EAST-WEST MONTAGE

REFLECTIONS ON ASIAN BODIES IN DIASPORA

SHENG-MEI MA

East-West Montage

Reflections on Asian Bodies in Diaspora

Sheng-mei Ma

University of Hawai'i Press ☆ Honolulu

Printed in the United States of America

12 11 10 09 08 07 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ma, Sheng-mei.
East-West montage : reflections on Asian bodies in diaspora / Sheng-mei Ma.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8248-3181-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Asian diaspora. 2. East and West. 3. Motion pictures—Asia. 4. American literature—Asian American authors—History and criticism. I. Title.
DS13.M3 2007
305.895—dc22

2007018637

University of Hawai'i Press books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Council on Library Resources

Designed by Lucille C. Aono

Printed by Edwards Brothers, Inc.

To Lien and Roan
my captive audience
my harshest critics

Acknowledgments

An IRGP grant from Michigan State University gave me precious release time in the fall of 2004 to draft this book, followed by a book subvention grant from the College of Arts and Letters and an initiative fund from the Department of English at MSU. I am indebted to my university, the college, and the department for the generous support.

Portions or drafts of chapters have appeared in the following journals and books. I thank the editors and publishers for permissions to reprint revisions of "Camp Scatology," from *VERB 3,* no. 2 (2006): 1–27; "Kung Fu Films in Diaspora," from *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema,* edited by Laikwan Pang and Day Wong, pp. 101–118 (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2005); "Tradition and/of Bastards in the Korean Wave," from *Korea Journal* 46, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 132–153 (abstract added by journal); "Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'Chopsticks' Musicals," from *Literature/Film Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2003): 17–26; "The Nine Lives of *Blackhawk*'s Oriental," from *International Journal of Comic Art* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 120–148; "Hmong Refugee's Death Fugue," from *Hmong Studies Journal* 6 (2005): 1–36; "The Fad(k)ing of the 0.5 Generation," from *National Taiwan University (NTU) Studies in Language and Literature* 15 (June 2006): 63–86.

With this book published on an island that is itself an East-West Montage, I have come almost home, another island further to the west, or rather, to the east.

Establishing Shots

East-West Montage

Approximately twelve hours lies between Eastern Standard Time and East Asian Time, between, say, New York and Beijing. West and East are, literally, night and day apart. Yet Rudyard Kipling was dead wrong when he wrote that "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Over and over again in this book, the "twain" are crosscut in adjacent filmic "shots." Rather than imposing a comparative paradigm, this book insists on a montage-like complementarity of East and West, as it reads the Asian diaspora—cultural expressions in literature and film by and about people of Asian descent, primarily on both shores of the Pacific Ocean—at cultural intersections. Indeed, even the concept of montage arises out of an East-West montage, namely, the Chinese ideograms inspiring Sergei Eisenstein in his theorizing about intercuts in the 1920s. Chinese ideograms, of course, have served as the impetus for many Western modernists to flee their phonetic, logo-, and phallocentric system. Nonreaders of Chinese—Freud, Eisenstein, Barthes, Derrida, and others—have interpreted pictographs most "creatively,"[1] leading either to radiant, mutual awakenings or to appalling distortions. Foucauldian knowledge/power aside, however, advances come at times from misunderstandings, as scientific discoveries resulting from experimental errors illustrate. In that spirit, inspired by my half-knowledge of the West and, in particular, of Eisenstein's theory of montage, which is, in turn, inspired by his half-knowledge of Chinese and Japanese hieroglyphs, this book freeze-frames what I call an "East-West montage," the "flash[es] of lightning," in Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa's term, from clashes between East and West ("The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" 1920, p. 366).

Given that the abstract collectivities of East and West cannot be placed side by side filmically, I deploy the word "montage" metaphorically. As figures of speech, East and West are montaged, which, in the simplest sense, signifies the filmic technique of one shot cutting to an implicitly connected shot to create a synthetic perception that is neither the first nor the second shot. Leaping

from image to image, the viewer's consciousness concludes the dialectics of montage by synthesizing imaginatively, associationally.[2] Optical and auditory stimulations to the senses are to be translated into intellectual perception and emotional affect, which shape a wide range of physical responses: tense muscles, sweating, increased heartbeat, laughter, tears, and so forth. Montage, a mechanical technique tracing back to its French root of "machine assembly,"[3] performs a metaphorical function much like clipped, condensed poetic language. On-screen images, sperm and egg, as it were, await their birth off-screen inside the viewer's head. Montage shots, therefore, point beyond the shot. Oftentimes, East-West montage not only brings together logically and explicitly related moments but also total opposites such as day and night, reason and irrationality, life and death.

In "Beyond the Shot" (1929), Eisenstein, a Russian filmmaker, himself dubiously situated between East and West, draws from Chinese writing to explicate montage, in particular, "the second category of hieroglyphs—the *huei-i,* or 'copulative,'" in which the copulation

> of two hieroglyphs of the simplest series is regarded not as their sum total but as their product, i.e. as a value of another dimension, another degree: each taken separately corresponds to an object but their combination corresponds to a *concept.* The representation of two 'representable' objects achieves the representation of something that cannot be graphically represented. (p. 139)

So far so good. Eisenstein then proceeds to give examples of such Chinese and Japanese hieroglyphs, which expose the airy, fanciful nature of his musings:

> a dog and a mouth mean "to bark"
> a mouth and a baby mean "to scream"
> a mouth and a bird mean "to sing"
> a knife and a heart mean "sorrow," and so on.
> But—this is montage!! (p. 139)

Some of these constructions are half right, others plain wrong. "A mouth and a baby" *(ying)* mean birds chirping or a human sobbing, the sense deriving not from a baby's cry, but from the pronunciation of the word "baby" *(ying).* As such, "a mouth and a baby" is not a copulative but a pictophonetic (*xingsheng*—the first category of Chinese words) character, where one element, the mouth, points to the meaning and the other element to the pronunciation. On the other hand, "a knife and a heart" mean "endure, tolerate, forbear." Sorrow is implied as well as a whole array of emotions, such as rage, hate, even love. Despite Eisenstein's double exclamation marks over his awakening, this and many

other passages read embarrassingly like contemporary Western bodies tattooed with Oriental gibberish. Innocence is indeed bliss, as willful misreading liberates Eisenstein to speculate boldly. Eisenstein engages in a double montage or montage with montage in "Beyond the Shot." Microcosmically, each alleged Oriental character splits into parts that jointly produce a linguistic sum larger than the parts. Macrocosmically, the alleged Orient—Oriental characters, haiku imagism, Noh dramaturgy—becomes the second shot the West cuts to in order to achieve a transubstantiation, a qualitative change of the West.

As a methodology and a narrative style rarely interrogated, East-West montage engineers not only modern filmmaking but modernity itself. If modernity is characterized by the Enlightenment spirit of reason, epitomized by Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," then it constructs itself, unthinkingly, vis-à-vis an "unthinking" Other plagued by irrationality. This egotistic Enlightenment is but the descendant of the Western tradition. The Greco-Roman-Judaic-Christian "civilization" has always evolved side by side with Persian, Egyptian, and Near Eastern "barbarism." In *The Odyssey,* sweet and total resignation is offered by Lotus Eaters, who live ten days' journey south of the island of Kythera in what appears to be North Africa. Greek tragedy frequently casts an Oriental chorus. Dionysus in Euripides' *The Bacchae* returns to wreak havoc in his native Thebes with a chorus of frenzied "Asiatic" maenads. Oedipus is enthroned after solving the Sphinx's riddle—the Sphinx *is* Egypt. In the Hebraic context, Moses leads the Israelites out of Pharaoh's Egypt. Freud, tortuously, attributes the cataclysmic genesis of monotheism to an Egyptian named Moses from the court of Akhenaten (*Moses and Monotheism* 1939). And, of course, the magi's Persian accents would perhaps fail to raise any eyebrows in the crossroads of Bethlehem. Many key texts in Western modernity inherit this image of a schizophrenic Asia that is at once stagnant and barbaric. Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) sees China as "stand[ing] still" (p. 175). Hegel expounds on the "stasis" of China: "Early do we see China advancing to the condition it is found at this day . . . every change is excluded, and the fixedness of a character which recurs perpetually" (*Lectures on the Philosophy of History* 1892–1896, p. 121). Max Weber finds the East lacking in rationality, illustrated by "deficiencies" in science, historiography, art and "rational harmonious music," and numerous other fields, which silhouette the virtues of Protestant capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–1905, p. 14).

Critiquing yet also deploying this division of East and West, this book treats them as fluid terms. The West herein refers to the sphere of influence exerted by the Greco-Roman-Judaic-Christian Western European and North American cultures, an influence that is well-nigh global. The East refers to the

Far East or East Asia dominated by Confucian-Buddhist-Taoist traditions, which is often joined in the Western mind by Arab tropes associated with the Near East. East and West are actually no more problematic than "America," a term often taken to mean the United States, while in fact it covers North, Central, and South America. So too with the term "United States." Seemingly well-defined in terms of the geographical boundary of the fifty states, the United States extends its power overseas to remote corners of the world. Domestically, the U.S. empire contains "foreign bodies," some of whom are second-class citizens due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, immigration status, and other factors. And this is no more problematic than the distinction between man and woman, a dividing line complicated by homosexuality and by gender and transgender issues. Granted the controversial nature of East-West dichotomies, they remain powerful codes of difference with far-reaching social consequences, as do pairs such as "America and Asia" or "man and woman."

Across this divide, Western intercuts to the East from the classical to the modern era have relied heavily on the power of association rather than on reason, claims of the Enlightenment notwithstanding. In extreme cases in literature, these montages are incidental and haphazard, offering either a springboard to the writer's own story or a deus ex machina to close the writer's otherwise inconclusive story. W. Somerset Maugham's epigraph in *The Razor's Edge* (1944), a quotation from the *Katha-Upanishad* that includes the novel's title, has little to do with the story itself.[4] And T. S. Eliot concludes *The Waste Land* (1922) with Sanskrit chants. Both examples resemble jump cuts that ought to jolt our sensibility due to the inherent incongruity of the "shots." Given the facile juxtapositions of East and West, Eliot et al. are, nonetheless, attempting to transcend the quandary of modernity. The methodological expediency does not cancel out the psychological urgency. Political incorrectness conceals innermost human desires. To return to Eisenstein for illustration: on the dubious foundation of Chinese pictographs, Eisenstein advocates in the 1920s and 1930s a new kind of film that destroys "the dualism of the spheres of 'emotion' and 'reason,'" restoring "to science its sensuality. To the intellectual process its fire and passion" ("Perspectives" 1929, p. 158). Eisenstein calls for "ecstasy" as the ultimate pathos produced by cinema and art, "a state of transport," in David Bordwell's exegesis, "getting carried away . . . a process whereby the concreteness of prelogical thought obliterates distinctions between part and whole, self and other" (*The Cinema of Eisenstein* 1993, p. 194). Eisenstein's mystical turn evokes, among others, M. Bakhtin's celebration of the carnivalesque, Georges Bataille's acephalic "nonknowledge" and "emptiness of intelligent questions,"[5] and Max Horkheimer and Theodor

Adorno's thesis in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1944): "Myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (p. xvi).

To be consistent with its dialectical nature, a book on East-West montage should not stop at analyzing the failings of montage; it needs to suggest the potentials, as this "Establishing Shots" attempts to do, cutting back and forth between the Asian diaspora and the Christian West. Missteps, like Alice falling down a rabbit hole, open onto another system, so long as we keep in mind the power imbalance fueling misrepresentations in the first place. Wedding the Enlightenment with myth, the scholarly with the poetic, in fact, resists the tyranny of rationalism unleashed by the Enlightenment. As such, the poetic title and subtitle to this scholarly book foreground the hybridity of the project as one wedged between East and West, light and shadow, modernities and traditions, bodies and their reflections. Three concepts—"montage," "reflections," and "Asian bodies in diaspora"—enable me to pursue what is essentially an intangible, lyrical project of reading the elusive Asian diaspora at the montage-like intersections of East-West cultures. The "reflections" of my subtitle refer both to thoughts on "Asian bodies in diaspora" and to images flitting across those bodies, both to idea and flesh, both to abstraction and "embodied" affect. The formulation "Asian *bodies* in diaspora" preempts "Asian diaspora," a fashionable academic catch-all term that "manages" migrancy in globalization and submerges individual agency within a collectivized concept;[6] it lays emphasis on *bodies,* the site of physical sensations and emotions that respond to being diasporic—eyes filled with tears, for instance.

These two kinds of reflection—theorizing and personally experiencing—are complementary, but they are polarized by the rational mind, with the personal strain routinely exorcized from scholarship. A book utilizing the methodology of montage does not allow a one-sided study of affect in the abstract; the poetic impulse comes to enrich and deepen the scholarly. Indeed, the poetic must be a party to any investigation into diaspora, a state of human existence characterized as much by rational decisions for mobility as by feelings of loss, nostalgia, and ambivalence. Because of this sensibility poised between the head and the heart, readers should not expect the nonemotional, dry monotone typical of scholarly works. Rather, a wide repertoire of emotions, from melancholic to ecstatic, from melodramatic to manic, emerges in these pages. Occasionally personal by academic standards, this account uses individual affect to sharpen the subject at hand: East-West montage, which remains very much a personal issue to an Asian in diaspora like myself. The marriage of scholarship and poetry is most evident when rational argument has run its course toward the end of each chapter as well as toward the end of the book. In lieu of a synthetic recap for closure, as the old scholarly habit

decrees, language at "land's end" begins to fray, succeeded by poetic fragments, open-ended, eliciting questions rather than foreclosing debates. Like music taking leave of lyrics and moving into pure sound, human reason climaxes into utterances beyond prose.[7]

"Asian bodies in diaspora," by definition, masks a fissure—a montage, if you will—between body and mind. The body languishing in diaspora, the mind longs for the construct of home. The body exists spatially, yet the formless mind rushes to and fro temporally. The more alienated the body feels from its surroundings, the more prone is the mind to effect an escape through time.[8] Even the diasporic subject's attempt to recreate, spatially, a familiar, home-like environment through, for example, interior decoration within an ethnic ghetto aims to trick time, retrieving wreckages of a "previous incarnation" amidst a Western metropolis. We kill time by fantasy—daydreaming, entertainment, even substance abuse. It is ironic that time always kills us in the end. Since there is no escape, the mind finds itself locked in a bigger prison than the physical one for the body. This bleak prospect only intensifies the gap between the trapped body and the escapist mind, aggravating the "double whammy" of Asian bodies in diaspora, alien bodies whose differences potentially repel the host mainstream culture, on the one hand, and bodies attracted to similar Asian bodies across an ocean and the International Date Line, on the other. To better understand this schizophrenic montage, let us contextualize the Asian diaspora with other disciplines, including Asian American studies, which have consistently suppressed the montage I have been suggesting.

The Asian Diaspora is Homesick!

Enjoying immense academic currency on the threshold of the twenty-first century, the term "diaspora" traces its origin to the body of Jews dispersed to the four corners of the world after the Babylonian captivity. Contemporary scholars have increasingly used the term to point to the strewing of a racial, ethnic, cultural group across the globe. Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993), for instance, deals with black culture on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, coalescing ethnic and postcolonial studies to examine African, Caribbean, and African American literatures. Similarly, Paul Julian Smith's *The Body Hispanic* (1989) yokes Spanish and Spanish American texts together. Yet to actual "bodies in diaspora," diaspora is less a conceptualized collective experience than a personal, visceral feeling. To truly comprehend the intensity of emotions associated with diaspora—to grasp what can be likened to an amphibian's existence on the borderland between water and land—we need to look at a diasporic archetype such as Lot's nameless wife in Genesis, a back-

ward glance that is a crosscut to the Judaic-Christian West. Rather than Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur's choice of Janus, "whose gaze is simultaneously directed both forward and backward" (*Theorizing Diaspora* 2003, p. 9), Lot's wife is a far more appropriate trope for diaspora because of her insistence on "looking back." Lot's wife helps us understand why so many pillars of salt dot the landscape of the Asian diaspora, manifesting paradoxical affects of loss and repossession, betrayal and life-affirmation, feminine nostalgia and masculine proscription. Only through the punishment inflicted on Lot's wife can we begin to grapple with the general conscious reluctance to dwell in homesickness and the subconscious urge to do so.

To appease the sinners bent upon sodomizing the two angels, Lot offers his two daughters for gang rape. God's messengers then advise the righteous Lot to flee with his family from the "fire and brimstone" about to befall Sodom and Gomorrah. Despite a strict warning not to do so, Lot's wife "looks back from behind him [Lot] and is turned into a pillar of salt" (King James version of the Bible). In "Looking Back at Lot's Wife" (1994), Rebecca Goldstein sees "conflict between the demands of transcendence and the backward pull of love and accidental attachment" (p. 8). Far from accidental, the look back is necessitated, indeed preordained, by nostalgia, a desire to repossess in one's pupils and mind's eye the home that is lost, the home that is being annihilated by God's wrath.

Sodom is condemned and marked for "demolition" partly as a result of sodomy, which violates masculinity rather than femininity, making the reluctance of Lot's wife to leave more psychologically compelling. Forced into exile, she is destined to endless sorrow in the form of salty tears. Her punishment for transgressing God's command is, in fact, a fitting metaphor for her post-Sodom days; becoming a pillar of salt is both punitive and descriptive. As Lot's wife drags herself away, tears pour from her eyes, water and salt exuding, shriveling her into an empty shell, crusted with crystals of bereavement. Like words from the mouth and perspiration from the pores, tears are both in and out of the body, salt being part of and independent of the body. Tears do more than register physical sensations and mental longings; they confess them to the world. The body remembers, whatever the mind forbids. Why does God not incinerate her with "fire and brimstone," reducing her to unrecognizable ashes, just like the city? Why does God leave behind this weird landmark except to intimate a divine ambivalence? After all, salt is distilled from seawater, the source of all life, and in turn sustains life. Loss causes grief, yet it is the essence of life.

Upon observing someone's shock or horror at a certain sight, we tend to turn to that direction and see for ourselves. The example of Lot's wife, however,

tells us to resist this human instinct. Had Lot not looked at (or looked back at) his wife, how did he know that she had turned into a pillar of salt? The King James version of the Bible places his wife behind Lot; the Revised English Bible remains mum on their relative positions. Does the Lot of the King James version walk backwards to find out what happened, or does he keep walking, holding back his tears? In any case, the pillar of salt serves as an interdiction, masculine and divine, against the human tendency and the body's urge to look back in mourning. A dubious sign, the phallic pillar congeals countless drops of "womanly" tears. Lot's and even God's hidden desire to look back themselves is projected onto the ambiguity of female transgression.

After Lot and his two daughters escape and hide in the cave, the daughters conspire to make their father intoxicated enough so that they can ensure the continuation of the tribe through incest. The mother's loss of Sodom extends into the daughters' loss of their mother. To compensate for the maternal loss, the daughters become their mother, the abominable sin securing a future for the family. The bloodline thus stays pure, within itself. The incest can also be taken as the daughters' ultimate revenge against Lot and his God for casting them out in the city and for casting the mother away altogether. Gender and power lie at the heart of this Genesis story. To stave off sodomy that makes "women" out of angels and hence God, Lot's women are sacrificed, "feminine" instincts—the mother's tearful nostalgia and the daughters' primal wholeness—censored, albeit deconstructively. Lot's wife's looking back is repeated by her daughters and remains a foundational flashback, a repetition compulsion, of God's. He must have been as homesick as the Asian diaspora!

The Asian diaspora contains within itself this tension between the matrilineage of loss and mourning shared by Lot's women and the masculine impulse of a forward thrust. Such tension permeates even the debate over disciplinary origin, a chicken-or-egg dispute over which comes first—Asian Diaspora or Asian American studies. This debate masks a turf war: does Asian Diaspora studies encompass Asian America studies, or is the latter a standalone field within American studies? Let us first look back at Asian American studies. Ever since the late 1960s, Asian American literature and studies have mapped out their identity via a two-pronged approach: defining Asian Americans as opposed to mainstream Americans as well as to Asians; constructing Asian American studies within U.S. institutions of higher education as qualitatively variant from area studies on Asia. Rather than issuing from Asian studies, Asian American studies presents itself as self-made. The Asian American focus has been more on the "here and now" than "over there in the past," more on political activism and ethnic struggle than sorrowful nostalgia. The emphasis is squarely placed on the second word in "Asian American."

Asian American productions testify to this. The very first anthology of Asian American writings, *Aiiieeeee!* (1974), announces in the preface a distinctly "Asian American sensibility" that unites American-born writers of Asian extraction. Maxine Hong Kingston concurs in her pioneering Asian American novel, *The Woman Warrior* (1976), which seeks to lay to rest Chinese haunting in hope of "claiming America." Even a postcolonial émigré writer such as Bharati Mukherjee perpetuates the American myth of individualism and emancipation, unencumbered by the Indian past. Asian American scholars largely agree with these views. Contesting the critical fixation on the generation gap, particularly between the immigrant and American-born generation, Lisa Lowe, in *Immigrant Acts* (1996), advances a horizontal alliance among divergent ethnic groups and conscious "strategic essentializing" on the part of Asian Americans. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, in "Denationalization Reconsidered" (1995), chides the "denationalizing" trend in Asian American scholarship, which allegedly dilutes the civil rights commitment to racial equality by ushering in transnationalism and globalization. Yen Le Espiritu, in *Asian American Panethnicity* (1992), calls for pan-Asian identity, a contingency plan in critical race theory to consolidate power. Occasionally, Asian American scholars point out the problematics and even hypocrisy of politics over poetics. Viet Thanh Nguyen in *Race and Resistance* (2002), for instance, draws from Asian American preference for the politically correct Sui Sin Far over her younger sister Onoto Watana to demonstrate ideological rigidity and blindness in the face of the highly complicated texts by Watana.

Nguyen may have touched a raw nerve, but this nerve has always been there, under the "banana yellow" skin. To rebuff banana mentality (yellow outside but white inside), or in Frantz Fanon's terms, a "minority complex," Asian Americans have consistently privileged sentiments of a militant kind and gravitated toward stereotypically masculine over feminine emotions, or mental discipline over the senses. The objective of this choice is, of course, self-empowerment. Because looking back in nostalgia threatens to sap, presumably, the manly, combative spirit by giving in to physical yearnings, it is regularly shunned. Even in Amy Tan's melodrama, the suffering of Chinese immigrant mothers is rarely presented for its own sake; it is indulged in to formulaically invigorate Asian American daughters. Yet the masculine masks contradictory "feminine" emotions; the mind cannot manifest itself without the body, and, as Lot's wife illustrates, an erect penis may weep as well. Looking forward is always looking back.

Among these Asian American writers and scholars, fashioning self-identity invariably begins with gestures toward loss. Kingston's Asian American woman warrior rides on the shoulders of the Chinese legend of Fa Mu Lan.

Kingston grounds ethnic female repression in the First World on an exotic "homeland," where rural Cantonese villagers ruthlessly raid against a scapegoated "No Name Woman." The self-transformation in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) similarly opens with a brutal yet mystical India. Whether U.S.-born Chinese American or Indian-born "Brahmin,"[9] both novelists resort to Asia, which they have purportedly forgone, to compose their American talk-stories. Frank Chin's Chinatown cowboy is likewise inspired by the Chinese god of war, Guan Gung, and other male role models from such pan-Asian sources as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Chushingura*. Even Lowe and Wong betray nostalgia for the 1960s, their sentiment of loss couched in Marxist and ethnic discourse. Both literature and criticism steal a look back to assemble an Asian American identity against the backdrop of Asian and Asian immigrant discourse. Such backward glancing is but human, as all cultural expressions concern, to some extent, the past, except perhaps prophesy, which may still be based on the past. A case in point: the clichéd future dystopia in sci-fi films never fails to hark back to the utopia of the Golden Age, even the Garden of Eden.

The cultural space Asian Americans have repeatedly carved out recalls Gloria Anzaldua's "borderlands," a forbidding place to inhabit. The origin of such an ethnic beachhead lies, however, beyond narrowly defined Asian American experience: only out of sheer necessity would "foreign bodies"—Asian immigrants—endure the unrelenting waves and scorching sun to reach this shore. Once arrived, moreover, the immigrant is an amphibian trapped between water and land, euphemistically belonging to both but possibly to neither. Even the little plot of sand under their feet is subject to erosion by the tide, the wind, the host culture's footsteps, and forces far greater than a puny amphibian. That territory has to be negotiated and reconstituted at any given time. The amphibian's precarious life turns, nevertheless, into an object of admiration for the more secure existence on land and in water. Amphibians on the beach are the new clothes the privileged, mainstream or ethnic, cannot help trying on in this global village. One such donning of immigrant identity is distinctly Asian American.

From this beachhead, generations of American-born Asians have ventured inland. Now earthbound, with degenerated gills and fins, Asian Americans find themselves paradoxically lulled by dreams of absence—the ancestral ocean. These watery dreams of Asian ghosts stem from the ambivalent Asian American psyche, for hauntings, by definition, mean that we can not or will not let go of the ghosts. Asian Americans move from the literal borderland on the beach to a psychological one between the American culture to which they wish to belong and an Asian body they would rather, in some cases, shed. To

depict their liminal existence between America and Asia, Asian Americans often resort to a dream state between sleep and wakefulness populated by otherworldly apparitions who look like themselves.

Despite dubious entanglements with an ancestral past, the academic discipline of Asian American studies places the focus on the here and now, but in recent years this unspoken rule has been challenged by the rise of Asian Diaspora studies. To borrow from Mandarin, Asian Diaspora studies is an amorphous *sibuxiang* (four unlike, or unlike anything else), bearing certain resemblance to its next of kin: area studies on Asia in the West and their attendant Orientalism, which mushroomed in the post World War II era to "Know Thy Enemy"; postcolonialism that rode the wave of worldwide decolonization and academic radicalization; Asian American studies born out of the tumultuous sixties and the ethnic community's maturing; Pacific Rim studies closely associated with the rise and fall of the Four Mini-Dragons in the eighties; and globalization and transnationalism, the dominant forces of our time. Yet Asian Diaspora studies is, in the image of Homi Bhabha's mimic man, "not quite" any of the above. Asian Diaspora studies repudiates the Orientalist legacy of area studies, while enriched by the Asian cultures and languages they provide; it expands from the postcolonial scope of the Near East and South Asia; it outgrows the boundaries of U.S.-centric Asian American studies; it strives to outlive the four "geckos"; and it interrogates the neoimperialist streak in globalizing forces as well as postmodernist potentials.

As a *sibuxiang,* it is nothing. Because it is nothing, it can be anything. Through an outsider's relative disinterestedness, Asian Diaspora studies can help its cousins by interrogating, to the "right" (pun intended), conservative Asia's fetish of modernization and Westernization and, to the "left," the exclusivity of Asian American identity politics. To achieve this two-way critique, Asian Diaspora studies must be free to reflect on affects of both body and mind. This is paramount if Asian Diaspora studies is to succeed, for "diaspora" means scattering and decentering, which lends itself as a basis for interdisciplinary, cross-cultural projects in this era of globalization. Yet its strength of hybridity risks the charge that it lacks focus. That Asian Diaspora studies can serve to bridge various constituencies in area, ethnic, postcolonial, and other studies suggests the danger that it has no institutional constituents of its own. Its amorphousness can provide a powerful critical, methodological tool, one that does not require scholars' voluntary identification with diaspora. At its worst, diaspora slips into becoming an academic buzzword, a catch-all word, no different from ethnic, postcolonial, or global (*Theorizing Diaspora* 2003, p. 3). Unlike the Jewish diaspora, the Asian diaspora does not have the unifying foci of Judaism and anti-Semitism. Unlike the African diaspora, the

Asian diaspora does not have the unifying foci of colonialism and slavery. To settle for a Sartrean definition—that Asians in diaspora are those whom the society views as such—is to give up agency altogether. To accrue self-identity, the Asian diaspora needs to reflect on its physical and visceral feelings and to think critically about its bodies, individual and collective, in diaspora. The mind and the body, as well as rationality and affect, zero in on the same sensation of "homesickness," feeling sick for the home that is lost or never owned and feeling sick at home, the host country's here and now that disavows Asians in diaspora. Nostalgic rediscovery implicit in Asian studies is wedded to political activism implicit in Asian American studies.

Surely, Asian Diaspora studies does not have to invent itself in a vacuum. It can borrow, for instance, from China studies. Asian Diaspora studies ought not return to C. T. Hsia's sentimentality in "obsession with China," nor should it accept indiscriminately David Wang's hip "flirtations with China."[10] Rather, it draws from both positions, while limited by neither and informed by recent theories of globalization, diaspora, and transnationalism. Hsia's melancholia and mourning and that of an early generation are balanced by the upbeat, playful, even veiled messianic tone inherent in the contemporary emphasis on fluidity, flexibility, and hybridity. Pairs like Hsia and Wang can be found in other fields as well. Cross-breeding not only them but across disciplines offers new critical angles for the twenty-first century. This endeavor is most urgent since Lot's wife still haunts us: the elements continue to dissolve the pillar into the earth, and her tears percolate through various Asian bodies in diaspora.

Body Parts

The book is divided into seven intercuts, each dwelling on one specific body part or physical attribute that is shared by a large number of people of Asian descent, across national and geographical boundaries within the overarching framework of East and West. This focus on the human body is necessitated by the fact that, Norman O. Brown attests, "we are nothing but body," which "the child knows consciously, and the adult unconsciously" (*Life Against Death* 1959, p. 293). This ceases to be a purely philosophical concept in the Asian diaspora, where the immigrants or first-generation Asian Americans—"big eaters" out of "Necessity"—must maintain physical well-being before the second-generation "treat-lovers" may move into a lifestyle of "Extravagance" (Sau-ling Wong's *Reading Asian American Literature* 1993). To elucidate the Asian diasporic condition, therefore, this book crosscuts on "Asian Anus," "Asian Penis," "Asian Dubbing," "the Korean Wave," "Body Oriental," "Asian Magic," and "Asian Deceased," each section consisting of a pair of chapters,