway separating them: "the Immigrant agent is standing in her doorway. He is dressed in a dark suit with a black and gray striped tie. He wears sunglasses, although it's an overcast day. The dark lenses disguise the only distinguishing part of his face: eyebrows, eyes, the bridge of his nose. Only the anonymous parts are visible: bald head, sharp chin, high forehead, beak nose, and pencil-thin mustache" (Nieh 3). In this dynamic, the immigration officer performs his expected position of power. Not only is he formidably dressed

[7] Sucheng Chan notes that under the Exclusion Act—which applied deportation proceedings for migrants who were suspected to have entered the U.S. "illegally,"—"immigration officials and judges who wished to deport prostitutes got rid of women by classifying them as manual laborers" (Chan qtd. in Kang 127).

in a dark suit, but he is also cryptic, with his facial expressions hidden from Peach. In this sense, he holds a silent but pervasive power over her; he can see through Peach, but Peach cannot do the same. Chiu also notes that the agent's anonymity and uniform (or uniformity), "does not distinguish between one agent or another, melding separate offices into a single institution [and] ultimately patriarchy through the sartorial" (31-32). The fact that "the agent himself...remains unnamed except for his general title: 'the man from the immigration service'" attests to the "faceless multitude of immigration services" (Chiu 31-32).

Furthermore, the INS officer is able to enter Peach's home without much consent, whereas for Peach, there is no border to pass as the agent basically stands in as what Amato implies, "the symbolic gatekeeper of cultural belonging" (38); he is "the modern institutionalized threat" (Nieh 11). Indeed, "the novel magnifies the degree of modern state surveillance of the private realm, especially for minority women, in a fantastic narration of the protagonist's alien residence application process in the United States (Amato 179). Given that the reason for his visit *is* to investigate Mulberry's application for legal permanent residency, makes the encounter much more grave and familiar; just as Kang notes how it was the white male commissioner's task to determine whether or not Asian womxn were able to enter the United States, it is the white male INS agent who will decide whether or not Mulberry/Peach will remain in America or if she will be deported. It is important to also note that the figure of power and surveillance is uniform, yet anonymous at the same time, and is thus able to easily mark those who diversify from the norm. Nonetheless, "these arbitrary and contradictory formulations, says Yamamoto, '[result] in the Asian American woman as an invisible subject who is nevertheless highly visible as a racially marked object'" (Yamamoto qtd. in Chiu 32).

Cunningly performing her part in the national narrative, Peach, on the other hand, wears nothing but a button-up shirt. She acts seductively towards the immigration officer, unbuttoning her shirt and letting the wind blow her blouse (Nieh 6-7). For Chiu, Peach's act of exposure "expresses a brazen, masculine quality that defies her feminine designation (as Asian and thus obedient and passive) at the same time that her naked female body plays into the notion of the exotic, sexual, feminine Asian..." (32-33). Playing two sides of her designated narrative simultaneously, as opposed to separately, effectively confounds the agent. Hence, he tries to contain Peach, closing the windows so that she could stop her tricks, to which she replies: "'Mr Dark, please don't close the window. Wind should blow, water should flow. You can't stop it,'" (Nieh 6) suggesting perhaps the idea of an open border, but also conveying that regardless of scrutinized border control, people will keep coming into the nation to escape the effects of globalization that was created by the United States and other colonial powers in the first place.

It is also through Peach's deliberate elusiveness and mobility that she is able to escape the interrogation. This is initially shown through her ambiguous and circling answers around Mulberry. She informs the INS agent that she is not Mulberry and that Mulberry is dead—a statement that he perceives as absurd. Her other state of elusiveness can be seen in her home where there is little furniture, suggesting Mulberry/Peach's constant mobility across the nation; Peach tells the officer: "'furniture gets in my way. I like it like this,' mov[ing] aside heaps of clothing, boxes, bottles, newspapers, paints, and pieces of paper" (Nieh 4). This combined with her deliberate seduction of the immigration officer demobilizes the agent's power, flipping their hierarchical relationship. As he is getting no information out of Peach, the officer is forced to leave: "Peach is standing by the window, her blouse half-open, her breasts full. She looks out

the window and smiles faintly. Her belly is slightly swollen. The agent from the Immigration Service picks up his briefcase and walks out, without saying goodbye" (Nieh 7).

After this interaction, the INS agent is forced to communicate with Peach only through letters, as she has run away across the Midwest. Daringly, Peach sends the immigration officer letters to give him information about Mulberry and taunts him along the way:

> Dear sir: I'm wandering around these places shown on the map. If you want to chase me, come on. Anyway, I'm not Mulberry. Sometimes I hitchhike. Sometimes I take a bus. As soon as I get somewhere, I leave. I don't have any particular destination. I'm always on the road...You said you wanted me to tell you about Mulberry. Today I'm sending you her diary. I'll be sending you more material about her, piece by piece. Let me tell you, I know every detail of her life. I know her thoughts, feelings, illusions, dreams, and memories. I even know things she didn't know or remember. We can work together on this. But you'll have to remember one thing: I am not Mulberry. She is afraid of you. But I'm not. As long as you don't call me by a dead woman's name, I can give you a lot of information about her. (Nieh 11-14)

Some scholars have also noted that the map that Peach gives to the agent is a challenge to the imperial system that enforces control and subjectification: "While the map in Peach's letter evokes the imperialist efforts to discipline imperial subjects and resonates with the officer's narcissistic demand to 'fixate' Peach as Mulberry (that is, an 'authentic' illegal alien), Mulberry/ Peach's rendition of the map and her account of her journey frustrate such efforts and turn the demand on its head through her un/mapping of the imperial map" (Cho 169). Additionally, the maps show an exaggerated delineation of routes, highways, rivers, and the like; thus, the excessive lines within the map diminish or undermine the actual state borders and disrupt the actual purpose of locating Peach (Cho 169). In this way, giving the borders and systems of control less power.

Furthermore, Mulberry's refashioning herself as Peach and refusal to perform the

officer's wishes is, in a way, another sort of remapping against Orientalized discourse. Peach tells the officer:

> You are wrong. Mulberry is Mulberry and Peach is Peach. They're not the same at all. Their thoughts, manners, interests, and even the way they look are completely different. Mulberry, for instance, was afraid of blood, animals, flashing lights. I'm not afraid of those things. Mulberry shut herself up at home, sighing and carrying on. I go everywhere, looking for thrills. Snow, rain, thunder, birds, animals, I love them all. Sometimes Mulberry wanted to die, sometimes she wanted to live. In the end she gave up. I'd never do that. Mulberry was full of illusions; I don't have any. People and things I can't see don't exist as far as I'm concerned. Even if the sky fell or the world turned upside down, I still wouldn't give up. (Nieh 6)

Abiding to East/West binaries, Mulberry may at first resemble the "submissive," "backward," and "irrational" East, whereas Peach might mirror the "aggressive," "rational," and "progressive" West. However, in a subsequent letter, Peach informs the officer that she participated in a vigil/protest for soldiers killed in Vietnam, where the protestors wore tags that bore the name of a dead soldier. Peach expresses that she wore a tag for the dead Mulberry (Nieh 13). This could be read to mean that Mulberry, similar to the American soldiers, is unable to survive in the imperial state, and that it is Peach who must carry on (Cho 162). In this case, the part of Mulberry that is "afraid" or "passive" or "fatalistic" also dies. At the same time, it is important to note that regardless, the Mulberry/Peach binary should not be simply read as an East/West counterpart, especially because Mulberry's first clues of schizophrenic tendencies happens when she is in Taiwan: "Her shattered past, her guilt, and life in the attic begin to wear away at her sanity. She begins to show signs of schizophrenia" (Nieh 116). In this sense, it is not Mulberry's move to America that she experiences a division in her identity. Rather, it occurs as a result of oppressive hegemonic forces, such as the Nationalist and patriarchal regime that forces her exile

and eventual hideout in an attic in Taiwan. Her schizophrenic tendencies only worsen as she immigrates to the U.S. and is still, in one way or another, confined to limited and gendered spaces as an undocumented immigrant, as though she is just transferred from one subordinating hegemonic power to another.

In addition, Amato also warns against reading the Mulberry/Peach split as "essentializing East/West dichotomies that reinscribe the Third World female immigrant as a marginalized victim of hyphenated subjectivities [where] Mulberry could be misinterpreted as a repressed and traditional Third World subject [and] Peach might then be misread as the part of the self that breaks out of the shackles of a Third World tradition to become an embodiment of a Western feminine autonomous self or agency in the making" (Amato 46). In other words, it is necessary to consider Mulberry/Peach's situation as influenced by transnational hegemonic powers, such as colonialism, patriarchy, socio-political exclusion, and imperialism, rather than assigning them fixed and separate entities shaped by the binaries of a constructed East/West paradigm. Looking at it from a myopic perspective, Amato suggests, offers up "a sense of incompleteness" (46). Moreover, it suggests that to assimilate into Western ideals is the only way to survive, when in fact, Peach lives a very precarious life despite the promises of Western freedom. Chiu notes that "Mulberry befuddles those who believe that all immigrants yearn for United States shores. Her original destination is not the United States but Taiwan. Her eventual arrival on United States soil is marked neither by a rejection nor by an embrace of her Chinese culture...nor does she desire belonging to a United States milieu. Rather, she wanders haphazardly away from the INS and toward nothing in particular..." (29). Indeed, it is Peach herself who utters "I am a stranger wherever I go," (Nieh 6) perhaps implying that as an undocumented Asian American womxn in

the United States *and* a femxle Chinese exile, there is no nation or society in which she can truly belong or call home.

Not even the immigration officer knows where to place Mulberry/Peach. In one of his earlier interrogations with Mulberry, he tells her that "'What we want to investigate isn't your state of mind, your emotions, or your motivations. I'll say it again: what we want to investigate is your behavior'" (Nieh 165). This statement gives the implication that for an (undocumented) immigrant to belong in the United States, they must comply with a certain type of disciplined performance that the rest of the interrogation highlights. Throughout, the INS agent asks Mulberry whether she or a member of her family was ever or is currently affiliated with the Communist party; whether or not they are Leftists; and whether or not she is an adulteress (Nieh 164-165). By asking these questions, the immigration officer simultaneously desires to outcast and gender Mulberry as an unpatriotic deviant, but also demands that she be loyal, obedient, and pure to the United States. It also implies that U.S. citizenship requires some sort of assimilation into the decrees of American society. Unable to make a decision, the INS agent tells Mulberry that another interrogation would be necessary:

> He says he still must continue investigating my case if they decide I am an undesirable alien they must deport me, where do I want to go? I say I don't know. He says he doesn't know what's the matter with Chinese all the Chinese people he's investigated answer the same way, the Chinese are foreigners who haven't any place to be deported to, this is a difficulty he's never encountered in investigating other aliens. I asked when they will decide he says he doesn't know. He tells me to wait wait wait wait. (Nieh 182)

For Amato, this unknown for both Mulberry/Peach and the immigration officer derives from a similarly dichotomized China: "With two Chinas, a fixed notion of homeland and nation is always elusive. Nieh's protagonist flees the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) and the Republic

of China (Taiwan, the R.O.C.)—two competing nation-states with forceful policies designed to seize control of individual and national self-conception in order to claim Chinese cultural legitimacy" (40). Furthermore, "experiencing double exile from both Taiwan, a country irreversibly altered by legacies of Japanese colonialism, American imperialism, and global capitalism, and mainland China, which was once a Western and Japanese 'hypo-colony,' only to become a U.S. immigrant without permanent residency, Mulberry is placed amidst multiple layers of exile and exclusion, thus making her even more difficult to identify with one essential label" (Amato 40).

Moreover, Mulberry's uncertainty may also perhaps derive from the trauma she develops after escaping numerous political and misogynistic forces. Her journey away from China due to both Japanese and Communist invasion results in pervasive encounters with male violence—whether it be physical or sexual abuse—which continues on in the United States. Indeed her mobility through escaping is paradoxically her confinement: "be it the Chinese nation, the Chinese patriarchal household, or the numerous enclosed spaces where Mulberry/Peach temporarily inhabits, in these various temporary 'homes,' Chinese men's violence against Chinese women intensifies as their masculinity is threatened by competing nationalist and imperialist male powers" (Cho 160). Cho also notes that in *Mulberry and Peach*, "the Chinese woman is relegated to the very bottom of the racialized, gendered power structure and constantly functions as the fetish, through which the Chinese man attempts to reclaim his masculinity" (Cho 191). In this sense, the need for Mulberry/Peach to be continuously mobile is perpetual; the homeland, then, is not desirable but neither is the new, which propagates the same patriarchal confinement. Although Peach taunts the immigration officer through her first letter

about her agency and freedom displayed by her mobility across the United States, it is important to note that the reason for her movement is precisely because she is being hunted down: "Her ostensible mobility, however, is forever haunted by the reality of her forced flight across the United States: the constant threat of the officer's efforts to hunt her down, to mark her as an illegal alien, and deport her" (Cho 164).

Altogether, Mulberry does not fit the "hybrid immigrant subject" nor the assimilated "model minority." Neither is she the immigrant or exile who longs for home. In this sense, she must reinvent herself as Peach to imagine another future, another world that she can call her own: "You're dead, Mulberry. I have come to life. I've been alive all along. But now I have broken free. You don't know me, but I know you. I'm completely different from you. We are temporarily inhabiting the same body. How unfortunate. We often do the opposite things. And if we do the same thing, our reasons are different" (Nieh 182-183). Of course, it is important to remember that Peach is a result of Mulberry's schizophrenia: "Mulberry/Peach's unhappy journey westward is a descent into madness, and the notion of progression implied in the term journey, becomes a devastating form of regression in mental health" (Chiu 21). In this sense, Chiu asks a crucially dire question: "If the nation-state is potentially more insane than its subjects, the novel asks, then is insanity a necessary tool for survival? Or, more simply, is multiple personality a sane answer to insane conditions?" (25). Chiu posits that *Mulberry and Peach* conveys "how nation, women, and traumatized bodies cross national divisions with schizophrenic results" (25). It rings true of what Lydia Liu expresses in her essay "The Female Body & Nationalist Discourse"—that is, "whatever happens to the nation, it is always the female body that suffers most" (55).

The novel ends with another personality that Mulberry/Peach identifies with. This time it is with Nu-Wa, a drowned womxn who "refuses to die" but instead becomes "Princess Bird [who] goes to live on Ring Dove Mountain" (Nieh 207). Everyday, Princess Bird flies back and forth from Ring Dove Mountain to the East Sea, dropping pebbles into the ocean hoping that she can fill it up to create land. Despite the East Sea's mockery, Princess Bird continues to fly back and forth, until this day, trying to fill the ocean. Many scholars read this ending as an allegory of perpetual exile (Cho 187); some read it as liberation and resistance (Liang qtd. In Cho 187); while others read it as a tale that "may symbolically reinscribe the novel's positioning of exile as, not one or the other—Eastern or Western—but a process of becoming something else" (Amato 47-48). Others suggest that it simply implies the incomplete narratives of (im)migrants, one that is also cautionary of the "omnipresent presence of imperial powers that always come back to haunt" (Cho 187).

If the latter is the case, then surely, the novel suggests that perpetual exclusion stems from a transnational citizenship that requires "the explicit corporeal markings of only certain kinds of eligible bodies" (Kang 133). Because Mulberry/Peach could not fit into what Berlant identifies as a citizenship that "involved the possession of a gendered and racialized body," (11) she had to become something else, albeit not human (which is a commentary in itself), wandering back and forth until a new terrain is created that would be welcoming.

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Chapter 2

"The walls were a lie, a trick": Blurring the Lines of U.S. national borders in Lisa Ko's *The Leavers*

"It was that kind of mindfuck: to be too visible and invisible at the same time."
-Deming/Daniel, *The Leavers*

"*The Leavers* was inspired by recent, real life stories of undocumented immigrant women whose US-born children were taken away from them and adopted by American families. It was this missionary-type attitude: we need to save these kids from their own culture and families. The kids are assimilable; the mothers are not."
-Lisa Ko

Lisa Ko's debut novel and Pen/Bellwether prize winning book, *The Leavers*, tells the story of Deming Guo, whose mother, Peilian, or Polly, disappears without a trace—never having returned home from her job at a nail salon. Set in New York and China, the novel is told from both the perspective of Peilan and Deming—who later becomes Daniel Wilkinson, after he is adopted by a white couple, Peter and Kay, through the foster system at the age of 11. Ko tackles several themes in this fictional work that mirror reality: loss, dual identities, departures, narratives of return, citizenship, (non)belonging, and more importantly, the undocumented immigrant experience for Asian American populations.

Ko finds inspiration for this novel that was almost 10 years in the making from a *New York Times* article about an undocumented Chinese womxn from Fuzhou, Xiu Ping Jiang. In an almost mimetic fashion of the fluctuating (in)conspicuousness of undocumented Asian American visibility, typing in Xiu Ping Jiang on the internet leads to about two decade old *New York*

Times articles written by journalist, Nina Bernstein, dated four months apart—the same articles that inspired Ko's writing of the novel. Both articles report on the arrest of Xiu Ping Jiang, an undocumented immigrant from China who fled to the United States in 1995 after being forcibly sterilized at the age of 20 because of the nation's one child policy. The first article, "Mentally Ill and in Immigration Limbo" (May 2009) recounts Xiu Ping Jiang's life as a garment factory worker and waitress in New York City, as well as her imprisonment in Glades County Immigration jail in 2007, which added to her already deteriorating mental health. The second article, "Immigrant Finds Path Out of Maze of Detention," (Sept 2009) updates the audience on Xiu Ping Jiang's successful bail (thanks to her two sisters who happen to be U.S. citizens and fought for her release) and life after her imprisonment, coping with mental illness and suicidal attempts.

Both articles also link Xiu Ping Jiang to the Vietnamese mass-shooter, Jiverly Wong, who opened fire in an immigration service center in Binghamton, New York, killing 13 people in 2009. Jiverly Wong's wife bore the same name as Xiu Ping Jiang, which led *New York Times* reporter, Bernstein, to come across the undocumented immigrant stuck in immigration limbo, a term that Bernstein defines as the state in which a prison "system has no rules for determining mental competency and no obligation to provide anyone with legal representation" ("Mentally Ill"). Bernstein also comments that "had she been the Xiu Ping Jiang linked to a mass killer, her story would have made instant news around the world. Instead, she is a kind of Internet-era doppelganger, lost in one of the dark places of immigration law, where the only life at stake may be her own" ("Mentally Ill"). Another article that surfaced after the Google search is by Thomas Francis, titled "A Prisoner in South Florida Rescued From Anonymity, If Nothing Else."

Francis's article echoes a similar sentiment, stating that without the news of Jiverly Wong's mass shooting, Xiu Ping Jiang "would have never been a newspaper name" and furthermore, would have been "thrown aside" in this "24-hour-news- cycle-driven-era."

Much of what was said in these statements can be thoroughly examined: what does it mean and what does it take to be visible—or invisible—as an undocumented Asian American womxn in the United States? What is being recognized (violence) and what is not (mental illness and undocumented immigration)? Why must Asian Americans be linked to violence or news-worthy sensationalism in order to be seen? What does this say about the (white) national gaze—or the U.S national media that chooses what is deserving to be worldwide news or what is simply "thrown aside"? More importantly, what does it say about the subject in observation?

Perhaps the subject is not only rescued from anonymity, as Francis suggests, but also from the myth of the model minority, as it becomes shattered and instead illuminates the often invisibilized undocumented immigrant figure, suffering from socioeconomic disparity, deteriorating mental health, systematic incarceration in detention camps, and family separation; it is important to note that Xiu Ping Jiang was also separated from her two sons who had been residing in China with their grandmother, which led to the spiraling decrease of Jiang's mental stability. And what of absent anonymity if once again, a decade later, Xiu Ping Jiang, is no longer a recognizable household name, if it ever was, yet still returns in a form of fiction?

In *The Leavers*, Lisa Ko reimagines Xiu Ping Jiang's story and offers an alternative future of what could have been. Ko writes in her blog titled "Why I Wrote T*he Leavers*" that she is "partial to obsessiveness, and obsessiveness, if the timing is right, can be a goldmine for writers." Thus begins her almost decade long writing of the critically acclaimed novel. In what

may be proof to the ways in which we are somehow all connected, Ko mentions in an interview that she was initially exposed to Xiu Ping Jiang's story through Bernstein's article and was struck with insatiable "questions around the narratives of assimilation and family separation," along with the "lack of context about migration" in the article. Accompanied by the obsession to dig beyond what was stated, Ko expanded her novel to discuss the flaws of immigration detention prisons that often function above the law as private corporations. She writes:

> I learned about so many other immigrant women whose US born children were being taken away from them – American courts were terminating their parental rights and granting custody of the kids to be adopted by American couples. Meanwhile, the women were being deported or imprisoned in one of the many underground immigration detention prisons around the country. Outsourced to private prison corporations and functioning, in many ways, as above the law, these prisons jailed hundreds of thousands of people, including children, but no one I spoke to seemed to even know about them. (Ko)

Through this vein, Ko also tackles the question of assimilability and problematizes the age-old "missionary-type attitude [that insinuates saving] these kids from their own culture and families." In other words, claiming that "the kids are assimilable [but] the mothers are not" (Ko 341).

In a way, just as Xiu Ping Jiang becomes an Internet-era doppelganger to what could have been an international news sensation, Polly Guo, becomes the fictional doppelganger to Xui Ping Jiang, in a novel that in itself holds many other doppelgangers or doubles within the story. Peilan Guo (who is also known as Polly), one of the two protagonists in *The Leavers,* mirrors Xiu Ping Jiang's life as she is an undocumented Chinese immigrant who comes to New York to seek a better life. More significantly, Polly is also arrested by ICE officials during an immigration raid at her work in a nail salon in the Bronx, and similarly sentenced to deportation

back to Fuzhou, China. Unlike Xiu Ping Jiang's sons, however, Polly's only son, Deming, who is later known as Daniel Wilkinson, is born in the United States, but is also adopted by white parents through the foster system after Polly's detainment in an immigration jail.

In this chapter, I will argue that Lisa Ko's *The Leavers* challenges the notion of model minority, assimilation, citizenship, belonging, and the borders of the U.S. nation state through the protagonists Polly/Peilan and Deming/Daniel. Polly/Peilan embodies the undocumented immigrant mother who is deemed unassimilable in the U.S. national narrative; she embodies the stories that are "thrown aside" unworthy of national attention, yet curiously reemerge in the periphery, shadows, and cultural memory of the United States' national borders. Deming/Daniel, on the other hand, embodies the child that is deemed worthy of saving; he is the Asian American who is forcibly molded into the model minority narrative even if the mould does not fit. Through this vein, both Peilan/Polly and Deming/Daniel trouble not only the national gaze, but also the narratives of belonging for every citizen and immigrant that America claims.

"Another Boy, Another Planet": Blurring the Model Minority Myth

From the start Deming Guo is the polar opposite of the model minority figure. As an eleven year old, Deming gets into physical fights at school or gets detention for tripping deserving bullies or not doing his school assignments. It is not academic life that Deming finds refuge in. On the contrary, Deming prefers listening to sounds, which complements his chromesthesia: the sounds of the television that were always reminiscent of home, the harmoniously discordant and multilingual sounds of the city of Bronx, and most especially, the smooth, reverberating sounds of the electric guitar that he learns to play and grows a passion for.

It is also at the age of eleven that Deming is abruptly forced to become Daniel

Wilkinson—"another boy from another planet." After being adopted by Peter and Kay subsequent to his mother Polly's sudden and mysterious disappearance, his foster parents believe his life "would be easier with an American name" (49). However, despite this name change and being born in the United States, Daniel was still met with foreignness and racial bigotry—from school teachers who double-checked his name when calling roll (58) to students who referred to him as "the #2 special" (58). Even his adoptive parents who forced him to only speak English, "concerned that Deming wouldn't be fluent enough for school, as if the English he spoke was tainted," (49) becomes problematic. Although well-meaning, Peter and Kay's almost clueless approach to parenting a child outside a culture of their own inadvertently causes more damage than good to Deming/Daniel's well-being.

Sort of forced to embody not only the identity of Daniel Wilkinson at the age of eleven, but also the assimilating expectations behind the name—coupled with the lingering ache of what he thinks is his mother's deliberate abandonment—Deming/Daniel seems to rest on an ambiguous and insatiated identity for the most part of the novel. At one moment, Deming/Daniel wonders "if he could just talk to his mother in person, maybe he could figure out who he should be," (Ko 48) as though the separation from his mother also detaches him from his cultural identity. In another moment, a much older Deming/Daniel completely understands that even though he is adopted into a white family, it does not necessarily mean acceptance into white culture or society, and even the family itself: "He was the last of the Wilkinsons, the only grandchild...the way Peter spoke about it, being the last of the line was a great responsibility; he had to do something special to live up to Jacob Wilkinson's legacy. This man he looked nothing like, whom if he had been alive, would probably never accept Daniel as a true Wilkinson" (Ko

242). At other occasions throughout the novel, he interrogates his dichotomized identities: "While Deming was growing up in Chinatown and the Bronx, was Daniel hibernating, asleep in Planet Ridgeborough? Or had they grown up together, only parting ways after the city? Daniel had lain dormant in Deming until adolescence, and now Deming was a hairball tumor jammed deep in Daniel's gut. Or Deming had never left Rutgers Street; he'd been here all along" (Ko 96). Important to note here is Ko's fascinating employment of wordplay for 'planet,' alluding to 'alienhood' or Deming/Daniel's sense of alienation. The feeling, of course, not only starts when he begins his new life in Ridgeborough, but was already happening while in the Bronx and Chinatown, where he had been "a city kid who had memorized the subway system by the 4th grade [yet] still felt like he didn't belong" (Ko 16). Thus, this insinuates that belonging for most Asian Americans, even if citizens, is still quite elusive.

Subscribing to what W.E.B. DuBois coined as "double consciousness," in reference to the African American experience, Deming/Daniel, like other racialized people of color, develops within himself, dueling identities amid a racializing nation-state. In other words, Daniel becomes the internalized identity that is seen from the outside world that is more often than not read white—the identity that is internalized but also externalized since Daniel simultaneously becomes the manipulated self that is "seen through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 351). As a result, Deming/Daniel becomes proficient "at juggling selves": Deming would "think himself into Daniel, a slideshow perpetually alternative between the same two slides" (Ko 16). Moreover, he becomes "malleable, everyone and no one, a collector of moods, a careful observer of the right thing to say...fun or serious or whatever was more strategic; whoever you wanted him to be" (Ko 16). And, despite the observation that these shapeshifting instances might suggest

Deming/Daniel's act of mimicking the model minority figure who is "whoever you wanted him to be," it also posits that Deming/Daniel is performing a personality that is not really himself. The real him, on the contrary, "remained stubbornly out there like a fat cruise ship on the horizon, visible but out of reach, and whenever he got closer it drifted farther away. He was forever waiting to get past that secret entrance" (Ko 16). Whether the secret entrance alludes to social acceptance or his reconciled selves, we are left to interpret on our own.

Aside from his mother's sudden disappearance that Deming/Daniel equates with abandonment, his need for social acceptance is also largely contributed from his life in Ridgeborough as the only Asian student among whites, which only strengthened Deming's sense of alienation and displacement, not only geographically—being plucked from a big, dynamic city to a small, quiet town—but also culturally and filialy. In Ridgeborough, white kids and white people in general, "paid too much attention to him (at first) and later, would pay no attention to him"—a feeling that Deming describes as a "kind of a mindfuck: to be too visible and invisible at the same time, in the ways it mattered most" (Ko 59). The unwanted and hostile visibility also exhumes up memories of his mother, as Deming longs to reattach himself to something he knows, something familiar: "He shut his eyes and pretended he was in the city with his mother. She looked like him, he looked like her; they looked like the other people they saw on the streets and trains. In the city, he had just been another kid. He had never known how exhausting it was to be conspicuous" (Ko 69).

It is also through Deming's proficiency at "juggling selves" that he is able to keep his past, even if secret, growing inside him, like the benign tumors aforementioned:

> He tried to tuck away the Bronx in scraps and shards. Once he had read in a book, an ancient science textbook...that people could have tumors inside them for years, harmless cysts, and these cysts could grow teeth and hair,

> even fingers. A person could carry this alien being and never know. A monster twin…So many things could be growing inside him. Inside every person. He carried Mama and Leon, Michael and Vivian, the city…A collection of secret tumors. (Ko 51)

Perhaps in the same way that Deming becomes literally adopted, Deming also figuratively adopts Daniel: "Adopt. There was a similar term in Chinese, yet Deming hadn't thought of his time with Peter and Kay to be anything but vaguely temporary...Even the name Daniel seemed like an outfit he would put on for an unspecified period of time, until he returned to his real name and home planet. Where the real home was, however, he was no longer certain" (Ko 80). Although home for Deming/Daniel is ambiguous at this point of the novel, Ko hints at the idea of temporary and permanence not only with people and places we reside in, but ultimately within and outside of the nation state—a notion that is scattered throughout the novel. Deming/Daniel's "home planet," symbolizes the alternative locations—or rather, the elsewheres, or the places that have not yet come to be—that Deming (his real name and self) seeks. Permanence then, in terms of residence within the borders of the United States, becomes something that is not desired, although perhaps because it is something that Deming/Daniel is already privileged to have. Rather, it is the temporary that is chosen, as we see in the rest of the novel: both Deming/Daniel and his mother, Peilan/ Polly, are *leavers*—troubling but also blurring the construct(ion) of national borders within the nation-state.

Furthermore, the novel complicates Daniel/Deming, as well as the model minority figure by constantly leading him back to his addictive habits of alcoholism and excessive gambling, as well as his self-sabotaging ways. Chapter Two of the novel jumps to Daniel's life in college 10 years later, while he is in academic dismissal at Carlough—where, not to mention, his white adoptive parents teach—due to his 1.9 G.P.A. His parents encourage him to follow the

educational path and use their leverage to get Daniel another chance at continuing his undergraduate degree. However, all Daniel wants to do is professionally play music with his rock band, Psychic Hearts, which he co-founded with his best friend, Roland. Yet, even this is contested as he continuously ruins the band's gigs, wanting to play music his own way, and wanting to be admired just as Roland is: as a frontman. His mother's "abandonment," along with society's conceptions of his "Otherness" account for his insecurities and internal chaos about his true identity: "If only he had the right clothes, knew the right references, he would finally become the person he was meant to be...deserving of love, blameless" (Ko 19). Thus, Daniel's inclination to self-destruction, leave him almost inert and "unable to do anything but pursue this singular impulse toward ruin" (Ko). It is at this moment, after his greatest vice of gambling and accruing thousands in debt reaches its pinnacle, that Deming can do nothing but run away. Not only does this place a critique on the notions of expected productivity and progress in a capitalist state, but Daniel's running away to find his birth mother in Fuzhou also signals his desire of running from his adoptive parents,' as well running from white society's expectations to assimilate and fit the model minority mould. Perhaps in this way, Deming/Daniel's self-destruction mirrors his subconscious rejection of Daniel's expected assimilation to aspire to the model minority narrative.

One particular part of the novel highlights not only these expectations of the model minority narrative, but also the "white man's burden" and civilizing aspect of early U.S. colonialism that has been sewn into the national fabric, and which mainly took the route of education that Ko also examines. Having a conversation about Deming/Daniel's birth mother with his adoptive parents, Kay mentions that she wants to start a scholarship specifically for

femxle Chinese students in honor of Daniel's mother who she assumes is struggling in China after her deportation, in spite of the fact that she is doing significantly well, teaching English for a program called World Top started by her husband, Yong. Deming/Daniel realizes that Peter and Kay have always viewed him in a similar manner—as someone who needed to be improved, assimilated, and essentially, saved: "[Kay] wasn't listening to him. He recalled how she and Peter had insisted on English, his new name, the right education. How better and more hinged on their ideas of success, their plans. Mama, Chinese, the Bronx, Deming: they had never been enough. He shivered, and for a brief moment, he could see himself the way he realized they saw him—as someone who needed to be saved" (Ko 332).

Throughout the novel, Ko assesses the age-old "white man's burden"/"civilizing" the "uncivil"/benevolent assimilation argument. This can be seen in Peter and Kay's almost always over-the-top and try-hard parenting methods, as well as their enforcement of Carlough College in Deming/Daniel's life. In relation to undocumented immigrants, Ko critiques the "who can/cannot be saved" narrative, and most especially the nation's system that allows for these family separations to happen—often deporting the parents, the "criminals," the mothers, but trying to "save" their children. The problematic narrative thus effectively shifts from the "problematic" parents to the actually problematic nation-state. Furthermore, the idea of deportation is also transcended. Oftentimes, deportation from the United States is seen as the end of things for the most part, and although this argument is nuanced in numerous ways, we can see that in the case of Peilan/Polly, deportation does not mean the end.

After Deming/Daniel finds his birth mother in Fuzhou, he learns that she is considerably affluent, married, and teaches English at a program called World Top. Finding his mother also

helps Daniel/Deming reconcile the dueling identities within himself. After discovering the truth about his mother's disappearance—that he was not abandoned at all, but that his mother was imprisoned in an immigration detention camp in Ardsleyville, Texas after a police raid at the nail salon where she worked—Deming/Daniel's anxieties of being enough is alleviated, as he realizes he can finally move on with the understanding that he was never left behind intentionally, but only through systemic political powers that neither he and his mother had control of. Through this, he also becomes aware that despite these factors, both he and his mother had just learned how to survive: "All this time, he'd been waiting for his real life to begin: Once he was accepted by Roland's friends and the band made it. Once he found his mother. Then, things would change. But his life had been happening all along" (Ko 322).

In a similar fashion, Deming/Daniel's sense of belonging undergoes a similar process as he realizes that he does not necessarily have to belong anywhere. Towards the end of the novel he questions "If he couldn't feel at home in China, if he didn't belong in Ridgeborough, then where did that leave him?" (Ko 333). As the novel concludes shortly after, we find Deming/Daniel settling in New York City: "For now, this was where his life would be,"—the "for now" implying that he can always leave again and start over (Ko 335). As opposed to solely being a U.S. citizen, Daniel/Deming becomes a transnational one. In this sense, Daniel/Deming is time and again a *leaver,* blurring the idea of staying within borders and transcending notions of "home"—especially one that is not only racialized but also settler colonial and carceral. Equally significant, we also part with Deming/Daniel as he begins his career as a solo musician who is not enrolled in Carlough, but rather, outside the outlets of education often assigned to model minority narratives. More often than not, Guofang Li asserts that "the myth renders invisible the

'diverse and complex experiences of Asian children' and does not reflect 'the increased evidence of Asian underachievement, dropout, and socio-economic gap'" (Li qtd. in Ty 5). Furthermore, Michael Tayag also argues that 'from a psychosocial perspective, all Asian American students are affected by the 'model minority' stereotype—that is, regardless of whether a student is high-achieving or low achieving, mental health risks like depression and anxiety and social problems occur" (Tayag qtd. in Ty 11), which we can evidently see in Deming/Daniel's character. *The Leavers*, then, is able to portray not only a divergence from this myth, presenting "alternatives to the current definitions of success, which center on professional and economic achievement…" but also "illuminate[s] the precarity in the lives of some members of a group that has been perceived to be in a privileged space" (Ty 136). In this way, Deming/Daniel successfully fails to emblematize the model minority figure and by doing so, debunks the constructed narrative.

"The kids are assimilable [but] the mothers are not:" deconstructing "good" immigrant "bad" immigrant narratives

Just as Deming/Daniel challenges the concept of the model minority, Peilan/Polly deconstructs the Western stereotype of the silent and submissive Asian woman, and is rather self-sufficient and autonomous. Peilan/Polly is introduced in the first few pages of the novel as someone who "despised laziness, softness, people who were weak" (Ko 5). Notably, Peilan's younger days in Minjiang, China, were already accustomed to breaking norms: smoking cigarettes, dropping out of the 8th grade, and moving alone to the commercial city of Fuzhou despite it being considered "improper" (Ko 129). Peilan's desire for autonomy starts early on, working her way into a Fuzhou sweatshop, snipping denim jeans but having bigger dreams to move up to a "better factory, a bigger dormitory, and eventually [her] own apartment" (Ko 128).

Living on her own, she enjoyed her independence like all the other girls around her: "The city was filled with girls like me, girls who swore we'd never go home again" (Ko 128). Not only does Peilan deconstruct conventional gendered narratives, but she also begins to set the standard for the young women in Minjiang, where soon after she had left to work in the garment factories of Fuzhou (working harder "than any boy"), parents began "let[ting] their own daughters go—[*making*] their own daughters go" (Ko 129).

This younger Peilan is inevitably seen through the Polly that we meet in the first few pages of the book: Polly who is "restless" and "unsettled," always bound to go—destabilizing gender constructs by seeking autonomy, independence, and freedom, in spite of the fact that it is not traditionally expected of her (Ko 5). Even news of her sudden pregnancy with her village boyfriend, Haifeng, does not stop her desires to keep moving; on the contrary, it is what impels her to immigrate to America: "I saw myself in a new country, with my own apartment...Xuan said you could live anywhere you wanted to...they wouldn't care about things like pregnancy permits[8] either...I'd go where Haifeng would never go" (Ko 137). This reproduced image of America as a land of not only opportunity but unlimited possibilities and freedom is also first introduced here in Peilan's imaginary. Although America promises fulfilment of dreams, individualism, and liberation, Peilan later learns that this American dream is nothing but fantasy enclosed by the borders of the nation state, which strictly regulate who belongs and who does not, who is able to access its resources and who is not.

Nonetheless Peilan makes her way to America, accompanied by $47,000 of debt to a loan shark and $3,000 to her relatives. She travels from Minjiang to Guangxi, Vietnam to Bangkok,

[8] Pregnancy permits in Fuzhou were patriarchal in manner, since they were exclusive to married couples who were exempt from paying high fees if they decided to get an abortion. Additionally, a womxn from China was only allowed to get a legal abortion if she was married (Ko).

and finally, Amsterdam to Toronto, where she declares herself a refugee and "followed two other women into a box in the back of a truck,[9] which drove [them] to a house in New York" [10]—not to mention that all the while, she was nearly seven months pregnant (Ko 138). And, just as Deming becomes Daniel after moving from the Bronx to Ridgeborough, Peilan becomes Polly after moving to New York: "In New York City, I changed. For one thing, I was no longer Peilan…[I]t was Polly not Peilan, who was doing thirteen-hour shifts in a garment factory, the same work Peilan had done in China except for eight times more money..." (Ko 138).

It is also Polly who gives birth to Deming: "I had run out of choices; I was fucked. I had to have the baby. Or rather, Polly would have to have the baby...Polly, the girl who'd defy odds, the girl who could do anything" (Ko 142). Unlike Deming who has Daniel thrusted upon his life, forcing him to embody this new person as he navigates his life in Ridgebrough, Polly, in an autonomous fashion, becomes like an armor that Peilan puts on in this new country, new city, and new life. Yet even then, it is inevitable to note that Peilan becoming Polly does have a hint of assimilation to it. However, Peilan becoming Polly is not so much just a mode of protection nor a mere desire to become more American. Rather, Peilan seems to embody Polly in order to do away with her past life that reminded her of too many restrictions. Recalling her first days spent in America, Peilan/Polly compares her old life in Fuzhou to her new life in New York:

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[9] Through this imagery, Ko epitomizes modern routes of irregular or undocumented immigrants into the United States and Europe: through ice/refrigerator boxes which often resulted in death (Leong 8).

[10] In *The New Chinse America*, Zhao also notes that "many recent undocumented newcomers first traveled from southern China to South America. From there they were sent to Mexico or Canada through underground channels before crossing U.S. borders…" (160). Those who were able to go through border inspection undetected, usually headed to ethnic enclaves in large, commercial states, like New York or California (Zhao 160). Zhao also adds that "about 80% of the Changle immigrants [in the Fuzhou region] live in the New York area, where Chinatown encompasses more than 20 blocks on Manhattan's Lower East Side" (108). Furthermore, in statistical data collected for the CUNY Forum on Asian American/Asian Studies, Amy Hsin specifies that "more undocumented immigrants reside in New York City than any other metropolitan area in the country" (Ho et al. 35).

> New York was a parallel gift of a life, and the unrealness of being here gave even the most frightening things a layer of surreal comedy. Peilan continued on in the village, feeding chickens and stray cats, washing cabbages, as Polly lived out a bonus existence abroad. Peilan would marry Haifeng or another village boy while Polly would walk the endless blocks of new cities. (Ko 142)

The interesting parallel here is not only between Peilan and Polly, but also Fuzhou and New York City. Perhaps it is through the permeated Orientalized discourse that has been diffused into the global subconscious (Lowe 11), that Peilan understands her own trajectory. In these series of twofold juxtapositions, Fuzhou is represented as idle, as though existing in a pre-modern, idyllic time while New York is "unreal," "endless," and "new," suggesting modernity, continuity, and development, a place that is dreamlike and futuristic. On another thread in this same fabric, Peilan is dependent and domesticated—feeding chickens and cats, marrying Haifeng or anonymous, interchangeable village men. Polly, however, is self-reliant and autonomous—walking New York City on her own like anything is possible. For Polly, Peilan was a young woman who had "grown up eating [her] words, [they] had gotten backed up inside [her]" (Ko 121). Someone she wanted to leave behind. Thus, Peilan's desire for autonomy is manifested through Polly's "restlessness" and "independence" (Ko 5). As Polly, Peilan could decide for herself : "Yi Ba thought that only men could do what they wanted, but he was wrong. I stood with my toes in the ocean, euphoric at how far I had come, and...when I gave birth to you, I would feel accomplished, tougher than any man" (Ko 143).

Moreover, Polly as "the girl who could do anything," conforms to the belief that this is only possible simply because Peilan/Polly is now in America, a place that can "fulfill" autonomy, freedom, and dreams. Inescapably, there is also a neoliberal narrative of progressing forward which is reflected in Polly's character, especially during her time in America. Yet like

any other myths of linear progression, it is interrupted by Polly's incarceration and subsequent deportation. And of course, there was always an underlying and ubiquitous fear of getting caught by ICE—of being limited from movement, being blocked from freedom. Recalling her first time visiting another state, Peilan/Polly remembers how she never went past the borders of New York for more than a decade since she arrived: "For over a decade...I hadn't left the city. I had gone to Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, to beaches and parks, taken subways and buses in all five boroughs, but I hadn't gone beyond the city's borders until now, though nothing had been stopping me except a vague fear of the outside, whispered warnings about how you could be picked up by police, deported" (Ko 210).

Nonetheless, even while living a cautionary life, the long arm of the policing state interrupts the fragile security of Polly/Peilan's daily life when an ICE raid breaks out during one of her work days at the nail salon. The arrest is of course emblematic of the definitive power of the carceral state, but it is also indicative of her loss of freedom—and even more importantly, Deming—coming to life: "I had thought, this is what it's like to be dead. Now, as I felt my arms pulled back in a decisive motion, like trussing a hog. I thought of you. It was you that I thought of. Always, it's been you" (Ko 220). Her arms being pulled back and even the animalistic image of a trussed hog is symbolic of the state's forceful and Otherizing power, and simultaneously the loss of her power and the loss of her family. This arrest also ultimately results in Peilan/Polly's incarceration for 424 days—approximately 18 months—in two immigration prison camps: one in New York and another located in Ardsleyville, Texas.

Her almost year and a half imprisonment in these camps are filled with extreme surveillance, violence, and eventual trauma that she carries with her throughout the rest of the

novel. From spoiled food, unkempt and confined spaces that resulted in rashes or hives, forbidden prolonged conversations with other incarcerated womxn, unjustified beatings, surveilled showers (and pretty much any other act), Peilan/Polly slowly begins to lose her mental stability. Much of the many layered violences that Peilan/Polly experiences is alleviated, though not healed, through her short exchanges with the other womxn, where she also learns that like herself, they were incarcerated for absurd reasons, such as getting a speeding ticket (Ko 295), coming back from studying abroad (Ko 296), and in her case, working to survive.

Peilan/Polly is also able to mitigate the effects of violence, if only just temporarily, through imagining an idealized Fuzhou, and a freer time before incarceration: "The walls were a lie, a trick. I could pull them apart with my own hands, gentle and determined, like pulling over a shirt over a child's head, blow on the floor until it fell away and then I would be in the grass, sunshine rolling up my body, lapping at my fingers...My body would pick up speed as I rolled, bouncing into the air, soaring over hills and oceans. There was my house, Yi Ba in the yard with chickens...because I wasn't really here" (Ko 299). In this fantasy, the walls, the borders, become reduced to a sham, become delicate and fragile. And the return home to Fuzhou is made easier, unproblematic. No deportation occurs, but rather a willing and happy arrival takes place—if there was ever a leaving in the first place. Perhaps this Fuzhou that Peilan imagines is a world where she did not even have to seek other places—other countries—to live a better life. The next lines are other assumed imaginary attempts that Peilan/Polly makes to dismantle the walls, the borders blocking her freedom and preventing her reunion with Deming: "I pushed at the walls with my head. I'd crack them open so I could return to you. Keep you with me" (Ko 299). Yet we realize after that, that the attempt is real—that it is her skull that gets cracked instead: "They

bandaged my skull...and for days it felt like my brain was sprouting nails" (Ko 300).

After a quick and absurd immigration hearing, Peilan/Polly is subsequently sentenced to deportation after answering a ticked-off immigration official's question before an English translation was offered, disobeying his petty rule (Ko 301). This not only mirrors the actual event of Xiu Ping Jiang's sentence to deportation ("Mentally Ill"), but ultimately, aligns with the age-old relationship between the Asian (undocumented) immigrant womxn and the male immigration officer that Kang elucidates in *Compositional Subjects*, describing the tension that is set up between the two figures, and one having more power to dictate the other's fate (121). Fortunately for Peilan/Polly, the afterlife of her deportation is unusually lucky. She struggles shortly after her deportation to Fuzhou, discovering that her home and property have been transferred over to her relatives which she can no longer claim. However, she works her way up starting another job at a nail salon, finds Yong, and becomes part of a successful business that teaches English to Chinese students. More importantly, she reunites with Deming, and finds that even she too can leave: "In the spring, four months after you left, I left, too. Not just Fuzhou, but my life—Yong, my job, our apartment, everyone I knew. I decided to move to Hong Kong...When you left Fuzhou, I understood that I could also leave" (Ko 325).

Although Peilan/Polly's way up can potentially be described as neoliberal—surviving in Fuzhou and in New York through a self-sufficient livelihood, and then subsequently working for an enterprise, World Top, that functions under the international demand of the English language—these are spaces that she also decides to leave at the end of the novel, detaching from the conventional and prescribed ideas that one must keep living lives of success, productivity, and fulfilling a necessity to belong somewhere. Perhaps it is what Alicia Schmidt Camacho also

notes in *Migrant Imaginaries*: that "as migrants narrate a condition of alterity to, or exclusion, from the nation, they also enunciate a collective desire for a different order of space and belonging across the boundary" (5). In this sort of ideal outcome, the afterlives of deportation are not an end, but rather a start for something different. And aforementioned, it is not Peilan/Polly who is seen as the problematic one, but rather, her imprisonment by a carceral nation-state. Regardless of all that she has suffered in her incarceration, Peilan/Polly walks out of her situation not as a silenced woman, but one who keeps on simply surviving.

Of Doppelgangers and Doubles

In Deming and Peilan's world, they become separated by the carceral state but are fortunately reunited after nearly a decade. In this same world there is another world where Deming and Peilan do not get separated—where Deming imagines the life of his and his mother's doppelgangers "living the life he hadn't, in different apartments and cities and towns" (Ko 322). In our world, families get separated everyday and at times the return is not so successful. More often the deportation is the end and the afterlife is uncertain amid the violence of a modern and globalized world. In our world, Xiu Ping Xiang does not become a household name, but her story continues to reemerge and is remembered. In our world, another world is created where the borders of the nation-state are diminished by simply leaving. By a mother and son who transcend belonging by belonging nowhere. For now this world is imaginary, but it is an elsewhere that could be.

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Conclusion:

'Illegality' in the Time of Trump and Covid-19

"The illegal alien is thus an 'impossible subject,' a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved"
-*Impossible Subjects*, Mae Ngai

"Blue skies on the other side of the world
I pray that my journey will not be my exit from this unjust world"
-"CO_2 Route," Russell Leong

This thesis would not be complete if it does not discuss, in one way or another, Jose Antonio Vargas, who is perhaps the most known—although, perhaps tokenized—face of undocumented immigration today. Vargas came to America by way of a smuggler-posing-as-uncle who was hired by Vargas's U.S. citizen grandparents. As a security guard, Vargas's grandfather saved around $4,500 to obtain fraudulent documents, such as Vargas's passport and green card, so that his grandson could come live with them in the United States. This was in 1993, and 27 years later, Vargas remains an undocumented immigrant despite all his successes. In his 2018 memoir, *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*, Vargas shares very personal details of his life and more importantly, his two coming out moments: one as a gay man and the other as an undocumented immigrant. He narrates his story from the the beginning of his life in America after being smuggled into the U.S. from the Philippines at the age of 12, until his incarceration in the McAllen Border Patrol Station in Texas in 2014, where he was also, by some miracle, released after spending only eight hours in the detention center—albeit long enough.

Vargas is detained after being questioned about his legal status by two Border Patrol agents at the McAllen Airport, where unlike other airports at the time, had intense border surveillance and multiple immigration checkpoints. Vargas writes:

> At the Texas border, "border security" is an inescapable daily reality, a physical and existential reminder of where you cannot go, what your limitations are. "Border security" means running random checkpoints anywhere within one hundred miles of the U.S.-Mexico border, a Constitution-free zone in which agents can stop your car, inspect your belongings, and ask for your papers, regardless of your immigration status. (The Fourth Amendment does not allow for citizens to be subjected to random search and seizures, but in the interest of "national security," the Fourth Amendment does not apply within a hundred miles of the border). (139)

It is interesting, and perhaps ironic, to note that along the lines of "national security" the highest set of laws in the nation-state become flexible, partly non-existent. With ever-increasing assumptions of foreign threats and foreign bodies, American hxstory presents itself as cyclical in the patterns of exclusion in terms of who it chooses to exclude and how. In "The Power of Culture," Lisa Lowe notes that "racism is not a fixed structure; society's notions about race are not static and immutable, nor has the state been built on an unchanging exclusion of all racialized peoples. Rather, legal institutions function as flexible apparatuses of racialization and gendering in response to the material conditions of different historical moments" (12). In this case, with the negative undocumented rhetoric focusing on the Latinx community, it is Vargas who is chosen to be set free and not the Latinx youth, men, and womxn who he was incarcerated with. This further epitomizes the nation's "worthy" v. "unworthy" narrative—of who is "deserving" of saving and who is not. Moreover, it perpetuates the myth of the model minority narrative, pitting one race against another, as well as implying that one is "better" than the other.

On another note, there is one other factor that is functioning in his release that Vargas

also acknowledges. He discusses the privileges that he is entitled to, knowing that, ultimately, this is what truly saved him even though it was a truth that he did not want to know or accept:

> I didn't want to know that while most undocumented immigrants are arrested, detained, and deported, without due process, I was able to get out after eight hours of being locked up. I didn't want to know that friends who had connections to the Philippine Embassy in the U.S. called the consul general and got him to call DHS to point out that I was Filipino...I didn't want to know that the moment I was arrested at the airport, friends called their contacts at DHS and the White House. People in positions of power responded and offered help. Even though I didn't want to know, I knew I needed to know, however belatedly. (Vargas 147)

But even with this knowledge, despite years and years of pushing to be seen and pass as an "American," Vargas, in his memoir, seems at a loss. Looking retrospectively at his arrest, Vargas expresses that he is "still trying to figure out what citizenship, from any country, means" (114). Years prior, in his short film, *Documented* (2013), he seemed more sure, confidently defining "American" as someone who is hard-working, is proud to be in the U.S., contributes to the country by paying taxes, and is self-sufficient—read not a burden to American society. In his memoir, the neoliberal traces of his initial guidelines seem to fade out, as he begins to feel more inhuman and homeless in America: "I wish I could say that being a global citizen is enough, but I haven't been able to see the world...I wish I could say that being a human being is enough, but there are times I don't feel like a human being" (Vargas 114). In the memoir, he also reveals that since the Trump election, he has had no permanent home, but rather, constantly moved around the country and was always ironically at airports: "I had no home at the moment: no physical space of my own, no permanent address" (Vargas 147).

In a way, Vargas becomes a model minority outlaw, blurring the line between the "worthy"/"unworthy" narrative, the "good" and the "bad" immigrant (Guevarra 356). Because

he is a college graduate, Pulitzer-prize winning journalist, who has generally had an extremely successful career as a reporter, "he is not what the U.S. state seeks to mobilize as the deportable subject" (Guevarra 365). Even Vargas himself has admitted this, expressing that "'coming out didn't endanger me; it had protected me. A Philippine-born, college-educated, outspoken mainstream journalist is not the face the government wants to put on its deportation program'" (Vargas qtd. in Guevarra 364). Rather, Guevarra argues that Vargas actually becomes economically desirable: "He is a model and therefore a desirable subject for the US state by virtue of his economic productivity" (Guevarra 365). Yet, despite all of this, in the eyes of many Americans, he is still an outlaw who has come to the U.S. "illegally." Guevarra explains that "[T]he racialization of Filipinos in America's sociopolitical imaginary is necessarily contradictory" (361). One one end of the spectrum, she notes that, "their desirability as immigrants stems from their positions as colonial subjects who carry the residues of America's 'benevolent assimilation' project, which increases the value of their labor power. On the other hand, this very same position is also a threat, emblematic of a xenophobic state that willingly takes Filipino labor but without the expectation or promise of any social entitlements" (Guevarra 361). Indeed, Vargas is the undocumented immigrant who has done all that he can to belong in American society, and has even gained an extra layer of protection through his connections and career. Yet, he still does not and cannot belong to American society. He is, along with many, many invisible others, what Mae Ngai, calls an "impossible subject." (5).

So what then becomes of the rest of the undocumented immigration population that do not have the same protection and privileges that Vargas has? Trump's campaigning days, his election, and his presidency have inarguably made matters worse, not just through the negative

national rhetoric that he has intensified which animalizes, dehumanizes, and criminalizes the undocumented population, but also through their incarceration and deportation by ICE that for the most part result in family seperation and deteriorating mental, emotional and physical health, which they in turn, have no access to heal. Lauren Markham's "This Route Doesn't Exist on a Map," reports that ICE had "arrested nearly 100,000 people suspected of being in the country illegally—a 43 percent increase over the previous year," just in the first seven months after Trump's inauguration. For the last 2 years, there have also been an average of 38,000 people incarcerated in detention centers across the U.S., while the Trump administration planned to construct more jails in order to increase that number by another 10,000 (Markham). Furthermore, "not only does the government want to detain more migrants, but it is also detaining them for longer periods of time. A backlog of more than 600,000 cases is currently pending before immigration courts, meaning that undocumented immigrants could remain in detention centers for years before their cases are heard" (Markham). Vargas also adds that:

> Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the country's largest law enforcement agency, employs an estimated sixty thousand people and operates a fleet of about 250 planes, helicopters, and drones, making it the largest law enforcement air force in the world. The Border Patrol, which is part of CBP, uses a "digital wall" comprising eight thousand cameras to monitor our southern border and ports of entries, and employs 18,500 agents on the nearly two-thousand-mile-long U.S.- Mexico border. Extending from California to Texas, about seven hundred miles of fencing that includes wire mesh, chain link, post and rail, sheet piling, and concrete barriers has been constructed at a cost of between $2.8 million and $3.9 million per mile. And all for what? To protect Americans from whom? (136)

A century after the Chinese Exclusion laws and the establishment of the U.S. border patrol, exclusion, surveillance and deportation have only strengthened. Although it largely focuses its enforcement on the Latinx community, it must be noted that restriction has come to

encompass numerous populations in general. Markham reports that "each year, thousands of migrants from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia make their way to South America[11] and then move northward, bound for the United States—and their numbers have been increasing steadily." At a closer look, it appears that most irregular migrants come from China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Congo (Markham). Also known as *extra-continentales* in Tapachula, Mexico, the city where a majority of migrants temporarily settle before deciding their next move, the number of migrants in the region have inevitably tripled since the last decade (Markham). Markham significantly notes that it is impossible to keep track of all the migrants who make it to the United States undetected. But it is also impossible to know the number of bodies who do not make it, the bodies that disappear. Theirs are a perilous and, at times, fatal journey that they have to trek in order to get to America,[12] wherein their rights and their citizenship will be unjustly questioned even after risking their lives. In "The Citizen and the Terrorist," Leti Volpp crucially asks: What of those members of this group who are not formally citizens? Those individuals who are noncitizens—currently being interviewed, deported, and detained—are made even more vulnerable by their noncitizen status and the power of immigration law to control their fate. They are even farther removed from the "us" of America because of the ways in which we understand

[11] Markham notes that "their first stop is most often Brazil, which has a favorable reciprocal visa law, meaning that, if a Brazilian can readily acquire a visa to visit their country...migrants from that country will receive the same courtesy in Brazil."

[12] Markham reveals that one of the most dangerous treks migrants cross from South America to the north is referred to as the "The Darién Gap, or "the jungle"—a thick "2,200 sq. mile tropical forest that connects Colombia and Panama" and is also known as "the most horrendous territory...[one] can imagine." Since 1698, there has been a "long history of attempted crossings and failed conquests" (Markham). For one, Scottish entrepreneur William Paterson, travelled with 1,200 prisoners across The Darién Gap, with the hopes of founding trade between the Atlantic and the Pacific; within months of the journey, most of the crew were dead (Markham). Today, there are several indigenous communities living within the Darién Gap, as well as the Colombian FARC, and innumerable migrants hoping to pass through (Markham).

citizenship to correlate with membership" (Volpp 584).

What then can we do to heal the border that Anzaldúa states is an open wound—"*una herida abuerta* where the Third World grates against the first world and bleeds." And what of the *extra-continentales*, the irregular migrants, the TNTs, the undocumented immigrants, the people who Vargas protests may have come here illegally, but are *not* illegal.[13] Further, there is an ongoing system in the U.S. that values (undocumented) immigrants solely for their labor and productivity but simultaenously outlaws them for the resources that they take or "consume"; Vargas notes that "[we] are seen as mere labor, our physical bodies judged by perceptions of what we contribute, or what we take" (Vargas 86). Moreover, Guevarra argues that irregular migrants "are implicated in institutional neoliberal imperatives that continue to govern the ways in which immigrants get defined and become desirable subjects of the state" (371). In this case, how do we also move from a system that perpetuates not only racial and gender inequality, but also the exclusion and alienation of certain immigrants into and within the nation-state?

In the present time amid the covid-19 crisis, essential workers have not halted their labor in the fields—growing, harvesting, and processing the foods that we buy and consume to survive; about 50-70% of those essential workers are undocumented (LeTourneau). As they work, they doubly fear getting deported and catching the virus because deportation and ICE raids have not ceased and the government has not adjusted its laws so that undocumented workers can get access to healthcare or the recent stimilus package. Some of their workplaces also do not provide enough protective gear and sanitary products for their workers to stay safe. Although some of the workers' travel to and from the workplace is protected and facilitated through the

[13] "Our existence is as broadly criminalized as it is commodified. I don't know how many times I've explained to a fellow journalist that even though it is an illegal act to enter the country without documents, it is not illegal for a person to be in the country without documents" (Vargas 86).

Department of Homeland Security that list them as "essential workers" (LeTourneau), the label does not protect them from possible deportation, or give them a path to citizenship regardless of their importance to the nation, now more than ever. Not to mention, there are also numerous undocumented immigrants who work as essential workers in different fields, whether it be in healthcare, care-giving, or education. Thus, in the time of this pandemic, it is ever more true what DuBois had discovered long ago: that the privileged are able to live comfortably because of the toil and labor of Black and Brown bodies; that the privileged have the comfort of staying safely in their homes not only because of essential workers in the hospitals, but also those in the fields who supply our food.

In an ideal world, land was never stolen from indigenous people and the so-called greatness of Western countries were not built upon the labor of Black and Brown bodies. In an ideal world, the U.S. is not an option and no one has to make dangerous treks just to arrive at an American fantasy that will soon be shattered by not only exclusion, but also racial and gender inequalities. In an ideal world, the after-lives of deportation fare well and migrants can start a new life "back where they belong" as though it is no issue. The reality, however, is different. And albeit what Appuradai optimistically claims, we do not live in a postnational era (Appuradai qtd. in Volpp 583-584), just as we do not live in a postracial one. Volpp also cites Kandice Chuh's critique of Appuradai's argument, stating that:

> We should remember that the idea of transnationality is not solely one where immigrants function as agents in maintaining diasporic ties, but can be one where a state or its people brands its citizens with foreign membership, extraterritorializing them into internment camps, or ejecting them from membership through violence against their bodies. We function not just as agents of our own imaginings, but as the objects of others' exclusions…[T]his society is neither colorblind nor a happy "nation of immigrants." Certain racialized bodies are always marked and disrupt the

idea of integration or assimilation. (583)

And indeed, as Sucheng Chan argues in *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History:*

"[A]ssimilation does not depend solely on the predilections of the newcomers. It can only occur when members of the host society give immigrants a chance to become equal partners of the world they share and mutually shape'" (Chan qtd. in Kang 144). In this way, where we can begin change is by critiquing and rethinking citizenship itself. In Lowe's words, "[W]e must engage in a materialist critique of the institution of citizenship, not to discount the important struggles through which Asian immigrants have become, after the 1940s, naturalized citizens...but rather to name the genealogy of the legal exclusion, disenfranchisement, and restricted enfranchisement of Asian immigrants[14] as a genealogy of the American institution of citizenship…" (13). Vargas also argues that "during this volatile time in the U.S. and around the world, we need a new language around migration and the meaning of citizenship. Our survival depends on the creation and understanding of this new language" (Vargas 94). One where citizenship is not contradictory, exclusive, or in flux, but *in*clusive—in terms of the law, and when applied to society. Citizenship, Vargas adds, "is showing up. Citizenship is using your voice while making sure you hear other people around you. Citizenship is how you live your life. Citizenship is resilience" (128).

For the Asian American community, silence is a word that is often assumed onto us. Silence was also my family and I when we first came to America, hoping for a better life, despite knowing that our B-2 tourist visas would soon expire. We never talked about our situation to anyone outside our family, but even then, the shame and the stigmas were silently felt. I carried

[14] But of course, this should also extend to other communities of color.

that silence and precarity with me as I grew up and entered higher education. And, I admit it was not until only recently that I began to shed all the constructed shame and the stigmas and the silence that followed me like a shadow from a past life that still continues to shape me. I used to embrace the silence like it was a form of protection, the parts of me no one needed to know. But as I have come to know more people who have left the shadows or are still living in it, I realized it was time to speak up, and educate, and tell stories. As Montoya expresses, "continuing the silence surrounding the realities of undocumented immigration is to remain tolerant of the injustices of our adopted country" (119). Before we can move towards a borderless nation, we must speak for ourselves and the voiceless, and we must also heal *la herida abuerta* "that have infiltrated our beings" (Reddy 77), beginning with our exclusion.

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