FORMED BY CONTACT:
MULTI-LOCAL MIGRATION AND CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVE

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This dissertation examines how changes in migratory patterns under contemporary globalization have transformed late twentieth-century narratives of migration. This dissertation argues that post-1980s narratives radically depart from earlier forms of immigrant writing in that they attend to migratory journeys formed by dwelling across multiple nations. Traditionally, immigrant literature, in particular U.S. immigrant fiction, has been studied in light of the challenges of integration and permanent settlement. The tension arising from the immigrant subject’s ties to the country of origin and host country have been central to critical approaches to narratives of immigration. This dissertation argues that contemporary narratives complicate such binary logic by asking us to conceive border crossing movements in more global and multi-local terms. I argue that this newly emergent spatial logic is pronounced in two major ways. By focusing on the geographical orientation of contemporary migrant writing, this dissertation traces the changing place of the U.S. from a place of final destination and permanent settlement towards a node within a circuit of movements. I further argue that such expansion in
geography is linked to the rise of transnational structures of intimacy within contemporary fiction for envisioning social and communal life. In order to examine multi-local migration as a global phenomenon affecting the lives of various diasporic populations, this dissertation employs a comparative frame for studying migrant writing. By illuminating inter-connections among a disparate body of ethnic writing rarely discussed together, it foregrounds the importance of a multi-ethnic approach for a nuanced understanding of migration in today’s globalized world.
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This project was inspired by my family’s history of migration. In the early 1970s, my parents arrived in Germany as guest workers. During their immigrant years, my mother worked as a nurse, and my father worked as a miner. Unlike the familiar immigrant story, theirs includes a story of return. In 1989, my parents decided to return to their homeland, South Korea. I was twelve when I arrived with my family in Korea. My parent’s return to their former home marked the beginning of my own displacement from my country of birth and childhood, Germany. This dissertation was first conceived as an attempt to come to terms with the legacy of such a history and its struggles.

Without the generous support of my dissertation committee, this dissertation would not have been able to gain its current shape. I would like to thank my dissertation director Rebecca L. Walkowitz for her inspiration and guidance. I was able to grow as a thinker and writer through the many conversations that accompanied various stages of the project. Her commitment to this project enabled me to sustain my belief in it. I also would like to thank my readers, John McClure and Allan Isaac, for their deep insights and support that challenged me to broaden the scope of my thinking. I owe some of the most exciting moments of my graduate studies to them. I am also very grateful to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan for her insights as an outside reader, and the kind advice on how to further advance the project.

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Introduction

This dissertation examines how changes in migratory patterns under contemporary globalization have transformed late twentieth-century narratives of migration. I argue that post-1980s narratives radically depart from earlier forms of immigrant writing in that they attend to migratory journeys that are formed by dwelling across multiple nations. Traditionally, immigrant literature, more specifically U.S. immigrant fiction, has been studied in light of the challenges of integration and permanent settlement. The tensions arising from the migrant’s ties to the country of origin and the host country have been central to critical approaches to narratives of immigration. This dissertation argues that contemporary narratives complicate such binary logic by asking us to conceive migratory movement in more global and multi-local terms. In this dissertation, I show how this multi-local spatial logic is pronounced in two major ways. By focusing on the geographical orientation of contemporary migrant writing, this dissertation traces the changing place of the U.S. from a place of final destination and permanent settlement towards a node within a global circuit of movements. I further argue that such expansion in geography gives rise to transnational structures of intimacy within contemporary fiction.

The effects of globalization upon the literary imagination have been both profound and vast. Early critical work on the relationship between twentieth-century literature and globalization has brought our attention to narratives that engage with themes of global subject matter. In particular, narratives that examine how the transnational flow of capital, information, and people have transformed existing forms of
social and political life were central to literary studies of globalization. While early
theories of globalization primarily understood globalization as an economic phenomenon,
the cultural turn in the 1980s deepened our understanding of globalizing processes by
allowing us to examine their implications in more complex and nuanced ways.¹ It helped
us to see the contemporary moment as an age of increased global contact and inter-
connection exemplified by the worldwide circulation of cultures and people at an
unprecedented speed.² As sociologist Roland Robertson has proclaimed, “globalization as
a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of
consciousness of the world as a whole.”³ Within discourses of globalization, longstanding
models of nation-based modes of thinking that understood the nation’s border as a
distinct marker of boundaries between social and political life came to be challenged for
their limits in coming to terms with the effects of transnational structures of power upon
local forms of life.

Within literary scholarship, early studies of globalization have been deeply
informed by the critical thinking of postcolonial scholarship.⁴ Rather than seeing
globalization as a predominantly contemporary phenomenon, scholars of postcolonial
thought have reminded us that the current features of globalization are deeply grounded
in the material conditions of imperialism and colonialism. In particular, scholars working

¹ The work of Stuart Hall in “The Local and the Global” (1997), Arjun Appadurai in Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (1996) and James Clifford in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (1997) were central to shaping the shift of emphasis towards the cultural within globalization studies.
² For many scholars, the advancements in transportation and communication technology have been central to discussions of the cultural dimension of globalization.
⁴ The relationship between colonialism and globalization has been a topic of much controversy. For a close discussion of globalization studies’ relationship to postcolonial and cultural studies, see Simon Gikandi, “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality,” The South Atlantic Quarterly 100.3 (2001): 627-657; Paul Jayes, Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010).
on the intersections of postcolonial critique and globalization have shifted earlier emphasis upon the Western metropole as a key sphere for understanding of today’s globalized condition to more diverse parts of the world. Challenging former theories that have seen globalization as a homogenizing process, they have repeatedly pointed to the uneven structures of power informing globalization’s intensification.

During the last decade, however, scholars have brought attention to texts that not only critically reflect upon globalizing processes and their effects, but actively embody and enact structures of global connectivity. In this body of texts, processes of globalization are shown to organize literary worlds by taking on a more formal dimension pronounced by variations and experimentations in narrative perspective, style, and structure. Rather than being firmly grounded in a single nation or region, global narratives aim to tell stories whose geographical span encompasses a large cluster of national or urban spheres. This vast expansion of geography starkly differentiates global narratives from earlier forms of fiction. In recent years, critics have suggested a range of terms for distinguishing such narratives from more nation-bound narratives. For instance, in her 2009 essay “Fictions of the Global,” Rita Barnard points to the emergence of global narrative forms that illuminate hidden connections among lives and events separated by time and place, yet are linked by conditions of globalization. In her recent book, Caren Irr recognizes a new type of fiction she calls “the geopolitical novel” that

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5 Franco Moretti’s discussion of world texts as narratives whose “geographical frame of reference is no longer the nation-state, but a broader entity – a continent, or the world-system as a whole” could be seen to provide an early example of such attempts. Moretti does not link the expansion of geographical span to processes of contemporary globalization. Yet, his discussion of the way literary texts undergo change in form depending on the geography they portray is helpful for examining how a growing consciousness of global inter-connectedness affects literary form. See Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare(London: Verso, 1996).

“reorganizes exiting literary forms” informing nationally grounded modes of political writing in order to engage in a global scene of politics.⁷

If the novel form has been primarily associated with the nation’s domestic and public spheres, the kinds of fiction Barnard and Irr are describing take today’s growingly inter-connected and integrated world as its major point of departure and central concern. Global narratives engage with problems of conceptual frame and narrative perspective for mapping geographies of transnational contact and integration as well as their socio-political implications. Rather than merely mirroring a saturation of global flows as organizing principles shaping novelistic worlds, global narratives are deeply concerned with the changing forms of social life informing today’s inter-connected world. Global narratives provide us with conceptual tools to map the complex geographies of trans-local inter-connectivity.

Building upon the insights of literary globalization, this dissertation argues that contemporary fiction on migration is a key sub-genre of the global narrative. As I have earlier pointed out, one central feature that marks today’s global age is the increased flow of people, both voluntary and forced, across varied parts of the world. Due to stark advancements in transportation and communication technology, transnational migration today, not only occurring at a highly accelerated speed, gives rise to varied forms of diaspora, exile, and immigration. The introduction of new kinds of migration is well reflected in the growing list of terms created to describe their new features such as student migration. The chances of leaving one’s native place in order to work, study, or

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flee local forms of oppression is becoming an experience shared by a growing number of people regardless of their nationality, race, class, gender, and age. Not only driven by economic factors, political instabilities and conflicts continue to produce large populations of displaced people across the globe. As Eva Hoffman observes in her 1999 essay “The New Nomads,”

But in recent years, in Europe most markedly, great tectonic shifts in the political and social landscape have taken place, which I think are affecting the very notion of exile – and of home. For what is happening today is that cross-cultural movement has become the norm rather than the exception, which in turn means that leaving one’s native country is simply not as dramatic or traumatic as it used to be. The ease of travel and communication, combined with the loosening of borders following the changes of 1989, give rise to endless crisscrossing streams of wanderers and guest workers, nomadic adventurers and international drifters. 8

Hoffman further points out that the increased ease of travel has even changed conditions of involuntary forms of migratory travel. According to Hoffman, even in the case of the hardships of the political exile, “the vastly increased mobility and communicative possibilities of our world change the premises of their banishment … Friends can visit or phone; they know that if the government of their country changes – and political arrangements, along with everything else, have become susceptible to quicker change – they can go back, or travel back and forth” (43).

Hoffman’s observations about the changes in migratory patterns are not limited to the European sphere. Migration has been conventionally understood as a unidirectional movement from a place of origin to a single host country. Since the late 1990s, however, scholars have identified forms of border crossing that challenge conventional

understandings of migration. For instance, the seminal work of anthropologist Aiwha Ong has helped us to recognize how global capitalism has given rise to the emergence of “flexible subjects” who live “a life in constant transit” and actively seek global economic opportunities.  

According to Ong, subjects that employ flexible modes of citizenship exemplified by “the multiple-passport holder; the multicultural manager; the ‘astronaut’ shuttling across borders on business” have come to thrive in the late twentieth-century (19). Takeyuki Tsuda has pointed to “return migration” as a distinctive type of migration increasingly informing the experience of varied diasporic ethnic groups. More recently, Susan Ossman has suggested the term “serial migration” in order to identify a specific pattern of mobility that involves “successive dwelling in different countries.” For Ossman, the recognition of serial migration is important because it challenges immigration-centered understandings of migratory movement in that it consists of multiple instances of displacement.

Indeed, migration can be caused by many different factors and often it is shaped by a mix of several factors. As studies of migration have shown us, displacement is experienced very differently by each individual and group. The migrating subject’s ethnicity, race, gender, class, and sexuality deeply affect one’s experience of migratory journey and living in successive displacement. In fact, each critic’s description in the

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10 Takeyuki Tsuda, *Introduction in Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective*. ed. Tsuda (Standard: Standard UP, 2009). By return migration, Tsuda is referring to two types of diasporic returns. The first is “return migration of first-generation diasporic peoples who move back to their homeland.” Whereas, “ethnic return migration” refers to “later-generation descendants of diasporic peoples who return to their countries of ancestral origin after living outside their ethnic homelands for generations” (1). Although Tsuda’s work tends to focus on ethnic return migration, the term’s first definition is useful for understanding migration in the context of globalization.
above examples often centers upon the experience of a specific ethnic group, class, or region. For instance, while Ong’s discussion mainly draws from the experience of overseas Chinese conducting business across the Asia Pacific region, Tsuda’s ethnographic work focuses on the movements of the Brazilian Japanese from South America to Japan. In contrast to Ong and Tsuda, Ossman’s study illuminates a specific pattern of migration informing regions of the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Europe. Despite their difference in focus, the critics’ work as a collective illuminates a growing awareness of migratory movement’s new rhythms and directions. No longer limited to a single one-way movement from a place of origin to a newly adopted country of permanent settlement, migratory paths and routes of the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century are shown to take up multi-directional shapes.

Recent changes in migratory patterns and their implications have been quickly addressed by anthropology and the social sciences. Yet, the way they have led to transformations in literary accounts of migration has been less fully studied. Within American literary studies, the most dominant frame shaping our understanding of the migrant condition has been the immigrant narrative of permanent settlement. Centering upon stories of economic and cultural struggle and survival, early immigration fiction has been understood to be aspiring to partake in the adoptive country’s national literary culture. For a long time, inclusion into the American literary sphere has been considered an important political project informing immigrant writing and shaping its critical reception in the United States.12 According to many critics, the problems of gaining

12 See David Cowart, Trailing Clounds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006). Cowart defines immigrant fiction to be advancing readers’ understanding of “the durability of or changes in the American way of life” (1-2). He further states that “whatever their focus, the fictions of
citizenship, cultural assimilation, family building, and language learning have often been identified as major thematic concerns informing immigrant fiction. Often written by writers who are immigrants themselves, narratives of immigration also tend to be seen as an author’s attempt to establish himself or herself within the host country’s national literary tradition. Given this focus on problems of national subject formation, autobiographical or semi-autobiographical narratives as well as the Bildungsroman have occupied for a long time a central place within studies of migrant writing.

The transnational turn within literary and cultural studies in the 1990s marked an important turning point for studies of migration in that American immigrant writing came to be conceived within larger historical contexts. More specifically, the immigrant condition was seen to offer deep insights into the growing status of the U.S. as a global economic and military power. The critical work of ethnic diaspora studies during the last decade has allowed us to examine problems of migrant subjectivity beyond a U.S.-centered framework and instead study them in light of larger geopolitical contexts. For instance, many critics have pointed out how Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha’s Dictee reveals the presence of the U.S. as a world power during the Second World War shapes the experience of people both in the U.S. and Korea. Considerations of such interlinkages have revealed U.S. history of immigration, not only driven by domestic concerns, but also to be deeply shaped by the changes in the emigrating nation’s economy and political

 immigrant writers alternately provide windows on cultures perceived as foreign by non-immigrant readers – or they teach such readers to see the United States in new and different ways” (14). Following Cowart’s definition, immigrant fiction primarily emerges out of the experience of otherness and marginalization in America.


For instance, within Asian American studies, the discussions of Lisa Lowe and Patricia Chuh have illuminated the central place of the Bildungsroman within Asian American literature.
conditions. Studies of diaspora particularly have well shown the importance of paying close attention to the migrant’s experience for understanding the changing relationship between both the emigrating and arriving nation.

This dissertation aims to further deepen these former critical insights by directing the reader’s attention to a diverse body of texts that complicate the conventional immigrant narrative’s central focus on problems of permanent settlement as well as the binary logic between the emigrating and arriving nation. The literary narratives I examine in this dissertation introduce migratory journeys that involve dwelling in more than two nations. The binary logic is often complicated by the inclusion of a third or fourth place of arrival. For instance, in Eva Hoffman’s memoir *Lost in Translation*, immigration is experienced twice. After first emigrating from Poland to Canada, Hoffman subsequently experiences a second emigration to the U.S. in order to conduct studies. Hoffman’s life story is starkly punctuated by these two instances of settlement as well reflected in the memoir’s three-part structure with each part focusing on her time in Poland, Canada, and the United States respectively. The migratory journey in Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*, on the other hand, takes on a more fluid shape and consists of a chain of movements connecting regions of the Asia Pacific. Rather than presented as distinct moments of departure and arrival, Doc Hata’s migratory journey more resembles a seamless flow of movements. Its fluid texture is especially pronounced by the novel’s extensive use of the image of water and ocean as a dominant metaphor for addressing Doc Hata’s life trajectory across various regions of the trans-Pacific. In both narratives, the traditional immigrant narrative of permanent settlement loses its explanatory power in that it fails to address the multi-local nature of each protagonist’s migratory movements.
Thus, in many of the texts this dissertation examines, the conventional immigrant narrative is radically reworked and re-envisioned in order to respond to the contemporary conditions of migration. The following chapters provide case studies of how experimentations with narrative form, plot structure, or narrative perspective illuminate migratory movements’ new rhythms, geographies, and shapes. In order to revise former understandings of migration in the context of contemporary globalization, this dissertation suggests the concept of “multi-local migration” as an umbrella term that describes migratory paths that ask us to conceive migratory travel from a more multi-local spatial logic. I identify narratives of multi-local migration as literary texts that engage with patterns of successive border crossing movements as a prominent feature of late twentieth-century migratory life. Narratives of multi-local migration ask us to think beyond the language of permanent settlement for conceiving the migrant condition and come to terms with a range of non-permanent forms of dwelling including residence and visits of varied length. Thus, defying the teleology of permanent settlement for understanding migrant life, contemporary fiction on migration are more interested in giving expression to life stories that are shaped by contacts with multiple national spheres. Narratives of multi-local migration demonstrate that the increased global flow of people are shaped by forces that compel us to envision more flexible modes of living to effectively respond to and survive in an increasingly integrated world.

Indeed, multi-local migration as a phenomenon is not entirely new to the late twentieth century. Histories of the diaspora have given witness to forms of continued exile and repeated displacements. The experience of the Jewish and Chinese diasporas, for instance, has shown the vast dispersal of large populations across different nations
and continents. What makes such phenomenon important for this study is the way patterns of multi-local migration have begun to affect diverse populations across the world. Not only has the flow of people across national borders dramatically increased, a growing number of people experience migration more than once. Even in the case of immigrants who settle down permanently in a single host country, back-and-forth movements between the country of origin and host country enabled by the ease of travel and communication create new modes of migrant life. Recent critical work on labor migration, for instance, has shown how the precarious conditions of globalization are putting people of varied backgrounds into patterns of repeated movements, whether voluntary or forced. Thus, not being confined to the experience of a selected diasporic group of people, multi-local migration informs the life stories of many diverse people.

In order to examine multi-local migration as a global phenomenon affecting the lives of various diasporic populations, this dissertation employs a comparative frame for studying narratives of migration. Historically, migration tends to be studied in light of a specific ethnic group’s experience. In particular, such an approach has helped us to pay close attention to specific socio-historical contexts shaping a certain ethnic group’s migratory history. A comparative analysis, however, allows us to trace changes in migratory patterns under globalization. Thus, instead of focusing on the border crossing experience of a single ethnic group, I bring together the work of authors who are not often studied together due to their difference in ethnicity and nationality. What brings the authors together for the purpose of this study is their shared engagement with transnational forms of migration as well as their affective dimensions. By illuminating inter-connections among a disparate body of ethnic writing, this study suggests the
importance of a multi-ethnic approach for understanding migration in the age of increased trans-local contact and inter-connection.

In the works this dissertation examines the U.S. sphere is frequently addressed not as a place of final destination and permanent settlement, but as a transitory place within a circuitry of movements. Even in the narratives that seem to feature the U.S. as a place of permanent settlement such as Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*, Doc Hata’s departure from Bedley Run in the novel’s final pages illuminates the States as part of a longer history of migration. The arrival to the U.S. holds a different place in each of the narratives the following chapters examine. Yet, as a collective, the texts of this dissertation foreground the U.S. as a central hub where different strains of migration meet and converge. They do in various degrees support Brian Edwards and Dilip Gaonkar’s recent suggestion of the United States as “a node in the global circuit” through which diasporic subjects “pass through” rather than arrive at or return to for permanent settlement.15 Because of their engagement with the U.S. sphere, many of the narratives I examine in the following chapters have often been considered to be partaking in an American literary tradition. For the majority of the authors I examine, the U.S. has been a main place of residence. My reading intervenes in former critical approaches to these texts by suggesting that narratives of multi-local migration require us to locate the experience of immigration to the U.S. within larger geographical contexts. Frequently, the migrant’s American experience is closely interwoven with a set of stories unfolding in different nations.

A comparative analysis is also useful because it helps us map out contemporary fiction’s interest in tracing affective structures that operate on trans-local and global scales. In addition to tracing migration’s multi-directional flows, contemporary fiction on migration is interested in giving expression to social ties and networks that are formed by transnational contact and encounters. Historically, the ties of family, ethnicity, and nation have held an important place within studies of prose fiction in general. In particular, the novel has been understood as a genre that put into foreground state-empowered structures of attachment and belonging which illuminate the nation-state’s central place for understanding an individual’s life. In this regard, the migrant condition has tended to be associated with the difficulties of claiming full belonging to structures of attachment endorsed by the state such as marriage, family, and national citizenry. This dissertation argues that late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century narratives of migration bring attention to intimacies arising from the migrant’s link to multiple places. At first, such structures of intimacy are not easily recognizable because they lack the language for social recognition. Read from a state-centered perspective, the ties of global contact appear to be rather fragile and weak. Yet, tracing their transnational structures allows us to map emergent social worlds that operate on a global scale.

The emergences of a structure of intimate feeling linked to the geographies of multi-local migration are a major focus of each chapter’s discussion. Each chapter demonstrates how the thematic and formal concerns of contemporary migration narratives shape particular ways of mapping border crossing movements’ geographic and affective complexities. While in some texts, multi-local migration closely informs the narrative’s content, in other cases it is more directly linked to problems of form. By
reading literary texts alongside theories and literary criticism on diaspora, globalization, and migration, each chapter demonstrates how each author’s project explores the possibilities of transnational affective structures’ political and social meaning.

The first chapter sets the context for the emergence of such literature. It turns to Eva Hoffman’s memoir *Lost in Translation* (1989) and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s experimental text *Dictee* (1982) in order to show how both texts break with the traditional immigrant narrative’s dominant logic of permanent settlement. In both texts, migratory travel begins to take the shape of an epic of multiple border crossings which critiques the teleology of assimilation and permanent settlement for understanding immigrant writing. The autobiographical voice of Hoffman’s memoir critically reflects upon the limits of the genre of immigrant autobiography for narrating Hoffman’s migratory journey across three nations. In *Dictee*, the experimentation with second person voice, an understudied feature of the text, creates a mobile perspective that asks the reader to closely engage with a disparate set of migratory contexts that highly differ in time and space. I argue that both Hoffman’s highly self-reflexive autobiographical voice and Cha’s usage of second person narration allow both texts to locate the experience of migration in a more global context.

While the dissertation’s first chapter focuses on early attempts to conceive the immigrant experience in global terms, later chapters demonstrate how contemporary fiction further advances such attempts. In particular, I am interested in examining how contemporary fiction about migration stages the formation of transnational affective structures linked to the geographies of multi-local travel. Narratives of multi-local migration map social worlds emerging from increased global flows and contact. The
second chapter begins by tracing patterns of migration in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost* (2000). Set during the Sri Lankan civil war, Ondaatje’s novel tends to be read as a text about the violence of inter-ethnic conflict and its traumatic effects upon the postcolonial state’s citizens. *Anil’s Ghost*, however, is also a novel about a diasporic subject’s unusual form of return to her native place. Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan born forensic specialist who holds a British passport and works for an international organization, briefly returns to Sri Lanka in order to conduct research. Focusing on how the solving of a political murder case leads to Anil’s unexpected bond with her Sri Lankan co-workers, the chapter demonstrates how the intimacies of friendship becomes a test case for a transnational model citizenship that includes the migrant figure who leads a life in constant transit.

If the language of friendship in *Anil’s Ghost* allows us to envision close connection beyond the ties of family, ethnicity, and nation, chapter three demonstrates how the network form is central to the giving shape to transnational intimacy in Aleksandar Hemon’s *Nowhere Man* (2002). Hemon’s writing enacts the structure of network by interweaving a disparate body of short narratives that recount the protagonist’s dwelling in different nations. Defying a migrant-centered perspective, Jozef Pronek’s multi-local life story emerges out of a collective account of narrators who came into contact with Pronek in various places. Each section focuses on the affective intensities each of the narrators experiences during their encounter with Pronek, which resemble the desires of sexual and physical intimacy. I argue that the novel’s network-like structure shapes a decentered frame for tracing migration’s global shape.
My final chapter examines how Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1996) employs an ocean-centered frame for tracing migratory travel across multiple nations. Told from the perspective of Doc Hata, the novel reflects upon a series of vexed intimate encounters informing Hata’s life story which centers upon encounters with two historical Korean diasporic figures, the Korean comfort woman and the Korean transnational adoptee. I argue that the novel’s oceanic frame, departing from an emphasis upon the U.S., foregrounds the trans-Pacific contours of the Korean diaspora. The chapter further argues that a set of adoptive ties, that deeply inform Hata’s migratory life, are not only central to the novel’s oceanic frame, but also offer a vision of family and kinship beyond the bounds of filial connection.
Chapter 1

Multiple Beginnings: From Immigration to Global Epic in Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*

In her 2009 article, “Fictions of the Global,” Rita Barnard discusses the emergence of narratives within contemporary film and fiction which she calls “fictions of the global.” Following Barnard’s definition, fictions of the global share a deep interest in giving narrative form to features of globalization such as “international finance, worldwide crime syndicates, labor migration, tourism, and terrorism” (211). According to Barnard, however, it is their formal experimentation along with their thematic that makes such narratives global. Not only defined by the wide extension in geographical coverage, novels of the world face the challenges of telling stories in new ways. New plots and characters as well as new coordinates of time and space do emerge from global narratives that challenge dominant notions of “human interconnection, causality, temporality, social space, and so forth” (208). For instance, in her reading of David Mitchell’s 1999 novel, *Ghostwritten*, Barnard observes how a digital entity that acts like “a surveillance satellite-like point of view” and the novel’s multiple first person narrators shape “a mobile optic” that effectively traces the hidden interlinkages among the novel’s different geographical locations (212).

Written in 1982 and 1989 respectively, the writings of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* and Eva Hoffman’s memoir *Lost in Translation* precede the age of increased globalization. Considering the discourse of globalization gained much attention in the 1980s, both texts were published at a time scholars started to actively explore analytical
frameworks to conceive the world as a whole. Although not often perceived in this way, both narratives’ experimentation register a shift towards more global configurations of the migrant experience. In fact, frames of thinking and historicizing that operate on a global scale emerge in the work of both authors. Until the 1980s, immigrant literature was predominantly understood through nation-based models of assimilation and permanent settlement. To a certain extent, both texts reflect various aspects of the familiar immigrant story. *Lost in Translation* is a memoir that centers upon Hoffman’s own experience of immigration to Canada and the United States. Different moments of *Dictee* deeply resonate with facts about Cha’s own immigration from South Korea to the United States.

The work of Hoffman and Cha, however, depart from the conventional immigrant narrative in that they conceive the immigrant experience through an epic of multiple border crossings. In both cases, this is achieved by critical reflections upon the imaginative limits of dominant genres and narrative structures of immigrant writing such as immigrant autobiography. In this chapter, I begin by turning to Hoffman’s memoir *Lost in Translation* and examine how the author’s attempt to give full expression to the way her dwelling in three nations calls forth a radical re-envisioning of the American immigrant autobiography. I argue that the memoir’s distinct three-part structure illuminates her arrivals to Canada and the United States to be part of a global epic of Eastern European emigration spanning the twentieth-century. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to Cha’s experimental writing in *Dictee* and examine how envisioning the epic form in the second person voice allows the author to create a narrative about
migration whose scope encompasses a wide range of migratory contexts that radically
differ in time and space.

**The Shape of My Story**

Eva Hoffman’s memoir *Lost in Translation* reflects upon the author’s successive emigrations from Poland to Canada and subsequently to the United States. The life trajectory’s three geographies are well foregrounded by the memoir’s divided structure. As the section titles “Paradise,” “Exile,” and “The New World” suggest, Hoffman’s life story is organized by three distinct parts. The memoir’s first section “Paradise” opens with the moment of Hoffman’s departure from Poland. “It is April 1959,” announces Hoffman’s autobiographical voice, “I’m standing at the railing of the Batory’s upper deck, and I feel that my life is ending. I am looking out at the crowd that has gathered on the shore to see the ship’s departure from Gdynia … We can’t be leaving all this behind - but we are” (3). In this scene, we encounter the thirteen-year-old Hoffman standing on a ship’s deck headed to Canada with her family. We learn that the rising Anti-Semitic sentiments in post-war Poland had been causing the family’s decision to emigrate.

Framed by the family’s journey from Poland to Canada, “Paradise” accounts Hoffman’s years of growing up in Cracow. Rather than strictly following a chronological order, the section’s narrative juxtaposes a series of episodes that offer glimpses into Hoffman’s Polish childhood. Referred to as “the narrative of my childhood,” the first section’s account is deeply imbued with feelings of nostalgia. For several critics, such a nostalgic view has been rather problematic in terms of distorting the political realities of post-war Poland. Hoffman’s autobiographical voice, however, is highly aware that the
section’s narrative is constructing a particular version of her Polish past. At a certain point, Hoffman tells us that despite the fact that Cracow of that time was surrounded by “dark political rumblings, memories of wartime suffering, and daily struggle for existence,” when the time came to leave, she felt as if “being pushed out of the happy, safe enclosures of Eden” (5). Hoffman’s account of her years in Poland ends with the ship approaching Montreal’s harbor.

The memoir’s subsequent two sections, “Exile” and “The New World,” center upon two different chapters of Hoffman’s migratory life. Opening with Hoffman’s arrival in Canada, the narrative of “Exile” recounts Hoffman’s early years spent in Vancouver’s Jewish-Polish immigrant community. The family’s economic hardships as well as Hoffman’s own challenges of adjusting to Canada’s life and culture deeply inform major parts of the section. Immigrant life in Canada is primarily described through the poignancy of geographical and linguistic displacement caused by the sudden rupture from one’s native place. The memoir’s final section titled “The New World,” on the other hand, depicts Hoffman’s student migration from Canada to the United States. It mainly features moments of her undergraduate and graduate studies in the States. In the section’s opening pages we learn that Hoffman is living in New York City and enjoying a successful career as a publisher and writer. In stark contrast to the former struggles informing her life as an immigrant in Canada, Hoffman’s American life is more depicted through the process of finding a new medium for articulating her notion of self and belonging particularly through her changing relationship with the English language. If the Canadian part of Hoffman’s life story is marked by the stark pains of being deprived of the comforts of
one’s native language, the final section attests to her growing fluency in English as both
speaker and writer.

Because of its subject matter, Hoffman’s memoir tends to be read as an example
of immigrant autobiography, a genre that particularly received much critical attention in
the 1980s.\textsuperscript{16} It was the rise of ethnic studies that shaped the growing interest in life
narratives that explore the experience of immigration. \textit{Lost in Translation} is a memoir
that has been particularly considered an immigrant’s story of successful Americanization.
Mark Krupnick, for instance, reads Hoffman’s memoir as a “Jewish autobiography” that
is a “variant of the familiar story of an immigrant’s Americanization.”\textsuperscript{17}
Similarly, Madeline Levine has identified the memoir as “a confessional immigrant’s tale.”\textsuperscript{18}
Among its many features, the memoir’s final section which portrays Hoffman well settled
in New York City and leading a successful career as publisher and writer has particularly
led critics to read it as a tale of immigrant success.\textsuperscript{19} As one critic has remarked, “the
completion of her autobiography is in itself a marker of her successful assimilation.”\textsuperscript{20}
Considering early parts of the memoir primarily center upon the disorienting effects of
settling in a new country, the memoir’s final section depicting Hoffman’s years in the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} See, for example, Betty Bergland, “Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing the
  Other” in \textit{Autobiography & Postmodernism}, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Leigh Gilmore (Amherst: U of
  Michigan P, 1994). Bergland states that “autobiographies and autobiographical studies focused on ethnic
groups and women have proliferated” from the 1970s “in the wake of feminist scholarship and the
burgeoning field of ethnic studies” (131).
\item \textsuperscript{17} Mark Krupnick, “Assimilation in Recent American Jewish Autobiographies,” \textit{Contemporary Literature}
  34.3 (1993): 454.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Madeline Levine, “Eva Hoffman: Forging a Postmodern Identity” in \textit{Living in Translation: Polish
\item \textsuperscript{19} Many critics have pointed out that the memoir’s final scene that depicts Hoffman in the middle of a
  flower garden during a visit to a friend’s place suggests settlement.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Sarah Phillips Casteel, “Eva Hoffman’s Double Emigration: Canada as the Site of Exile in \textit{Lost in
\end{itemize}
States seems to confirm a familiar version of the immigrant’s tale of successful settlement in the New World.

However, reading Lost in Translation through the frame of immigrant autobiography, although illuminating important aspects of the memoir, fails to fully grasp its narrative complexity. Far from following the conventions of immigrant literature, the memoir’s overall organization rather deviates from the familiar immigrant’s tale. As Sarah Casteel has argued, “In the critical literature, the Canadian portions of the narrative are discussed as though they were continuous with the American portions, the term ‘American’ applied indiscriminately to either side of the border.”21 Canada’s place in the memoir, however, as Casteel notes, is differentiated from its American counter-part. The reader is asked to see the Canadian part of Hoffmann’s life story as a distinctive stage.

Furthermore, the autobiographical voice of Lost in Translation is highly conscious of its own process of structuring the author’s migratory life into a particular shape. In a recent interview, when asked why she chose to write in the memoir form, Hoffman gives the following answer:

I actually came to the idea of writing a memoir reluctantly. I knew I wanted to write about living in a second language and in a second culture, and the relationship of language and culture to the self. I wanted to write about this because in America – where I was living at the time – there is a large immigrant literature, but it has traditionally been a very narrow literature about stories of struggle and triumph. I thought that the internal trajectory of emigration had not been talked about. I thought of writing a novel, or about Eastern European writers who had been exiled. But I decided that I wanted to write about the intersection between subjectivity and the external world. That was at the heart of it. Slowly I came to the idea of writing a memoir.22

By directing attention to problems of language learning, Hoffman illuminates several important aspects of *Lost in Translation*. She reveals that she intended to explore in her writing the intricate relationship between language, place, and identity in the context of migration. More important for this chapter’s discussion, however, Hoffman’s comment raises a fundamental question with regard to what constitutes an immigrant’s tale. Pointing to the central presence of “stories of struggle and triumph” within American immigrant literature, Hoffman observes that critical understandings of migration had been limited to a certain narrative frame and logic. Taking Hoffman’s critique of the imaginative limits of immigrant writing as a key moment of departure, my reading of the memoir suggests that *Lost in Translation* is an enactment of such critique.

**From Immigrant Autobiography to Migrant Epic**

In his study of the immigrant autobiography, William Boelhower notes the presence of a common language informing the genre which he calls the “immigrant autobiographical macrotext” (30). A central feature of the macrotext is the tension between the Old-World and the New-World which is foregrounded by the immigrant protagonist’s journey from the place of origin to the emigrating country. Following Boelhower’s definition, the immigrant autobiography points to the tension of “two cultural systems, a culture of the present and the future and a culture of memory” and strives to locate both systems in a single narrative by offering a comparison and evaluation of them (29). Driven by the utopian expectations of the American Dream, the immigrant autobiography follows the general rhetoric of American autobiography and

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culture whose typology of the self, according to Boelhower, is constructed on the myth of transformation and recovery of an Edenic condition. As he further notes, the immigrant autobiography offers “a system of expectations and possible worlds” as shown through “the transformation (Americanization) of the protagonist during which process he confronts the utopian grammar of the New World for what it actually represents” (29). The protagonist’s passage from one cultural space to another during which “he must impossibly translate his Old-World identity and New-World dream into a real New-World self” shapes the immigrant autobiography’s narrative complexity (35). In Boelhower’s schema, the immigrant autobiography gives witness to the emergence of a newly defined American self in the modern age.

Drawing from the examples of European immigrant autobiographies published in the early twentieth century, Boelhower’s model offers deep insights into early forms of immigrant life writing. The immigrant autobiography is particularly shown to partake in and advance critical discussion of American modern life and culture in that it revises early models of American selfhood. “The specialty of ethnic autobiobraphical signification, its unique semiotic jeu,” states Boelhower, “largely consists in consciously re-elaborating or simply rewriting the received behavioral script of the rhetorically well-defined American self” (125). The immigrant autobiographical voice, not only aware of its marginal status within American society, following Boelhower’s discussion, actively seeks inclusion into the American literary landscape.

24 In his book, Boelhower primarily focuses on the examples of Italian American autobiographies such as The Soul of an Immigrant (1921) written by Constantine Panunzio and Son of Italy (1924) written by Pascal D’Angelo. The book’s introduction, however, includes references to the work of a wide range of early European immigrants such as Mary Antin, Edward Steiner, and Edward Bok.
In her critical response, Sau-Ling Wong challenges Boelhower’s understanding of the genre by pointing to its limits for trans-ethnic applicability through the examples of Chinese immigrant autobiographies. Wong’s critique revises Boelhower’s understanding of the genre by bringing close attention to features of immigrant autobiographical writing overlooked in his discussion. For instance, while Boelhower prioritizes the first-generation immigrant experience, Wong makes a clear distinction between narratives written by foreign-born and American-born writers. Like Boelhower, however, Wong approaches the immigrant autobiography as a distinct sub-genre of the American autobiography. She begins her essay with the following observation that despite “the centrality of the immigrant experience in American history,” autobiographies written by immigrants have held only a peripheral presence within American autobiographical studies (142). Given its neglected status, Boelhower’s theoretical model, despite its limits, is significant because it offers “a book-length study devoted to immigrant autobiography” and attempts a “coherent theoretical account of it” (142).

Autobiographical writing is a genre Hoffman is not only highly aware of but in fact frequently refers to in her own memoir. At various moments of the memoir, Hoffman invokes a list of well-known literary figures whose work has been closely associated with the genre of autobiography. The list of names includes Vladimir Nabokov, Henry Adams, and Mary Antin. Although frequently discussed as an example of American immigrant autobiography by many critics, Hoffman links her memoir to varied strains of autobiographical writing. In fact, each section of the memoir, in addition to being set in

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different geographical locations, closely engages with disparate traditions of
autobiographical writing. For instance, early parts of the memoir particularly are put into
cornerstone with the work of Eastern European writers who wrote under conditions of
exile. Thus, instead of writing itself to an American literary tradition and American
notion of self, Hoffman links her writing to an Eastern European history of exilic writing.
In particular, in the memoir’s first two sections, “Paradise” and “Exile,” Hoffman
invokes the work of Eastern European émigré writers as a major point of reference for
recounting her Polish past and first immigration to Canada. Hoffman’s narrative unfolds
over a web of diverse literary affiliations for addressing different moments of her life.

Vladimir Nabokov, among others, is a central literary figure that guides
Hoffman’s own recollection of her years in Canada. Born in Russia, Nabokov spent most
of his life in exile in a variety of Western nations including the U.S. Hoffman notes that
in “Speak, Memory,” Nabokov makes the poetic, or the playful, speculation that Russian
children before the Revolution – and his exile – were blessed with a surfeit of sensual
impressions to compensate them for what was to come” (114). Nabokov’s memoir Speak, Memory was published in 1966 during his residence in the United States. The memoir is a
literary recollection of Nabokov’s childhood in Russia, a country he was permanently
exiled from at an early age. Nabokov’s treatment of his Russian childhood enables
Hoffman to come to terms with her own feelings of nostalgia she experiences during her
years in Canada:

Nostalgia is a source of poetry, and a form of fidelity. It is also a species of melancholia, which used to be thought of as an illness. As I walk the streets of Vancouver, I am pregnant with the images of Poland, pregnant and sick. Tesknota throws a film over everything around me, and directs me inwards. The largest
presence within me is the welling up of absence, of what I have lost. This pregnancy is also a phantom pain. (115)

Hoffman further notes that she does not know “what to do with this private heaviness, this pregnancy without the possibility of birth” (115). Her acquaintances of the Vancouver Jewish-Polish community recommend that she should forget what she has left behind. “It wasn’t any good back there, our Jewish acquaintances say, why would you even want to visit, they didn’t want you anyway” (115). Such recommendations, however, lead Hoffman to question the wisdom of such thought. “Can I really extract what I’ve been from myself so easily?,” she asks, “Can I jump continents as if skipping ropes?” (115).

For Hoffman, it is the wisdom of a particular group of Eastern European writers who have written under the conditions of exile that provide an answer to her questions. The writing of Nabokov and Milosz teach her “the virtues of true memory” (116). As she states, “Nabokov unashamedly reinvokes and revives his childhood in the glorious colors of tesknota” (116). Along with Nabokov, Milan Kundera and Czeslaw Milosz are other important figures that teach Hoffman how to relate to the Polish past. “Milan Kundera,” she states, “knows that a person who forgets easily is a Don Juan of experience, promiscuous and repetitive, suffering from the unbearable lightness of being. Czeslaw Milosz remembers the people and places of his youth with the special tenderness reserved for objects of love that are no longer cherished by others” (116). Hoffman constructs early parts of her memoir by drawing from the insights of these émigré writers.

The group of writers she evokes in this passage share the experience of permanent exile from their Eastern European homeland. Each of the writers took up exilic residence
in the West at different moments of their lives. Nabokov emigrated with his family from his native country Russia after the Russian Revolution. First living in Germany, he moved to France and subsequently to the United States in 1940. If Nabokov serves as an early example of exilic writing, Kundera and Milosz speak to a later generation of Eastern European writers who followed similar paths. Born in Czechoslovakia, Kundera has been living in exile in France since 1975. Milosz is a Polish poet, translator, and literary critic who first sought exile in France and later in the United States after the end of the Second World War. As if following the path of such exilic history, Lost in Translation’s first section “Paradise” is shaped by a similar attitude towards Hoffman’s Polish childhood. The second section “Exile” reflects a similar stance. By invoking Nabokov, Kundera, and Milosz, Hoffman not only acknowledges the influence of Eastern European émigré writers, but also affiliates her own writing with this specific literary history. Moreover, her literary affiliation with such figures brings attention to an Eastern European history of emigration unfolding on a global scale.

Towards an Eastern European Global Imagination

While earlier moments of the memoir forge literary affiliations with Eastern European exilic writing, later parts recounting Hoffman’s second emigration from Canada to the United States arises out of a critical response to the conventions of the American immigrant autobiography. In the second section’s final pages, Hoffman depicts her departure from Canada. We learn that she is leaving in order to pursue undergraduate

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26 From 1962 until 1982, Milosz was a professor in the Slavic Literature department at University of Berkeley.
studies in the United States. With her impending arrival in the U.S., Hoffman reflects upon the life story of Mary Antin.

Among the many immigrant tales I’ve come across, there is one for which I feel a particular affection. This story was written at the beginning of the century, by a young woman named Mary Antin, and in certain details it so closely resembles my own, that its author seems to be some amusing poltergeist, come to show me that whatever belief in my own singularity I may possess is nothing more than a comical vanity. (162)

The immigrant tale Hoffman is referring to in this passage is Mary Antin’s autobiography, *The Promised Land: The Autobiography of a Russian Immigrant* (1912). In many aspects, the biographical details of Antin’s life story strongly resonate with Hoffman’s own. Born of Jewish descent, Antin grew up in Russia and came to the States with her mother and younger brothers in 1892. They came to join her father who had arrived earlier and made preparations for the family’s settlement in Boston. Antin was fourteen when she arrived and settled in the States. Similar to Hoffman’s family, Antin came to the States during “one of those enormous movements that washed Jewish populations across the ocean” (162). Like Hoffman, Antin had a talent for language and quickly established herself as a literary figure at an early age. In 1899, she published her first book *From Polotzk to Boston* which depicts her journey from Russia to the United States.27 Among her many writings, *The Promised Land* was central to establishing her as a canonical figure within the American literary scene. To this day, Antin’s autobiography has been considered a

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paradigmatic example of the rhetoric of assimilation within American immigrant life writing.28

Given the historical significance of Antin’s autobiography within the U.S. history of immigration, Hoffman’s invocation of Antin and her writing at first seems to register a shift in literary affiliation. If the memoir’s first two sections foreground the presence of Eastern European émigré writers who chose to live in exile, *Lost in Translation*’s final section “The New World” engages with the immigrant autobiography for configuring its shape. Although initially drawn to Antin’s life story, Hoffman announces that her American story will be very different from that of Antin’s.

Ah, how I recognize Mary Antin’s youthful chutzpah, her desire to be happy and her troubles, her combination of adolescent shyness and a precocious maturity forced on her by her circumstances! But once she diverges from telling the tale and gives us her views of it, all similarities between us end. For, despite the hardships that leap out from the pages, Mary insists on seeing her life as a fable of pure success: success for herself, for the idea of assimilation, for the great American experiment. She ends her autobiography, entitled *The Promised Land*, as she is about to enter college and pursue her vocation as a natural scientist and she gives us to understand that everything worked out wondrously well from then on. (163)

In her reading of Antin’s autobiography, Hoffman points out that the teleology of assimilation structuring the narrative of *The Promised Land* fails to address the rich affective dimensions of emigration. She recognizes “a trace of the other story behind the story of triumphant progress” that remains underexplored. As she notes, “there is only one hint that there is another side of the story and it comes in the preface” (163). It involves “the pang, the fear, the wonder, and the joy” of the processes of “uprooting, 28 Gaining popularity during a time autobiography was a male-dominated genre, Antin’s work was groundbreaking in many ways and remains a central text in major anthologies of immigrant and ethnic autobiographical writing.
transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development” (163). Far from being Antin’s own literary choice, however, Hoffman concludes that the absence of such story in *The Promised Land* had been determined by “the sentiments of her time” (164). As she further notes, “The America of her time gave her certain categories within which to see herself” (164). It was “a belief in self-improvement, in perfectability of the species, in moral uplift – and those categories led her to foreground certain parts of her own experience, and to throw whole chunks of it into the barely visible background” (164). Following Hoffman’s description, the frame organizing Antin’s life narrative is more limiting than revealing.

The America Hoffman arrives at in the 1960s is depicted to be very different from that of Antin’s time. “A hundred years ago, I might have written a success story, without much self-doubt or equivocation,” says Hoffman (164). She tells us Antin’s is an America that no longer sustains the prospects of “a steady, self-assured ego, the sturdy energy of forward movement, and the excitement of being swept up into a greater national purpose” (164). Instead, she recognizes having come to “a different America, and instead of a central ethos, I have been given the blessings and the terrors of multiplicity” (164). Under such conditions, the shape of one’s life story no longer can be “one of simple progress” and “straight narrative becomes impossible” (164). “Any confidently thrusting story line,” she further notes, “would be a sentimentality an excess, an exaggeration, an untruth” (164). Unlike Antin’s immigrant tale, Hoffman anticipates that her story in the States will be one that is rather highly fragmented. She announces that she will be made “of fragments” and her “consciousness of them” (164).
Hoffman, her own consciousness of constructing such a narrative is what makes her an immigrant.

Hoffman’s self-portrayal in the memoir’s final section “The New World,” which depicts her life in the United States, consists of loosely put together pieces of information. Many critics have grounded their reading of Hoffman’s memoir as a conventional immigrant’s tale in the section’s opening scene that features Hoffman present at a party. For many critics, it is a central scene that asserts her successful assimilation into American life and culture: “It’s April 1979, and I’m standing in a crowded living room on the Upper West Side, sipping wine and surveying the surroundings” (167). Hoffman’s autobiographical voice reveals that she is currently working at The New York Times and feels well settled in New York City. She proclaims, “I’m a recognizable example of a species: a professional New York woman, and a member of a postwar international new class; somebody who feels at ease in the world, and is getting on with her career relatively well” (170). Although claiming herself to be “a recognizable example” of her time, the announcement is complicated by the comment she makes a couple of lines later. Back home before falling asleep, she thinks, “How strange what I’ve become, and then words cease and, in my drowsiness, I become an animal thing I’ve always known, only myself” (171). With these final thoughts, the section’s narrative goes back further in time and recounts the early days of Hoffman’s arrival to the States where she finds herself “in a new country again” (171).

Except for this scene, however, the narrative of the final section rather reads as a pastiche of different moments of Hoffman’s years in the States. In fact, it centers upon a web of affiliations informing her time in the U.S. During the first half of the section,
Hoffman’s narrative is preoccupied with questions of assimilation into American life and culture, which she announces early in the section as an impossible task. She describes herself as an “incompletely assimilated immigrant” that is “a partial American, a sort of resident alien” (220-21). Defying the teleology of settlement, Hoffman comes to understand her life in the U.S. as a shuttling back and forth between circles of American and Polish friends. The process of translating across cultures emerges as a model of immigrant life in Hoffman’s writing. “I have to make a shift in the innermost ways,” she states, “I have to translate myself. But if I’m to achieve this without being assimilated – that is, absorbed – by my new world, the translation has to be careful, the turns of the psyche unforced” (211).

Thus, although primarily set in the United States, the narrative of “The New World” Hoffman depicts in her memoir, consists of an expanding web of affiliations that reaches beyond the U.S. sphere and brings her into close contact with a wide range of Polish or Jewish populations living in exile. Although residing in the States, Hoffman finds herself within a global circle of both personal and literary affiliations. If her early life narrative arises out of a critical conversation with the work of early twentieth-century exilic writing, the memoir’s final section establishes her as someone who bears witness to various forms of exilic and immigrant life. As the memoir proceeds, New York City is foregrounded as a hub that mediates Hoffman’s ties to varied Polish and Jewish populations living in exile ranging from the Jewish-Polish immigrant community in Vancouver to the Polish émigré intellectual circle in New York City. America is also the place where she unexpectedly re-connects with former acquaintances and friends from Cracow who emigrated to Israel. Although often not perceived in this way, Hoffman’s
Americanization consists of her expanding circle of intimacy with various Eastern European emigre populations and communities. For instance, the unexpected encounter with Zofia, a former childhood acquaintance, at Harvard leads to a reunion with Hoffman’s childhood first love, Marek, who emigrated with his family to Israel before Hoffman’s family left for Canada. “The contemporary world,” she states, “by the sheer thickness of events and the incessant movement of people over the globe, multiplies coincidence” (223). Sometime after meeting her Polish acquaintance, Hoffman tells us that she re-connected with Marek in Boston. It is through Marek that she learns about his life in Israel after leaving Cracow.

In particular, Hoffman’s trip to Cracow serves as a significant turning point in the section. Hoffman states that she first attempted to travel to Cracow in 1968, but failed due to the political climate of that time. “I was literally baffled in my desire to go to Poland once before, in 1968. An unfortunate year to choose for going there, a year when most of the Jews remaining in the country were being forced to emigrate by a campaign of official and officially stimulated anti-Semitism” (232). The campaign Hoffman is referring to here is the 1967-1968 anti-Semitic campaign led by the leading Communist Party of Poland. It is in 1977 that Hoffman tries again to gain a visa and this time succeeds. During her visit to Cracow, Hoffman re-connects with former childhood friends and acquaintances. When asked by one of her Polish friends whether she regrets that she didn’t stay in Poland, Hoffman realizes that she would probably have had to leave Cracow anyway. “In 1968, and in the wake of the anti-Semitic purges that followed student riots,” she remarks, “I would probably have been forced to emigrate, as were most of the Jews who were still in Poland then” (240). This scenario of a potential
emigration makes Hoffman wonder about its consequences. “I would have left regretfully, perhaps heartbrokenly,” she notes, “but consciously: a different kind of departure from a despairing and blind adolescent uprooting. Where would I have gone? Israel, America, West Germany, Sweden?” (240). Although this version of emigration never realized, Hoffman’s contemplation of its possibility unravels another key moment of mass migration affecting the lives of Jewish Poles. In fact, the majority of Jews who had remained in Poland after the Second World War emigrated as a consequence of the government’s anti-Semitic campaign.\textsuperscript{29}

Back in New York, Hoffman encounters a more recent wave of Polish emigration in the 1980s. “The Poles have begun arriving in New York around 1981,” she observes, “the courtesy of General Jaruzelski, and yet another turnabout – the declaration of martial law – in the perpetual drama of Polish events” (255). This time it is a different kind of war that has brought this new generation of exiles. While the emigration of Hoffman’s family was deeply affected by the Second World War and its aftermath, the arrival of Polish emigrants in the 1980s is a result of the political instabilities of late twentieth-century Eastern Europe. As Hoffman describes her close circle of Polish friends, “Elka, a robust blond woman in her fifties, spent the war years in England; her father was a parachutist courier between the Polish army in the West and the resistance forces within Poland. Jurek’s parents were both in the resistance; his mother, aside from acting as a contact person for the delivery of arms, organized poetry readings in a Warsaw apartment” (254). In this circle of emigrants, the conversation turns to “Poland’s present situation”

(254). As Hoffman observes, “The Question of Poland is the perpetual knot, the great conundrum” (255). By foregrounding her close affiliation with the “New York Poles,” Hoffman emerges as a figure affiliated with a disparate group of émigré populations across various nations. Hoffman’s life narrative gives shape to a global epic of Eastern European emigration.

“Beginning Wherever You Wish”: An Epic Without Beginning

In Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*, the migrant condition takes on many different forms. Instead of portraying the migrant experience through a single storyline, Cha’s text interweaves a heterogeneous body of narrative pieces that starkly differ in genre, perspective, and language. Although major parts of the text take the form of poetry and narrative prose, *Dictee*’s formal style includes a range of visual images such as photos, maps, and calligraphy. The text frequently moves between different languages. English is the text’s primary language. French, Chinese, and Korean, however, inform various parts of the text. As a collective whole *Dictee*’s narrative fragments allude to a wide range of migratory contexts such as the experience of displacement, immigration, and exile. For instance, early moments of the text feature processes of language learning as shown by the introduction of dictation and translation passages from one language to another. Later parts of *Dictee* introduce passages that depict a diverse set of migrant experiences such as living in exile as well as the bodily experience of passing through the checkpoints of a nation’s border.

Published during a time when autobiography and realist aesthetics dominantly informed immigrant literature, *Dictee*’s experimental style initially did not receive much
critical attention as a narrative about migration. In fact, it was not until the early 1990s that *Dictee* came to be understood as a text about the immigrant experience, more specifically, the Korean American experience. Within Asian American scholarship, *Dictee* came to be recognized as a text that interrogates the logic of cultural nationalism as a dominant paradigm defining Asian American studies. It was the collection of essays exclusively dedicated to the discussion of *Dictee* titled *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (1994) that made Cha’s text central to the discourse of Asian American criticism in the 1990s.30 The readings in the collection, which includes the work of Lisa Lowe, Elaine Kim, and Shelley Sunn Wong were highly influential in shaping the text’s reception within the Asian American scholarly community. While earlier critics tended to focus on narrative elements of the text that specifically relate to a politics of difference, more recently, the critical readings of Josephine Park and Timothy Yu have deepened our understanding of *Dictee*’s formal features by linking them to the post-1970s avant-garde discourse and modernist aesthetics.31

As shown by the history of the text’s critical reception, *Dictee* is a text that defies easy understanding.32 Due to its genre-bending and multivalent nature, *Dictee* lends itself to a variety of critical readings. For critical approaches, critics have tended to focus on certain elements of the text and discuss it in light of a specific political discourse or literary genre. Instead of prioritizing a single mode of writing and representation, however, the text is more interested in addressing the migrant condition through a

31 Shelley Wong’s essay “Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*” included in *Writing Self and Nation* was an early work that foregrounds the text’s lyric and epic modes. For later criticism on *Dictee*’s poetics, see Josephine Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007); Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009).
32 For a detailed account of *Dictee*’s reception history, see chapter four of *Race and the Avant-Garde*. 
peculiar kind of cross-genre dialogue which is mediated by continued shifts in narrative perspective and voice. The text’s different narrative pieces are loosely held together by the ambiguities of narrative voice. The text’s title *Dictee* invokes the presence of a female subject whom we are to understand in light of a language context. The French title literally translates as someone dictated. Aside from this information, however, the text’s title subject is not further specified. Moreover, although the title foregrounds the presence of a single narrated subject, it is not very clear whether the text is about this very figure. Instead, Cha’s writing illuminates the co-presence of multiple subjects as marked by the proliferation of unidentified pronouns “I,” “you,” and “she.”

Interestingly, the text’s narrative ambiguity, although frequently noted by critics, has gained less full critical attention. Criticism on *Dictee* tends to speak of a single narrator who is identified as female, Korean American, and postcolonial.33 Moreover, as Sue Kim points out, “Despite critics’ theoretical orientation towards heterogeneity and the impossibility of final articulation, readers of *Dictee* nearly unanimously speak of a narrator and/or acting subject, and moreover, identify that narrator as Cha.”34 Similarly, Timothy Yu has noted that major critics of the text tend to read autobiographical elements of the text as a narrative of Cha’s experience and assume the presence of a single writing subject or narrator. This close association between Cha and the narrator has been particularly endorsed by the way the text mirrors aspects of the author’s own life.

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33 Critics such as Elaine Kim and Lisa Lowe identify the narrator as “Korean American” (11), while critics like L. Hyun Yi Kang more tend to read the narrator’s voice as Cha’s own.
34 See Sue Kim, “Narrator, Author, Reader: Equivocation in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*,” *Narrative* 16.2 (2008): 163. In her reading, Kim offers a series of examples that show critics’ tendency to read *Dictee* as autobiographical. Shelley Sunn Wong observes that *Dictee* insists on “the narrator’s multiple positionalities as woman, as a colonial and post-colonial subject, as religious subject, and as Korean” (105). Other examples include the readings of Anne Anlin Cheng’s reading of the text as Cha’s autobiography in “Memory and Anti-documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*.” More recently, Josephine Park traces the presence of “a single heroine” whose voice starts to emerge in the opening pages of Cha’s text (133).
Born in Korea in 1951, Cha immigrated with her family to Hawai in 1963. The family eventually settled down in San Francisco. After completing studies in literature and art at the University of California, Berkeley, Cha worked as an artist and was active in the San Francisco Bay area. Two instances of travel significantly influenced her art work. During her graduate studies, Cha spent a semester in Paris at the Centre d’Etudes Americain du Cinema. In 1979, Cha visited her native Korea for the first time after immigrating to the States.\footnote{For a detailed discussion of Cha’s biography, see the Introduction of \textit{Exilée and Temps Morts: Selected Works} (2009), a collection of Cha’s writing, written by Constance M. Lewallen and Ed Park’s essay “This is the writing you have been waiting for” that details Cha’s trip to Korea in the late 1970s.}

Read in light of Cha’s biographical details, several parts of \textit{Dictee} indeed invite such identification. In particular, early parts of the text that invoke different moments of Korea’s twentieth-century history and the hardships of acquiring a second language and acculturation endorse connections to Cha’s personal life. The reader’s impulse to read \textit{Dictee} as an example of immigrant or ethnic autobiography, however, is simultaneously repudiated by the text itself. In fact, the text never confirms that the narrated or narrating subject is Cha herself. In fact, a more accurate description of \textit{Dictee} would be to view it as a text that includes narrative pieces that possibly point to the experience of Cha and her mother.\footnote{In her reading of the text, Kim has suggested that the text’s autobiographical parts are “loosely linked through the themes of women’s lives and the fraught processes of signification” (164).} By focusing on the text’s deliberate refusal to identify and thus fix narrative voice and perspective, this chapter examines how the voice’s ambiguity transforms \textit{Dictee} into a narrative of vast geographical span that inter-connects a highly diverse set of migratory contexts in order to make a narrative whole. I argue that the strategic employment of the second-person voice as a narrative medium produces an epic tale about the migrant condition that cuts across the vast distances of time and space.
The Affordances of Narrative Ambiguity

In her most recent book, Caroline Levine introduces the notion of “affordance” for thinking about how literary and social forms operate. Affordance is a concept Levine borrows from design theory which designates “the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs” (6). For instance, “a fork affords stabbing and scooping,” whereas, “a door knob affords not only hardness and durability, but also turning, pushing, and pulling” (6). Applied to literary and social arrangements, affordance enables us to discuss “the particular constraints and possibilities that different forms afford” (6). If we take up the notion of affordance for understanding the workings of narrative perspective, we begin to see how the choice to tell a story from a specific point of view determines the range of possible ways for the reader to engage with the text. *Dictee* proliferates with many pronouns that often remain either unnamed or unidentified. Instead of providing us with specific names and characters, the text features contexts that stage certain kinds of interaction between unanimous figures. Most strikingly, narrative ambiguity in *Dictee* particularly emerges from its employment of second-person narration.

Compared to first and third person narration, second person narrative, due to its less frequent presence, has received little critical attention within studies of narratology.
As Brian Richardson has noted, “historically, earlier theorists of narrative either ignored this kind of narration or dismissed it as curiosity.” If recognized, it was seen as an example of interior monologue. An early work that has brought attention to the presence of second-person narration within twentieth-century writing is Bruce Morrissette’s article, “Narrative ‘You’ in Contemporary Literature,” published in 1965. Morrissette opens his essay with the observation that “a new, or apparently new, technique” relating to narrative mode has been launched (1). It is the narrative “you” present in Michel Butor’s *La Modification* (1957) that prompts Morrissette to write his essay. For Morrissette, the choice of a certain narrative mode is important because it “determines to a great extent the receptive stance and esthetic involvement of the reader” (1). It was, however, not until the early 1990s that second person narration came to be discussed by literary scholars in more extensive ways.

In particular, the work of Brian Richardson, Monika Fludernik, Irene Kacandes, and James Phelan has been influential in shaping our understanding of the second person voice within prose fiction. A distinctive feature of the second person narrative voice that differentiates it from the first and third person narrative is that it creates a peculiar kind of experience for the reader. As Richardson and other critics have noted, the second person pronoun, unlike the first and third person pronoun, suggests “ambiguity over the identity and status of the ‘you’ ” (20). One of the effects of such ambiguity is that it “threatens the ontological stability of the fictional world insofar as it seems it could be addressing the reader as well as the central character” (20). With the possibilities of operating as a mode

Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2006).

40 Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*, 21.

41 For instance, the 1994 fall issue of Style is dedicated to a collection of essays on second-person narration.
of address, the second person pronoun opens up the narrative to many different possible audiences including the reader. In more recent years, critical work on second-person voice in contemporary fiction has helped us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between texts and readers. The work of Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin has brought our attention to the reader’s active role in digital fiction that requires input from the reader for telling its story. More recently, Rebecca Walkowitz has shown how the second person voice within contemporary fiction dramatizes “the geopolitics of reading” by creating a special kind of interaction between texts that circulate transnationally and readers.

Drawing upon the novels of Jamaica Kincaid and Mohsin Hamid, Walkowitz’s work illuminates how the usage of second-person voice allows contemporary postcolonial writers to critically reflect upon their texts’ relations to the English-speaking reader.

In *Dictee*, the second person voice invites the reader to take an active role in shaping the text’s migratory context. *Dictee* operates as a spatially unbounded text in that the reader’s interaction with the text determines the text’s referential scope. Historically,

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42 For a detailed discussion of the reader’s role as both observer and addressee in second-person narration, see James Phelan’s “Self-help for narratee and narrative audience: how ‘I’ – and ‘you’?”-read ‘how’” and Irene Kacandes’ “Are You in the Text?: the ‘Literary Performative’ in Postmodern Fiction.” In his reading of Lorrie Moore’s *Self-Help* (1985), Phelan notes that “when the second-person address to a narratee-protagonist both overlaps with and differentiates itself from an address to actual readers, those readers will simultaneously occupy the positions of addressee and observer. Furthermore, the fuller the characterization of the ‘you,’ the more aware actual readers will be of their differences from that ‘you,’ and thus, the more fully they move into the observer role, and the less likely this role will overlap with the addressee position” (351). While Phelan is interested in the reader’s shifting role from observer to addressee, Kacandes addresses textual examples that talk directly to the reader such as Italo Calvino’s novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1981).

43 See Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin, “‘I know what it was. You know what it was’: Second-Person Narration in Hypertext Fiction,” *Narrative* 19.3 (Fall 2011): 311-329.

immigrant writing has tended to be written in first person or third person narration with the main protagonist being the migrant. In third person narration, distance between the migrant and the reader is sustained in that the reader holds the place of close witness to the migrant’s struggles of settlement in a new country. Like conventional narratives of immigration, the third person narration informs early parts of *Dictee*. For instance, an early moment of *Dictee* features a dictation exercise, first written in French and then in English, which addresses the presence of a migrant figure from a third person perspective. The passage opens with the following sentence: “Aller à la ligne C’était le premier jour point Elle venait de loin point ce soir au dîner virgule les familles demanderaient virgule ouvre les guillemets” (1). The English version offers a “literal translation” of the preceding passage in French. “Open paragraph It was the first day period She had come from a far period tonight at dinner comma the families would ask comma open quotation marks” (1). Although starkly differing in their written languages, both passages reflect upon the presence of a migrant figure. More specifically, the dictation exercise portrays the migrant figure through notions of distance as asserted by the phrase, “she had come from a far.” For the English speaking reader, the translation from French to English closes the distance and makes the account of the exilic figure more accessible. Although mediated through the act of translation, however, the third person perspective through which the migrant’s story is told sustains the distance between the reader and the exilic figure.

Similarly, in the page following the dictation passage, an unnamed female subject is depicted struggling to speak in a learned language. “She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words” (3).
Along with the agonies of pronouncing the learned language, the narrating voice further describes the subject’s physical movements accompanying the act of speech. “The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place” (3). Through the descriptions of a third person narrator, the reader comes to closely visualize the agonies of a female subject’s labor to give voice in a non-native tongue.

The third person narration’s earlier dominant presence, however, is increasingly displaced by the emergence of various narrative voices. The text actively searches for new narrative mediums for giving shape to its story. At first, the Muse of Greek mythology is invoked to tell the story.

O Muse, tell me the story
Of all things, O Goddess, daughter of Zeus
Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us. (7)

As Wong has suggested, the second invocation is a reworking of “Hesiod’s invocation of the Muses in that quintessential foundational text, The Theogony” (113). While Hesiod’s version asks the Muse to relate things to the narrator “from the beginning,” Dictee rewrites such practice and instead asks the Muse to begin wherever she wishes. For Wong, such reworking is suggestive in that Cha’s writing intervenes in “a historical practice which privileges origin and the idea of orderly patriarchal succession” (113). The Muse is given freedom to choose to tell the story from wherever she wants. Given Dictee’s migratory context, the phrase “beginning wherever you wish” opens up the text for the possibilities of different kinds of beginnings. The invocation is re-worked a couple of pages later.
Tell me the story
Of all these things.
Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us. (11)

This time, the invocation is no longer addressed to the Greek Muse. According to Wong, the earlier critique of the privileging of origins is “here further complicated by the disappearance of the authorizing source and tradition altogether” (114). “No longer bound to a long-established hierarchy of dictation from gods to man,” states Wong, the pronouns “‘me, ‘you,’ and ‘us’ are left to negotiate new referential positions” (114). In particular, the “you” invoked in this passage suggests the possibilities of the story being told by various figures. This move towards narrative ambiguity is important because the speaking voice opens up the story to new kinds of narrative possibilities. Moreover, freed from its Greek origin and context, the narrative voice invoked here is free to address any context.

Second Person World Epic

The way narrative ambiguity allows the text to travels through a wide range of migratory contexts that highly differ in space and time is well represented in one section titled “Calliope/Epic Poetry.” Dictee contains nine sections that are named by the nine Muses. The second section named after “Calliope” invokes the epic as the genre that frames the section’s narrative. The section opens with a faded black-and-white photograph which features a young Asian woman. On the next page, the photograph is followed by a speaking voice that addresses a figure living in exile. “Mother, you are eighteen years old,” announces the voice, “You were born in Yong Jung, Manchuria and
this is where you now live. You are not Chinese. You are Korean. But your family moved
here to escape the Japanese occupation” (45). The mode of address in this passage is
striking for several reasons. On one level, the second person narrative assumes the
presence of a narrator (an implicit “I”) who makes an address to “you.” Resembling the
form of dialogue, the address invokes the presence of a narrative “you” who is claimed to
be the narrator’s mother.45 Something else, however, is enacted by the second-person
voice that particularly shapes the reader’s response to this passage. In her discussion of
“second-person narrative”, Irene Kacandes notes that “Actual readers of a literary text
may or may not consider themselves the specific target of the literary “utterance.”46 Any
given reader, like the listening audience for the rhetor’s apostrophe, is, however, the
receiver of the message by virtue of having read or heard it” (3). Similar to what
Kacandes suggests, the reader of this passage, posited as someone who overhears the
narrating voice, is given intimate access to the mother’s exilic experience.

Distance between the reader and the speaking voice’s mother is further closed by
the narrative’s present tense. From the outset, the narrator states that the mother’s exile
from Korea occurred during the Japanese colonial period. At a later moment of the
section, we learn that the year the narrator is referring to is 1940. The second-person
narrative, however, complicates the temporality of historical time by invoking a
discursive present. As someone who overhears the address, the reader partakes in this

45 Former critics have tended to read the section as Cha’s reconstruction of the journal entries of her mother,
Hyung Soon Huo during her years of exile in Manchuria. See L. Hyun Yi Kang. “The ‘Liberatory Voice’ of
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Dictee,” Writing Self, Writing Nation, eds. Elaine Kim and Norma Alarcon
(Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994). I complicate such reading by suggesting that the “I” cannot be
presumed to be the voice of Cha.
46 Irene Kacandes, “Are You in the Text?: The ‘Literary Performative’ in Postmodern Fiction,” Text and
moment of “now.” It is in this light that it could be said that the second-person voice allows the reader to engage with the exile’s story in an intimate way. The second person narration allows the text’s reader to closely relate to an otherwise temporally and spatially remote figure.

Following Bakhtin’s definition, the epic is “a work of ‘beginnings’ and ‘peak times’ in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families.”\(^{47}\) In other words, it is “a poem about the past” which is far removed from “discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries” (13). The singer and the listener hold a distance from the heroic tale that is told, what Bakhtin calls, “epic distance” (14). The epic journey in “Calliope,” however, constantly puts the past and the present into close dialogue in that the reader becomes an intimate part of the tale.

Intimate mediation occurs not only between the narrator, addressee, and reader, but also the section’s different aesthetics modes. The second-person voice connects the photograph that opens the section to the section’s narrative. At first glance, the photo remains a static image that the reader cannot easily relate to. It captures the image of a young Asian female figure. Yet, any specific information about who this photographic image refers to remains absent. It is through the workings of the narrative voice that the photo transforms into an object the reader can relate to as the narrator’s mother. Cha does not specify the exact relationship between the woman in the photo and the “you” addressed by the narrator. The fact that the narrating voice calls the second person “mother,” however, invites the possibilities of such linkage. The emphasis lies not in the

verity of information, (whether the woman in the photo and the exilic figure are identical figures of not), but in the voice’s power to make such connection possible.

Further into the section, we learn that the mother is living in exile in Manchuria, a northern part of China, along with other Koreans. As the narrator states, “You live in a village where the other Koreans live. Same as you. Refugees. Immigrants. Exiles. Farther away from the land that is not your own. Not our own any longer” (45). The narrating voice tells us that the mother has recently graduated from a teacher’s college and has started teaching in a small village in Manchuria. She had to leave her parents’ home to start the new life as a teacher. Several passages of the section’s opening pages begin with an address to the mother such as “Mother, you are eighteen years old” or “Mother, you are a child still.” As the section proceeds, however, the narration becomes less colloquial and increasingly takes up the shape of second person narration and turns into a descriptive account of the mother’s everyday life in Manchuria. Passages start to begin with sentences such as “You write” and “You are the first woman to come to this village in six years” (48).

The epic tale of “Calliope” clearly starts off as a narrative about a mother’s years of exile. As the narrative proceeds, however, the relationship between the “I” and the narrative “you” becomes ambiguous. Especially in the section’s last couple of pages, it becomes less clear who exactly the addressee of the second person narration is. In particular, a radical shift in the nature of second person narration occurs in the following passage. “I write. I write you. Daily. From here. If I am not writing, I am thinking about writing. I am composing. Recording movements” (56). Here, it is not very clear whether the “I” entering the section is the same narrator that addressed the mother figure living in
exile. Similarly, we are not to know for sure whether the mentioned “you” is the mother figure addressed earlier in the section. From the fact that the narrating voice states that she is recording movements, we are only to assume that it might be an extension of the former parts of the epic that feature the mother’s exilic life in Manchuria. By departing from a mode of address, the relation between the “I” and “you” undergoes further change in that it is mediated by the means of writing. More specifically, the “I” emerges as a writing subject that records the movements of the unidentified “you.” The epic’s journey, rather than firmly grounded in a specific setting, enters a less specified narrative realm.

The boundaries between the narrator and addressee continue to further blur a couple of lines later.

I have the documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. One day you raise the right hand and you are American. They give you an American Passport. The United States of America. Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph. The other one. Their signature their seals. Their own image. (56)

In this passage, the “I” is revealed to be a subject undergoing the process of obtaining American citizenship. The relationship between the “I” and “you,” however, remains ambiguous. The rapid shift in narrative perspective profoundly unsettles the boundaries between the narrator and narratee. This abrupt shift from “I” to “you” might be seen as a mode of self-address that mirrors the self-alienating aspects of immigration. As the narrator remarks, it is “their own image” that is imposed upon the immigrating subject. At the same time, however, the above scene’s narrative includes the reader as its potential
addressee. By keeping the “you” unnamed, the passage invites the possibilities of the reader being the “you” in this passage.

The possibilities of the audience being the reader are further strengthened by the section’s final passage. The section “Calliope” ends with a scene of return. In this scene, the unspecified narrative “you” is revealed to be a figure returning to a former country of residence. Far from being a heroic one as in the Greek epic, the return subjects the narrative “you” into the procedures of border control.

You return and you are not one of them, they treat you with indifference. All the time you understand what they are saying. But the papers give you away. Every ten feet. They ask you identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality … Every ten feet they demand to know who and what you are, who is represented. The eyes gather towards the appropriate proof. Towards the face then again to the papers, when did you leave the country why did you leave this country why are you returning to the country. (56)

Given the order of appearance, the second scene can be read as an extension of the earlier passage. While the former scene of obtaining U.S. citizenship limits reader identification to an immigrant reader, here it includes anyone who holds the experience of crossing a nation’s border. However, the fact that the “you” remains unidentified and that the narrator does not offer any further details concerning the passage’s specific context (we are not to know where and when exactly this is happening) foregrounds the text’s narrative ambiguity. The epic journey shaping the section depicts a migratory world informed by different kinds of movements across borders.

48 Similarly, Sue Kim observes that the passage describes processes of adopting citizenship that could be “generalizable to any immigrant” (169).
The epic world envisioned in *Dictee*, although initially rooted in a specific historical context, transcends the boundaries of time and space. It spans migratory contexts across different moments of the twentieth-century. As earlier parts of this chapter have shown, however, Cha’s epic defies closure and fixation by blurring the boundaries between past and present as well as the narratee and reader, an effect achieved by the workings of the second person voice. Instead of tracing the story of a single hero or nation, *Dictee* holds together disparate stories of the migrant condition. By playing with epic distance, Cha creates a narrative that is able to cross time and space in order to tell stories of displacement and border crossing. The mother’s story of exile, initially invoked as the section’s founding story, is further accompanied by a sequence of narrative pieces that open up the epic to include different versions of exile and displacement taking place in a more contemporary context. In addition to vastly spanning time, the spatial logic of *Dictee* defies a nation-based story and gives shape to experiences that occur in the nation’s marginal spaces or spheres located in-between nations’ borders. The mother’s exilic stay addressed early in “Calliope” unfolds in Manchuria, a region of China to which Koreans fled during the Japanese occupation. The more contemporary migratory contexts are set at border checking points such as the airport. Defying a nation-based narrative, the epic form in *Dictee* gives narrative shape to an open-ended tale of migration and immigration of which the reader is also a part.
“Citizened by Friendship”: Feeling Intimate beyond the Nation-State in Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost

The solving of Sailor’s case lies at the heart of Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000). Set during the height of the Sri Lankan civil war, the novel features Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan born forensic specialist who works for an international human rights organization, coming across an unidentified skeleton while conducting research in her native country. Suspecting the skeleton to be a victim of political murder, Anil commits herself to the recuperation of the skeleton’s identity. The investigation leads to an unexpected collaboration with two Sri Lankan male figures Sarath Diyasena, a local archeologist who works for the Sri Lankan government, and Ananda Udugama, a former artisan. Due to their stark difference in background and affiliations, the early interaction among the three figures is highly strained. The investigation process, however, gives rise to a structure of feeling\(^\text{49}\) that radically transforms their relationship. In an unforeseen way, three strangers who differ in nationality, gender, profession, and even language come to feel deeply drawn to each other. Towards the end of the novel, Anil coins a remarkable phrase that describes their affective bond: “she was with Sarath and Ananda, citizened by their friendship” (200).

The phrase “citizened by their friendship” is striking for several reasons. It draws

\(^{49}\) I am indebted to Raymond William’s term “structures of feeling.” Instead of reducing the social as a finished product, Williams introduces the term “structures of feeling” as a way of approaching the social in its formative process. According to Williams, “structures of feeling” refer to “affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living an inter-relating continuity” (132). See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977).
on the intimacy of friendship for defining social membership and belonging. More specifically, it rests upon a rather unusual model of friendship among three strangers who are brought together by an investigation project. Historically, the term *citizenship* has been associated with the nation-state and state-bound notions of belonging. By pointing to the bond connecting three individuals who differ in political and national affiliation, Anil’s phrase revises the conventional boundaries of citizenship. In light of the novel’s civil war context, this notion of friendship suggests a mode of intimate belonging during a time the Sri Lankan nation is torn by inter-ethnic conflict. Read against this political backdrop, the novel’s politics of friendship could be seen to offer a corrective to the war’s violence and the postcolonial nation-state’s internal divide. Because of its transnational vision, however, the affective tie’s place in the novel has been the subject of much controversy, both inside and outside the novel. For many critics, the abrupt ending of the novel with Sarath’s sudden death and Anil’s forced departure from the country attests more to its political limits than its possibilities.\(^5\)

Taking up the controversial nature of friendship’s place in *Anil’s Ghost* as the starting point, this chapter examines how the novel’s language of friendship gains particular significance in light of not only the novel’s local, but also migratory context. Indeed, the Sri Lankan civil war is important for understanding the novel, and many critics have brought attention to Ondaatje’s treatment of the war and its implications. Along with *Running in the Family* (1988), a memoir that reflects upon Ondaatje’s childhood years of growing up in Sri Lanka, *Anil’s Ghost* has received critical attention

\(^5\) The final scene of *Anil’s Ghost* that portrays Ananda reconstructing a broken Buddha statue has often been read as an affirmation of the local for the novel’s vision of healing the wounds of war. See, for instance, Gillian Roberts, “Ethics and Healing: Hospitality and *Anil’s Ghost*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 76.3 (2007): 962-76; Victoria Burrows, “The Heterotopic Spaces of Postcolonial Trauma in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*,” *Studies in the Novel* 40.1 (2008): 161-77.
for its close engagement with the author’s native country. Another important, yet less fully recognized feature of the novel’s narrative is its deep interest in tracing a peculiar form of migratory life that involves dwelling in multiple nations. Although not often perceived in this way, *Anil’s Ghost* is a novel about multiple border crossings. In fact, the way Ondaatje foregrounds the novel’s Sri Lankan setting is as part of an extended history of migratory journey. The novel opens with Anil arriving at the Colombo airport, which marks a return after a fifteen-year-long absence. Although born in Sri Lanka, Anil is revealed to have lived and worked in various nations from an early age. A series of flashbacks that deviate from the novel’s present moment, illuminate the different geographies of Anil’s life such as Colombo, London, Arizona, Montreal, and Guatemala. From a collection of episodes, we learn that Anil has led a life of constant movement.

By focusing on intimacy’s transformative powers, this chapter closely examines how the novel interrogates problems of belonging in the context of multi-local migration. I argue that the intimacies of friendship in *Anil’s Ghost* allow us to develop an alternative vocabulary for articulating connection and belonging in the context of multi-local migration. In doing so, this chapter shows how the notion of friendship as affective community in *Anil’s Ghost* advances recent thinking on contingent modes of affiliation, an emergent field within studies of migration and diaspora which, however, has less often been related to discussions of contemporary fiction.

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51 For an early example that focuses on friendship as a model of critique against state power, see Leela Ghandi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2006). Ghandi’s work illuminates forms of anti-colonial critique that took the form of allegiance between anti-colonial South Asians and anti-imperial Westerners during the late Victorian period. Calling them “minor forms of anti-imperialism,” Ghandi brings attention to cross-cultural alliances that have been relatively unintelligible to the existing field of postcolonial studies.
**Half-hearted Returns: The Trope of Return in Ondaatje’s Writing**

Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer, Michael Ondaatje is well known for exploring themes of migration in light of Sri Lanka’s post/colonial history. During the early stage of his career, Ondaatje was primarily known within the Canadian local context. It was through the publishing of *The English Patient*, which won the Booker Prize in 1992, that he gained international recognition as a South Asian migrant writer working in English. In fact, a major body of his work, published in the late twentieth century, engages with the post/colonial contexts of his native country. For instance, the family memoir *Running in the Family* (1982) recounts the author’s Sri Lankan childhood during the late 1940s. Along with his memoir, two of his best-known novels, *The English Patient* (1992) and *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), bring Sri Lankan (post)colonial history into close conversation with larger world historical moments. In both texts, Ondaatje delves into the intricacies of such intersection.\(^{52}\)

Often featured to be complicit with Western forces, the migrant figure in Ondaatje’s oeuvre embodies material conditions of postcoloniality. For instance, in *The English Patient*, Ondaatje addresses Sri Lanka under late British colonialism through the portrayal of Kirpal Singh, a British colonial subject forcibly enlisted into the Allies’ Army. Following the British Army’s movement across Europe, the trajectory of Kirpal’s movement in *The English Patient* charts the geographies of colonial migrancy. In an

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\(^{52}\) Ondaatje’s own personal history deeply informs his writings’ interest in problems of migratory movement. Born in 1943, Ondaatje left Sri Lanka at the age of eleven. Following his parents’ divorce, Ondaatje first migrated to England in 1954 and subsequently to Canada when he was nineteen. Since then, Canada has been the country of his main residence and citizenship. It was not until his mid-thirties that Ondaatje decided to revisit Sri Lanka. The visit marked a return after a twenty-five-year-long absence. *Running in the Family* is a personal account of his journeys back to the island in the years of 1978 and 1980 respectively. During his two month-long visits, Ondaatje conducted extensive research of his family’s history on the island by collecting historical records and interviewing remaining family members.
interview, Ondaatje reveals that the portrayal of Kirpal as a sapper working for the British Army had been a deliberate decision to challenge official accounts of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{53} “I was very conscious that all the mythology of the war I’d grown up with was English,” states Ondaatje, “When I came to England, I was reading all these war novels. The movies of that time were all Second World War movies, and it seemed utterly, completely white . . . But the population of Indian soldiers who were massacred was very much part of the war; they weren’t just background figures” (263). If The English Patient re-writes Western-centered accounts of World War Two by featuring Kirpal’s presence in the British Army, his later novel, Anil’s Ghost, more directly addresses the South Asian postcolonial context. Set in Sri Lanka, the world of Anil’s Ghost features the contemporary post-colonial nation-state under political turmoil. The novel begins with Anil Tissera, a Sri Lanka-born forensic specialist working for an international human rights group, returning to her native country. Through the portrait of Anil’s return to Sri Lanka, Ondaatje interweaves Sri Lanka’s local context with the rise of transnational organizations’ influence over non-Western parts of the world.

The intersection of the local and global, a striking feature of Ondaatje’s writing, has attracted a wide range of critical readership. For critics interested in the global context, Ondaatje’s portrayal of migration entangled in global forces enacts a critique of institutional structures of power such as colonialism and globalization. His fictional writing has been associated with post-nationalism that explores alternative forms of community building beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Like Kirpal, many of his

fictions’ characters critically reflect upon transnational structures of institutional power as well as their complicity with them. Critics working with the novels’ more local context, meanwhile, have pointed to the portrayals of war and its atrocities as central to understanding the novels’ politics. In particular, the portrayals of war’s violence in both *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost* have been read to be critically engaging with the traumas of war. In more recent years, the discussion of war’s violence in Ondaatje’s writing has been further linked to the discourse of post-secularism and human rights.  

This critical focus on the nexus of global/local interactions has, however, tended to deemphasize Ondaatje’s abiding interest in contingent forms of affiliation that arise from geographies of transnational contact. Encounters within Ondaatje’s oeuvre often give rise to structures of feeling that connect a body of strangers across vast social and national difference. Far from being merely fleeting and ephemeral, a defining feature of such transnational contacts is that their affective intensities outlast the moment of encounter and come to compete with more familiar and conventional structures of attachment such as familial and national belonging. As way of examining Ondaatje’s treatment of such moments of intimate contact, this chapter begins by attending to a recurring but often overlooked trope in Ondaatje’s oeuvre: the trope of return. Ondaatje’s writing reveals an abiding interest in stories that feature the migrant’s return to the homeland, be it

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permanent or temporary. Of all his writing, *Running in the Family* which gives an account of Ondaatje’s own experience of return to Sri Lanka, is a paradigmatic text working with this trope. The memoir starts with Ondaatje’s decision to visit his native country. “In my mid-thirties,” he writes, “I realized I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood” (22). Driven by the imperative of coming to terms with his Sri Lankan past, the memoir reflects upon his childhood as well as the processes of re-connection to his native place.

Whereas diasporic return translates into re-connection with one’s familial past in *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje’s fictional writing complicates the promise of such re-connection. Rather than being driven by one’s own choice, the return to one’s place of origin is shaped by larger world-historical contexts. For instance, return in *The English Patient* far from being driven by a desire to revisit one’s past results from Kirpal’s disillusionment at his work as a sapper working for the British Army. Hearing the news of the allies’ bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kirpal realizes his complicity with Western colonial forces. As a corollary, he deserts his post in Italy and the community at the Villa and returns to India. In constellation against the trajectory of the British Army’s movement across Europe, his route back to India is narrated to be “travelling against the direction of the invasion, as if rewinding the spool of war, the route no longer tense with military” (290). Kirpal’s return marks a powerful moment in the novel’s narrative in its symbolic gesture of breaking from his complicity with the West. Occurring only near the end of the novel, the incident occupies a peripheral presence within the novel’s overall narrative. And yet, the implications of its willed determinacy leave strong imprints on the novel’s project.
By staging returns to one’s country of birth in light of a diverse set of migratory contexts, Ondaatje’s works illuminate the complexities of one’s affective ties to the homeland. For instance, Anil’s confession in *Anil’s Ghost* that her decision to return had originally been only “halfhearted” well crystallizes return’s complicated nature. Although it was initially her decision to apply for the position in Sri Lanka, “She didn’t expect to be chosen, because she had been born on the island, even though she now travelled with a British passport” (16). Far from being nostalgic, Anil’s words reveal that her return is underwritten by the ambiguities of half-heartedness. Similarly, the opening page of *Running in the Family* depicts the complexities of the returning migrant’s feeling. The memoir’s opening sketches feelings arising during a day’s morning. “All across the city men roll carts with ice clothed in sawdust. Later on, during a fever, the drought still continuing, his nightmare is that thorn trees in the garden send their hard roots underground towards the house climbing through windows so they can drink sweat off his body, steal the last of the saliva off his tongue” (17). Emphasized by terms such as “fever” and “nightmare,” the opening passage forecloses the state of distress under the day’s heat. As the passage proceeds, it becomes clear that this first scene sketching one’s affective response to the day’s heat also overlaps with Ondaatje’s impression of Sri Lanka since his return. “He snaps on the electricity just before daybreak. For twenty five years he has not lived in this country, though up to the age of eleven he slept in rooms like this,” Ondaatje continues (17). As indicated by the phrase, “for twenty five years he has not lived in this country,” the passage’s emphasis here is more on the fact of Ondaatje’s prolonged absence from Sri Lanka than on his return to the country. The emphasis upon one’s prolonged absence along with the distressed feelings in the preceding passage turn
the notion of return into an estranging and vexing experience rather than a restoration of the familiar or nostalgic. The familiar is recognized, but it is more determined by the unfamiliar as signaled by the narrator’s feelings of distress. It is not the comforts of returning to a prior home that strike the reader in this passage, but rather the discomforting feelings accompanying the return.

Return to one’s prior homeland in Ondaatje’s oeuvre turns into a rather unhomely experience accentuated by the affective state of distress. Translating Freud’s usage of the term “unheimlich” into the post/colonial context, Homi Bhabha in *Location of Culture* (1994) rewrites the term “unhomely” as a reference to the estranging experience of socio-historical and cultural displacements. The unhomely for Bhabha exists in moments of disjunction between the boundaries of home and the world, in other words, at moments that reveal “the-world-in-the-home” (15). Through the term unhomely, Bhabha effectively unravels the affective effects of social displacement. Homes produced by histories of displacement are revealed to be haunted by the pain and trauma of displacement. If Bhabha makes visible the presence of social and cultural displacements embedded in the Western nation-state’s history, the unhomely in Ondaatje’s writing redirects the critical gaze back to the migrant’s departed home. The original home the migrant returns to no longer exists as one’s formerly perceived home. By defamiliarizing the act of homecoming, Ondaatje rethinks diasporic notions of home and belonging in that they are dismantled of the affective values of the familiar and comfort.

In *English Patient*, such rethinking allows the novel to envision a powerful

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55 Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
56 Bhabha cites in his discussion of the unhomely Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Nadine Gordimer’s *My Son’s Story* as examples of “unhomely fiction” haunted by histories of social and cultural displacements.
moment of transnational connection. Depicting a group of strangers that differ in nationality and political affiliation temporarily brought together by the war, *The English Patient* is a novel that envisions a model transnational community during a time of stark division and conflict between modern nation-states. Towards the end of World War Two, four strangers, Hana, Almacy, Caravaggio, and Kirpal, come to take up residence at the Villa Girolamo located at the outskirts of Italy’s Florence. Offering a refuge from the war’s on-going violence, the villa serves as a realm of self-care and healing for its occupants. With Kirpal’s ultimate return to India, however, the novel’s project turns into a failed one. Continued hope for the realization of the community, however, gains shape in the form of imaginative vision. The novel’s final pages depict Kirpal comfortably settled in Bombay: “He is a doctor, has two children and a laughing wife” (299). In the midst of his daily life in Bombay, Kirpal feels the strong urge to connect with Hana, whom he had developed an intimate relationship with during the war. On the way home from work, he starts imagining Hana, “And he watches Hana, her hair longer, in her own country” (300). As he further confesses, “He sees her always, her face and body, but he doesn’t know what her profession is or what her circumstances are, although he sees her reactions to people around her, a background of noiseless tram cars. This is a limited gift he has somehow been given, as if a camera’s film reveals her, but only her, in silence” (300). Kirpal’s reflection here is first triggered by past memories, but they gradually evolve into an active imagining of Hana.

The intensity of Kirpal’s feelings further creates a moment of connection that crosses vast distance. This vision of intimacy gains more concrete shape in the novel’s very last lines through the collage of two distinct but parallel bodily movements. Kirpal is
thinking of Hana while watching his daughter struggling with her cutlery:

And so Hana moves and her face turns and in a regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal’s left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles. (302)

Interweaving two distinct moments occurring simultaneously at different locales into one single passage, this final scene brings into close view a shared moment of connection. Following the sequence of both sentences, Kirpal’s catching of the dropped fork reads as a direct response to Hana’s dropping of the glass. The possibility of such connection is strengthened by the immediacy of his gesture.

Lost Languages of Connection

In Anil’s Ghost, transnational connection is invoked in the form of friendship. Set in the late 1980s, Anil’s Ghost depicts a world of increased transnational mobility and global interconnection. Working for a Geneva-based international human rights group, Anil leads a life in transit conducting research in various parts of the world. Her life as a forensic anthropologist consists of successive dwelling in varied nations. During her years in the West, “Anil had courted foreignness, was at ease whether on the Bakerloo line or the highways around Santa Fe. She felt completed abroad” (54). Along with migration’s multiple nature, the novel reveals the geographies of Anil’s movement to be shaped by the global scope of the West’s power. Anil’s arrival as “an outside consultant” at Sri Lanka during the civil war reflects continued legacies of Western influence (16). As the narrator notes, “But under pressure, and to placate trading partners in the West, the government eventually made the gesture of an offer to pair local officials with outside
consultants” (16). Upon her arrival, Anil is paired with Sarath Diyasena, a Sri Lankan archeologist, for a six-week long project that investigates state-sponsored political murder cases.

The narrative of *Anil’s Ghost* has been dominantly read as a literary response to the political realities of Sri Lankan civil war. Contemporary Sri Lanka is revealed to be severed by ethnic tension and conflict. As Ondaatje notes in the novel’s preface, “From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the anti-government insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government.” Sri Lankan everyday life is shown to be underwritten by the war’s violence. Either indirectly or directly, all the characters of the novel encounter death in their daily lives. Attending to the novel’s portrayal of war, critics have identified the politics of the novel in its exploration of how to respond to the war’s violence. Similar to a Levinasian ethics that stresses one’s ethical relation to the Other, Gillian Roberts contends that Ondaatje’s writing speaks to an ethics of care and healing. Similarly, Joseph Slaughter’s reading of the novel in *Human Rights, Inc.* (2007) examines the implications of the nation’s state of emergency upon the welfare of its citizens. With the lack of a “functional, open, democratic, national public sphere” under the state of emergency, Slaughter points out, the protection of human rights is unconditionally suspended (188).

Life’s precarious state under war translates into a permanent state of fear for the nation’s inhabitants. Throughout the novel, fear of potential danger and death deeply resides in the characters’ consciousness. Anil’s contemplation upon “amygdala,” a part of

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the brain that is known to house fearful memories, signals fear’s dominance (134). Anil is
reminded of this particular organ during the early stages of the investigation when
cautioned by Sarath against the dangers of detention. Knowing that Colombo houses at
least two unauthorized places of detention, Sarath repeatedly reminds Anil of the possible
dangers that their investigation might cause. Identifying fear to be the law covering all of
the living, he further comments, “… Most can be broken within an hour. Most of us can
be broken by just the possibilities of what might happen” (135).

For the returning migrant, fear caused by the homeland’s ethnic divide
complicates the migrant’s re-connection to the Sri Lankan society. In the novel’s opening
pages, Anil is shown arriving on a plane in Colombo. The brief conversation she has with
the local official who picks her up at the airport highlights the challenges of defining the
nature of her return:

‘How long has it been? You were born here, no?’
‘Fifteen years.’
‘You still speak Sinhala?’
‘A little. Look, do you mind if I don’t talk in the car on the way into
Colombo-I’m jet-lagged. I just want to look. Maybe drink some toddy
before it gets too late. Is Gabriel’s Saloon still there for head massages?’
‘In Kollupitiya, yes. I knew his father.’
‘My father knew his father too.’
Without touching a single suitcase he organized the loading of the bags into
the car. ‘Toddy!’ He laughed, continuing his conversation. ‘First thing after
fifteen years. The return of the prodigal.’
‘I’m not a prodigal.’ (10)
Although highlighting the presence of a shared history suggested by the presence of a common language and local knowledge, the conversation does not translate into (re)connection. Both share the knowledge of people, places, and objects in the Colombo neighborhood, yet Anil refuses to locate them as grounds of connection and belonging. Such refusal may simply suggest reluctance to share one’s personal history with a stranger. Anil’s detached mode, however, makes it hard to read her return as one of diasporic homecoming.

The official’s comment (“the return of the prodigal”) offers one immediate answer to the ambivalent nature of Anil’s return. Like the official, some critics have linked Anil’s detached mode to her close affiliation with the West and its culture. For critics like Gillian Roberts, Anil’s prodigality consists of her complicity with Western forces, more specifically, her official status as a forensic specialist working for an international organization. “The status of her home country as a nation under her own investigation,” notes Roberts, “complicates Anil’s relationship to Sri Lanka and compromises her position there upon her return” (963). In a similar vein, Victoria Burrow contends that Anil “appears to have only a peripheral emotional attachment to Sri Lanka, its culture, and its peoples” (167). The lack of strong emotional attachment, writes Burrow, makes her appear more “a Westernized outsider” than “a diasporic subject returning to a familial community, or a community of friends” (167).

The novel, however, reveals that it is the nation’s current internal divide under the war that further complicates the affective vocabulary of Anil’s return. For the migrant, the nation’s internal conflict complicates the terms of re-connection. As a Sri Lankan-born forensic specialist who holds a British passport and works for an international
organization based in Geneva, Anil finds herself torn by questions of affiliation on multiple levels. Knowing the intricacies of forensic work during a political crisis, Anil asks herself, “Whom was she working for?” (28). Moreover, Anil’s estranged encounter with her Tamil caregiver, Lalitha, reveals that affiliation is determined not only by nationality, but by ethnicity. Anil remembers Lalitha as “the only person who taught her real things as a child,” and the reunion is initiated by Anil’s strong desire to reclaim her lost connection to Lalitha. Contrary to Anil’s initial expectations, however, this turns into an impossible act under the conditions of the current war:

Anil could hardly recognize the tiny aged woman. They stood facing each other. Anil stepped forward to embrace her. Just then a young woman walked out and watched them without a smile. Anil was aware of the stern eyes that were taking in this sentimental moment. When Anil leaned back the old woman was weeping; she put her hands out and ran them over Anil’s hair. Anil held her arms. There was a lost language between them. (22)

Lalitha’s physical appearance has changed with her age, and the nature of their relationship has changed as well during the war. They no longer share the affective language that once used to connect them. In particular, the unsmiling eyes of Lalitha’s granddaughter suggest that their difference in ethnic affiliation complicates the nature of Anil’s claim on her Tamil ayah. Under the conditions of war, the language of familial intimacy that once tied Anil and Lalitha is not only inevitably strained by tension, but also hard to restore.

A common view of reading Anil as a Westernized figure is challenged by her repeated announcement that she is at home in none of the Western countries where she

58 The fact that Lalitha is Tamil particularly resonates with the Sri Lankan civil war in that the separatist Tamil Tigers were majorly involved in the war.
has lived. In fact, the novel’s narrative deliberately refrains from using terms like home or homeland. Instead, the nation-states Anil resides in are merely places she “lives.” For instance, during their first encounter, Anil’s former lover Cullis whom she first meets in Montreal asks her if she speaks French. “No. Just English,” replies Anil, adding that she can “write some Sinhala.” When Cullis asks if Sinhala informs her personal background, Anil says, “I live here. In the West” (36). With this answer, Anil refuses to connect her sense of belonging and allegiance to a specific country of origin. She may be fluent in Sinhala, but her response to Cullis’ question deliberately challenges the equation of her language proficiency to her cultural and national belonging. If the question implies a naturalized relation between language and national origin, Anil’s answer refuses to connect her origin to a certain nation and culture. Nor does she articulate her current sense of belonging in relation to a specific nation-state. By referring to the place where she currently lives as “the West,” she invokes a region and, presumably, a set of values, rather than a specific place (36).

Throughout the novel, it is others, both characters and critics, who insist that the West is Anil’s home, not merely her place of residence. Sarath’s brother Gamini is especially blunt: “‘American movies, English books – remember how they all end?’ Gamini asked that night. ‘The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That’s it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero’” (286). Gamini’s words imply that Anil’s stay in Sri Lanka signifies for him the stay of a Western hero who ultimately returns home after completing his mission. In a similar vein, Sarath accuses Anil of her rather transient relations to place. “‘You know, I’d
believe your arguments more if you lived here,’ he said. ‘You can’t just slip in, make a
discovery and leave’” (44). Sarath’s comment crystallizes an interesting and central
assumption that lies at the heart of such suspicion. According to his logic, in order to
claim one’s commitment to solving a political murder case, Anil needs to affirm a
continued presence on the island.

**Citzened by Friendship**

Historically, the language of settlement has been central to critical understanding
of the migrant’s relations to place. Conventional narratives of migration, especially the
immigration narrative, tend to be informed by the teleology of permanent settlement.
Such language, however, as the earlier part of this essay has shown, proves to be limiting
for a nuanced understanding of the ambiguities of Anil’s feelings towards the multiple
places in which she resides and works. It offers only limited insight into Anil’s migratory
life that is primarily informed by transitory contact with a wide range of places across the
world. It is not only that Anil has studied in the West, her current work as a human rights
forensic specialist necessitates repeated border crossings and temporary engagement with
local affairs. The novel’s sporadic references to her work in other places such as the scene
that depicts Anil conducting excavation work in Guatemala, foregrounds a mode of life
that consists of not only repeated movements, but also stays of varied length.

In recent years, critics have begun to complicate the language of settlement for
understanding migration by attending to forms of migratory travel that engage in multiple
border crossings. A growing number of critics have brought increased attention to forms
of affiliation arising from contingent contact with places and people for more nuanced
understandings of the diasporic and migrant condition. Although differing widely in their focus on geography and history, scholarly attention to contingent forms of contact and intimacy have helped us to trace an underexplored history of cross-racial alliance and coalition that dates back to early moments of various diasporas. Ondaatje’s project in *Anil’s Ghost* further extends scholarly interest in histories of cross-border contact into the realm of literature in that the affective resonances of Anil’s growing ties to Sarath and Ananda as well as their complications take central stage. Set during the Sri Lankan civil war, contingent intimacy explored in Ondaatje’s writing particularly dramatizes the tension and challenges caused by the three figures’ differences in nationality, language, and profession. Throughout the novel, such difference leads to a heightened sense of fear and suspicion. From the outset of the investigation, Anil questions Sarath’s allegiance: “He was high up in the state-sponsored Archaeological Department, so how much a part of the government was he? Was he its ear and eye while assigned to aid her in the Human Rights investigation and report?” (28). At the same time, Anil also wonders about her own role as a British citizen working for an international organization in the investigation. “Forensic work during a political crisis was notorious, she knew, for its three-dimensional chess moves and back-room deals and muted statements for the ‘good of the nation’” (28). The further introduction of Ananda, a craftsman who used to conduct eye painting ceremonies on Buddha statues, adds a new tension. Ananda’s methods differ starkly from forensic science. Distrusting those methods, Anil comes to see Sarath’s

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suggestion to hire Ananda as folly.

Despite this early tension and distrust, the repeatedly staged encounters with dead bodies and skeletons in *Anil’s Ghost* create the context for a growing intimacy among the three. Early in the novel, before Anil even arrives in Sri Lanka, we learn that despite her distant demeanor she is strongly affected by the horrific scenes she witnesses. Watching a woman grieving over the dead bodies of her husband and brother at a remote excavation site in Guatemala, Anil is profoundly struck by the affective resonances of the scene. “She was on her haunches,” notes the narrator, “her legs under her as if in formal prayer, elbows in her lap, looking down at the remains of the two bodies” (8). Anil finds herself without language for describing the woman’s face. “There are no words she knows that can describe, even for just herself, the woman’s face. But the grief of love in that shoulder, she will not forget, still remembers” (8). In this scene, Anil does not actively respond to the woman’s grief, but remains a silent observer. However, as the narrator points out, the woman’s grief is something that continues to stay with Anil.  

Throughout the novel, Anil and the other characters bear witness to scenes of brutal death and mourning. When Anil, Ananda, and Sarath stay together at the walawwa, a deserted family estate, the narrative identifies moments of connection not only between the mourner and witness, but among the three colleagues. They are seeking clues to the identity of a skeleton whom they have named “Sailor.” Suspecting that Sailor must have been initially buried in the Ratnapura district, the three choose to take up residence at a

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60 Anil is often considered to be merely interested in scientific research and emotionally detached from the scenes of violence and death. For a detailed discussion of Anil as a politically disinterested figure, see Mrinalini Chakravorty, “The Dead that Haunt Anil’s Ghost: Subaltern Difference and Postcolonial Melancholia.” *PMLA* 128.3 (2013): 542-558. In contrast, I suggest that the novel as shown by the opening vignette introduces her as someone who actually remembers and carries the affective resonances of such scenes.
nearby estate where they can work undisturbed. A growing sense of connection emerges and transforms relations among the three during their time spent together. One night, Anil, who deliberately had been keeping her distance from Ananda and his work, observes him picking up the skeleton from her worktable and carefully holding it in his arms:

She was in no way appalled by what he was doing. There had been hours when locked in their investigations and too focused by hours of intricacy, she too would need to reach forward and lift Sailor into her arms, to remind herself he was like her. Not just evidence, but someone with charms and flaws, part of a family, a member of a village who in the sudden lightning of politics raised his hands at the last minute, so they were broken. Ananda held Sailor and walked slowly with him and placed him back on the table, and it was then he saw Anil. She nodded imperceptibly to show there was no anger in her. (170)

The way Anil responds to the incident signals a dramatic change in her relation to Ananda. Until then, Anil and Ananda had been approaching Sailor’s case from starkly opposing perspectives, the lenses of forensics and artisanship respectively. But respect for each other’s labor and work emerges in this moment. Anil’s initial distrust of Ananda’s artisan way of reconstructing Sailor’s face dissolves here in the recognition of their shared concern for Sailor as a person who has fallen victim to state violence. It is particularly Ananda’s respectful manner of treating Sailor that catches Anil’s attention. Since their arrival at the estate, both have been occupying different spaces and working in mutual silence. This incident, however, leads Anil to identify the formerly unknown presence of a profound non-verbal common language. “Still, on this night, without words, there seemed to be a pact,” she recalls, “The way he had respected the order of her tools, touching nothing, the way he raised Sailor into his arms” (171). In stark contrast to her
earlier distrust and disapproval of Ananda’s methods of work, Anil here begins to recognize a shared respect and concern for the person who was once Sailor.

This recognition is registered in Anil’s deeper perception of Ananda’s feelings. Anil for the first time is able to read the sadness underlying Ananda’s face. As the narrator notes, “She saw the sadness in Ananda’s face below what might appear a drunk’s easy sentiments” (171). Instantly drawn by an urge to placate his sadness, “Anil put out her hand and touched his forearm” (171). If the sight of Ananda carrying Sailor at first invokes a feeling of respect from Anil, such respect transforms into a feeling of understanding crystallized by the intimacy of touch. Connection between the two reaches an even deeper level of intimacy after Ananda completes the construction of Sailor’s face. When Anil and Sarath are presented with Sailor’s constructed face, both are surprised to notice an unexpected serenity in it:

‘It’s so peaceful.’ She spoke first.
‘Yes. That’s the trouble,’ Sarath said.
‘There’s nothing wrong with that.’
‘I know. It’s what he wants of the dead.’ (184)

Contrary to their initial expectation, Sailor’s constructed face does not exemplify a restoration of its past features, but instead projects Ananda’s hopeful wishes for the dead. As Sarath further comments, these wishes include hopes for Ananda’s wife who had been a victim of an unknown group of insurgents and disappeared from the village three years ago. Instead of restoring what has been lost, then, Ananda’s painting transforms Sailor’s face into a medium of hope for the numerous victims of the war.
Ananda’s projection of hope onto Sailor’s face forges not only connection between the dead and its remaining family members, but more importantly intimacy among the three co-workers. When informed of the disappearance of Ananda’s wife, Anil instantly finds herself overcome by heightened feelings of shame and grief. “She could no longer look at the face,” states the narrator, “saw only Ananda’s wife in every aspect of it. She sat down in one of the large cane chairs in the dining room and began weeping” (185). The crying addresses the grief and pain not only of Ananda, but other people affected by the war. Anil here is crying for Sailor and for Sarath’s brother “working himself to death” to save the lives of the war victims at the hospital in the North Central Province (186). And she is crying for the “mad logic” driving the war’s violence (186).

What is particularly striking about this scene, however, is the immediacy of Anil’s affective response. The crying is important in that it depicts Anil, a formerly emotionally detached figure who interprets her native country “with a long-distance gaze,” closely attending to the pain of others (11). If the former presence in foreign countries had been mainly defined by the nature of her work as a forensic specialist, with limited affective response to the political condition of the places where she conducts research, Anil for the first time in the novel responds in an expressive way to the tragedies of Sri Lanka’s civil war.

Echoing Anil’s touch, Ananda, who had been silently observing from a distance “standing, listening to Sarath and Anil speaking in English in the courtyard,” walks toward Anil and “with his thumb creased away the pain around her eye along with her tears’ wetness” (187). The tenderness of the touch is immediately recognized by its receiver. It is a touch Anil comes to remember as the “softest touch” on her face (187). As
she notes, “Now Ananda had touched her in a way she could recollect no one ever having touched her, except, perhaps, Lalitha. Or perhaps somewhere further back in her lost childhood” (188). The touch is similar to that of a caregiver, and stirs memories of childhood, but, as Anil makes clear, it is not the same. Indeed, the touch seems more about the present than the past, for it is soon thereafter that Anil turns to the phrase from which this essay takes its inspiration. Left alone at the walawwa while Sarath is on his way to the city in order to save Ananda from an attempted suicide, Anil affirms their connection across temporary distance: “She was with Sarath and Ananda, citizened by their friendship – the two of them in the car, the two of them in the hospital while a stranger attempted to save Ananda” (200).

Anil’s words here rewrite the notion of citizenship through the intimacies of communal bond. Similar to the way Anil describes Andanda’s touch as neither very distant nor very personal, her emerging sense of connection locates itself at the very intersection of the private and public. Unlike national citizenship, it is not an institutionalized or naturalized form of relationship in that it is not defined by the laws of the nation-state. Nor does it resort to a model of intimacy that is driven by sexual desire. With its emphasis upon the reciprocal nature of intimacy as suggested by the exchange of the touch, the novel’s language of friendship also differs from a form of ethical relation that presumes notions of indebtedness and obligation for the other. With Sailor’s skeleton at its mediating center and a series of gentle touches as its affective sign, the friendship’s communal bond arises from gestures of mutual respect and a horizontal exchange of caring gestures aimed towards the remnants of a citizen’s body that bears the markers of state violence.
The friendship’s transformative power is particularly made visible by the walawwa’s profound transformation from an exclusively private space to a communal realm of collaborative work. Formerly the home of five generations of the Wickramasinghe family, the walawwa is first introduced as an exclusive reservoir of familial intimacy. Its secluded location provides the comforts and safety of a private refuge. A small vignette reminds us that Sarath himself in his childhood years had spent some time at the walawwa fleeing from the dangers of death when his brother fell ill with diptheria. For the young Sarath, the stay at the walawwa not only provided protection, but also fostered a heightened sense of privacy, a state he confesses “he had perhaps never fully emerged from” (165). As Sarath’s words suggest, although it provides protection from dangers posed by the outside world, the estate simultaneously houses the dangers of solitude. But with the entrance of its new tenants, the estate revives into a communal realm housing different approaches to Sailor’s case. Contrary to his prior solitary stay, Sarath this time enters the family estate accompanied by Anil and Ananda. “With Anil and Ananda at his side, he opened all the rooms so they could each choose a work space and bedroom, then locked the unwanted rooms once more” (165). Sarath in this passage stresses the co-presence of Anil and Ananda when he enters the walawwa. Far from intruding on each other’s space, all three share the walawwa’s space, yet occupy disparate parts of it. With the ongoing work of collaboration, a space formerly preserved for familial comfort is gradually transformed into a communal realm where three friends

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61 In Ondaatje’s 1992 novel *The English Patient*, four strangers who differ in nationality, profession, and gender forge a sense of communal belonging in the outskirts of Florence during a time of stark national conflict. These are not conventional diasporic subjects so much as they are migrants, temporary residents in a locale that is neither their home nor a foreign land they plan to settle in. That vision, even though it is marked as temporary, portrays collective life through a growing intimacy among strangers and thus offers an alternative to state-sponsored forms of affiliation. This theme, I am arguing, is more fully developed in *Anil’s Ghost*. 
come to haunt together a “public story” (203).

_The Politics of Friendship_

As I have earlier noted, a distinctive feature of the novel’s portrayal of the growing affective bond among Anil, Sarath, and Ananda is its close attention to the tension deriving from their difference in former affiliations. This tension particularly resurfaces when Sarath, after leaving for Colombo, fails to keep his promise to return to the walawwa. Sarath had left the walawwa to gather further information about Sailor whom they had identified as “Ruwan Kumara,” a toddy tapper that was abducted from the plumbago village. Sarath had proposed to go to Colombo and “search for Ruwan Kumara’s name in a list of government undesirables” (269). Initially, Sarath had promised to return in two days. Left alone at the walawwa, Anil begins to grow suspicious of Sarath’s intensions for leaving. As the narrator notes, “All her fears about him rose again – the relative who was a minister, his views on the danger of truth” (269).

Similarly, towards the end of the novel, Anil again finds herself wondering whether she will remember her friendship with Sarath and his brother after leaving the country: “Wherever she might be would she think of them?” (285). Anil’s question reveals a deep doubt regarding the friendship’s sustainability after her departure. Unlike Sarath, who has love for “the place,” Anil anticipates stepping into a new life in “an adopted country” (285). Her ties to places are merely transient. Anil holds no sustained allegiance to any place, be it in legal or symbolic terms.

Thus, as if testing its own vision, _Anil’s Ghost_ repeatedly points to the risks involved by claiming allegiance to strangers of disparate background and affiliations.
Such questioning strongly resonates with Derrida’s notion of friendship in his late work, *The Politics of Friendship* (1994). Derrida writes that the history of philosophical thought on friendship has been deeply grounded in notions of fraternity. Asking us to think beyond the canonical homo-fraternal conception, he instead proposes a model of friendship that embraces the tensions and risks of difference. According to Derrida, friendship inevitably contains the danger that the friend might be also the enemy. “To be capable of this friendship, he states, “to be able to honour in the friend the enemy he can become, is a sign of freedom” (282). In *Anil’s Ghost*, the court scene particularly offers a fruitful occasion for interrogating the friendship’s political efficacy. Back in Colombo, Anil delivers her report orally in front of the local officials. In the midst of rising hostility and tension, we learn that Sarath is present in the auditorium. Without Anil being aware of it, Sarath was sitting in the back and carefully listening to her presentation. He silently affirms that, “It was a lawyer’s argument and, more important, a citizen’s evidence; she was no longer just a foreign authority” (272). Since Anil holds a British passport, Sarath’s use of the term *citizen* clearly invokes a different category than that of the nation-state. In this scene, Sailor’s case gains its legitimacy through the voice of someone who, as we have already learned, has been “citizened” not by institutional authority but by friendship. Bringing up charges against the government for political murder, the citizen’s voice interrogates the violence of state power. “Then he heard her say, ‘I think you murdered hundreds of us.’ Hundreds of us. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally us” (274). What Anil and Sarath exactly mean by “us” remains unclear. Yet the transition of language from “citizen” to “us” is suggestive in terms of the shifting grounds of its social imaginary. Locating the emergent sense of communal bond in the interstices

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between “citizen” and “us,” the passage unsettles the strict boundaries of national citizenship. The pronoun “us” here not only enables the envisioning of a more inclusive collective body, but also one that has the political force of alliance.

While acknowledging Anil to be part of “us,” Sarath also senses the danger that his statement might cause. He is aware that the allegiance to friendship puts him into an antagonistic relationship with the state. As the narrator notes, “He sensed the hostility in the room. Only he was not against her. Now he had to somehow protect himself” (272). Sarath here is clearly aware that he is risking his own safety if he supports Anil. Yet this does not stop him from helping her. Sarath, a formerly highly private figure who had been distancing himself from actively engaging with the difficulties of life including the nation’s civil war, finds himself in this moment stepping back to “the intricacies of the public world, with its various truths” (279). Although clearly aware that he will be punished for his allegiance to friendship over the nation, Sarath secretly helps Anil escape the building and procure Sailor’s skeleton. If Anil’s formulation “citizened by friendship” makes legible friendship as a medium of belonging, Sarath’s act of rescuing Anil further establishes it as a powerful counter force that critiques state violence.

Allegiance to friendship in *Anil’s Ghost* leads to deadly consequences. While Anil is forced to leave the country, Sarath silently faces death for claiming friendship during a state of national emergency. One of the novel’s last scenes features Sarath’s brother, Gamini, encountering the dead body of Sarath, which bears the markers of violence. “The shirt they had dressed Sarath in, the narrator notes, “had giant sleeves. Gamini knew why. He ripped the sleeves down to the cuffs. Below the elbows the hands had been broken in several places” (290). For many critics, both incidents assert the limits of friendship as a
critique against state violence and a sustainable model of belonging. In particular, Anil’s enforced departure has been read as a mark of the limits of her role in solving the conflicts of the war. Her complicity with Western forces makes the departure inevitable. Following a similar logic, the novel’s final scene, in which Ananda reconstructs a broken Buddha statue, has been seen as an affirmation of the local subject as the empowered figure for the nation’s recovery. Ananda was assigned the task of reconstructing the statue of a Buddha which had been attacked. “The thieves pried the stomach open with metal rods but found no treasure, and so they left. Still, this was broken stone. It was not a human life. This was for once not a political act or an act perpetrated by one belief against another. The men were trying to find a solution for hunger or a way to get out of their disintegrating lives” (301). The narrator reminds us that a place once reserved for the religious is no longer separable from harsh living conditions under war. The statue’s brokenness embodies the frustrations and despair fallen over the nation’s citizens.

Ananda’s effort to restore the statue can be read as a redemptive gesture aimed towards healing the wounds of war. With the help of the villagers, Ananda is able to reassemble the statue’s broken parts. Similar to the reconstruction of Sailor’s face, the project’s value initially lies in the restoring of a broken whole. Emphasis is given to the labor of bringing together scattered parts of the statue. This project, however, gains an additional layer of meaning when Ananda decides to wear Sarath’s shirt throughout its process. Ananda is repeatedly noted wearing “one of the Indian cotton shirts Sarath had given him some years back” (303). Days later when he conducts the eye ceremony in order to celebrate a newly built statue, Ananda is wearing Sarath’s shirt again. “The sun

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lit the green bamboo of the ladder. He could feel its partial warmth on his arms, saw it light the brocade costume he wore over Sarath’s cotton shirt – the one he had promised himself he would wear for this morning’s ceremony” (305). Ananda proclaims that “he and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena” (305). Sarath’s shirt here is important because it powerfully invokes the spectral presence of two absent figures, Sarath and Anil. With Ananda wearing the shirt, the eye-painting ceremony is transformed into a medium that conveys the language of the friendship among the three. Like the intimacy of touch Ananda experienced at the walawwa, the act of conveying Sarath’s shirt crystallizes another intimate gesture that affirms the continued presence of their bond.
Chapter 3

Migrant Network Aesthetics: Migratory Travel as a Transnational Network of Affiliation in Aleksandar Hemon’s *Nowhere Man*

*There is something called narrative paradigm. It is a term from psychology and, for me, it boils down to this: people understand their own life as stories. They see themselves as characters in the stories of their life. Storytelling is a cognitive framework.*

(Aleksandar Hemon in Conversation with Colum McCann, 2010)

If storytelling is a cognitive framework, the way Hemon chooses to tell the migrant’s story in his novel *Nowhere Man* (2002) starkly differs from Ondaatje’s method in *Anil’s Ghost*. In Ondaatje’s novel, the reader is given access to Anil’s migratory life in the form of past memories that the novel invokes in a highly fragmented manner while telling its main story. Although the novel is set primarily during the Sri Lankan civil war, the different geographies of Anil’s life trajectory emerge through a series of flashbacks that highlight different moments of her dwelling in various parts of the world. The different geographies of Anil’s life enter the novel’s narrative in the form of episodic vignettes that diverge from the novel’s present moment and main plot structure. Anil’s migratory past occupies a more spectral presence in Ondaatje’s writing. In stark contrast, migratory travel in *Nowhere Man* emerges as a more defining feature of the novel’s structure and form. The way Hemon traces the protagonist’s migratory life radically departs from conventional portrayals of migration. Instead of following a single coherent storyline or plot structure, the narrative of *Nowhere Man* asks its reader to trace Pronek’s migratory life through a heterogeneous body of narratives told from the perspective of different individuals.
Nowhere Man’s narrative structure challenges the reader’s attempt to trace Pronek’s life trajectory in a strict chronological order. In fact, it is only after having finished the novel as a whole that the reader comes to recognize the novel’s mapping of Pronek’s migratory life. Consisting of seven sub-sections that not only differ in time and place, but also in narrative perspective, the novel resembles a collection of short stories. At first glance, the sections’ stories seem to hold little relation to each other. The independent nature of each section is particularly emphasized by the presence of a title page accompanying the opening of each section. The title page of Nowhere Man’s first section, for instance, not only stating the section’s title “Passover,” specifies the narrative’s spatial and temporal setting. We are told that the section’s narrative unfolds in Chicago on the day of April 18th, 1994. Similarly, we learn from the title page of the second section “Yesterday” that the section is set in Sarajevo and spans the time from September 10th, 1967 until January 24th, 1992.

The novel’s sections highly differ in their geographical locations. Not only are they located in different urban spaces, both sections cover different spans of time. While “Passover” unfolds over a single day, “Yesterday” features events that occur between the years of 1967 and 1992. Because of the heterogeneous nature of each section, it is hard for the first time reader to configure the exact relationship among the novel’s different sections. Over the course of the novel, we learn that what connects these seemingly disparate stories is the recurring presence of a character named Jozef Pronek. Pronek makes his appearance in all the novel’s sections as a character the narrator had been affiliated with while visiting or residing in an urban space. Given Pronek’s recurring presence, Nowhere Man is a novel that consists of a set of stories that address a common
figure. When we read the stories collectively, we come to learn that Pronek was born in former Yugoslavia’s Sarajevo in 1967. Sarajevo is the main place where he grows up and spends most of his time before coming to the States in 1992. With the sudden outbreak of the Bosnian war during his visit to the States, Pronek is unable to return to his home country and becomes stranded in the States. Several sections of *Nowhere Man* bear witness to the struggles of Pronek’s early years of exile in the States. While we encounter Pronek in the first section as a student enrolled in an ESL class, other sections feature him engaged in different types of temporary work in order to survive in a foreign country.

By tracing Pronek’s whereabouts through the account of different narrators who are related to him, *Nowhere Man*’s narrative structure invokes the frame of network. More specifically, the novel as a whole reflects the structure of a transnational network of affiliation. Instead of being narrated by Pronek himself, we come to read Pronek’s life story from the perspectives of different individuals who have either encountered or befriended him in a variety of places spanning Eastern Europe and the United States. Although holding a shared tie to the novel’s title character, the narrators differ in their levels of intimacy with him. Frequently, Pronek is someone the section’s narrator was closely associated with during their time together in a foreign place. In “Yesterday,” for instance, Victor, the section’s narrator, closely befriends Pronek while attending a cultural program in his ancestral homeland, Ukraine. In other sections, the narrator remains an unidentified figure who closely follows Pronek “like a shadow” (72).

novel’s conventional form and interweaves two parallel narrative strains that trace different trajectories of migratory movement. Closely attending to the formal features of *Nowhere Man*, this chapter argues that the novel’s network-like structure as an organizing principle introduces a multi-local spatial logic for telling the migrant’s story. I am particularly interested in how this emphasis upon the intimate interactions among the novel’s varied narrators and Pronek shifts the reader’s attention away from the problems of the migrating subject’s consciousness and allows us to trace migration from an inter-subjective perspective. Moreover, whereas conventional narratives of migration tend to depict nations and cities as places of permanent settlement, Hemon’s writing illuminates geographies of transient encounters central to understanding migration in today’s globally inter-connected world.

The mapping of urban spaces across various nations in *Nowhere Man* reflects contemporary fiction’s recent turn towards more global configurations of space. In her discussion of global fiction, Caren Irr has noted that Hemon’s *Nowhere Man* is a novel whose spatial orientation “repudiates the premises of national narratives.” Irr’s comment highlights the novel’s interest in interweaving different urban spaces across multiple national spheres. I would like to further suggest that the spatial logic of *Nowhere Man* is simultaneously multi-local. The novel’s network-like structure does not prioritize a single national sphere. By asking its reader to travel through an interconnected web of differently located narratives, Hemon’s novel introduces a decentered frame for narrating

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64 Starkly differing in time, one strain of *The Lazarus Project*’s narrative investigates the real life story of Lazarus Averbuch, a teenage immigrant from Eastern Europe who got shot at the Chicago police station in 1908. The novel’s first sub-narrative is coupled with the story of Vladimiar Brik, a Bosnian immigrant, who undertakes a research trip to Eastern Europe to trace Averbuch’s life story.

transnational migration. In fact, notwithstanding the length of time Pronek spends at a certain place, the novel highlights all the specific locales of Pronek’s migratory trajectory with equal weight. In other words, the novel insists upon paying close attention to the multi-local nature of Pronek’s transnational movements.

Historically, the migrant condition has been largely understood through problems of displacement and permanent settlement. Having departed from the place of origin, whether by free choice or enforced by economic or political conditions, the migrant tends to be read as a figure of exile. The challenges of forging a sense of connection and belonging, whether by terms set by nation, family, or culture, have primarily informed critical understandings of migrant subjectivity. If early studies of migration have emphasized the host country’s central place in the migrant’s social imaginary, studies of diaspora have pointed to the symbolic value of the place of origin for envisioning forms of belonging and alliances among people of the diaspora. Following a similar vein, literary critics have focused on problems of citizenship, displacement, and belonging in their approaches to narratives of migration.

Nowhere Man radically revises the former emphasis upon the binary logic between the homeland and host country by creating a narrative that unfolds over contact with multiple geographical locations. Told from the perspectives of several narrators who forge affective bonds with Pronek in a specific nation or city, migratory movement in Nowhere Man is understood by the terms of contingent affiliation. This focus on intimate encounters allows the novel to address the migrant condition through a set of feelings underexplored within traditional immigrant writing. While migrant-centered narratives often elaborate the experience of being away from one’s homeland as well as feelings of
loss and nostalgia accompanying the act of border crossing, the way Hemon depicts Pronek’s migratory life in *Nowhere Man* instead brings attention to a transnational social network arising from the geographies of multi-local migration.

**The Migrant as Recurring Character**

The novel’s third section titled “Passover” contains a strange moment of monologue. Told by Victor Plavchuk, an American of Ukrainian descent, the section recollects Victor’s visit to Kiev as part of a summer program. The monologue takes place during a trip to Lvov, which Victor undertakes with other students from the program. While spending time with one of the students, Victor discloses a family secret:

> I talked about my father, about his being born in Lvov. I talked about all the things he had never told me, things I found out eavesdropping on my mother’s furious rants when they fought. I told him that my father had been a member of a secret Ukranian organization – very secret indeed. They prepared a war of liberation, and hated Russians, Poles, and Jews. And then in World War Two, he was an eighteen-year-old fighter with Bandera partisans, fighting Bolsheviks and avoiding fighting Germans … He went to England, lived in Liverpool, worked on the docks, then he was off to Canada, where he ran the memberless Ukrainian-Canadian Opera Society and sang at weddings and funerals – mainly funerals. Then he went to Chicago, where he conceived my miserable self. (92)

Randomly collected from moments of the mother’s furious rants, the monologue interweaves fragmented pieces of information that had been deliberately kept secret. It gives shape to an account of the father’s migratory past across varied nations. In the monologue, Victor’s father is revealed to have engaged in multiple border crossings since leaving Ukraine during the Second World War. First emigrating to England and then to Canada, the father subsequently settled down in the United States where Victor was later born.
By borrowing the form of monologue, Victor in the above passage develops a brief narrative that grasps a history of serial displacements. Such a task, however, is revealed to be a rather challenging one. As he confesses, “Boy, was I on a roll. I kept babbling – it is very possible that Jozef did not understand most of my prolix monologue” (93). Considering the section as a whole reads as a carefully constructed narrative, the monologue’s rather abrupt manner marks a stark anomaly from the section’s main narrative. Neither a thoughtful recollection nor part of a conversation, it offers details relating to the father’s migratory past that Victor is eager to reveal, but is putting together in a rather hurried way.

One striking feature of the father’s migratory history is that it is depicted as a sequence of temporary dwelling. We as readers come to understand the father’s life trajectory as a state of repeated displacements. Moreover, the father’s years spent away from Sarajevo are described in terms of the nature of his employments. Stating that his father worked on the docks in England and sang at weddings and funerals after moving to Canada, the migratory years are primarily introduced in terms of the father’s work experience. The list of employments speaks to the precarious life conditions as a transient migrant worker. In order to make a living, Victor’s father is revealed to have needed to be highly flexible in the employment of his skills. The years abroad are given meaning in terms of the different nature of the father’s labor.

The challenges of developing a narrative that is able to fully come to terms with the migrant’s dwelling in multiple nations deeply inform the novel’s project as a whole. Similar to Victor’s father, the title character of Nowhere Man crosses national borders several times. Pronek first leaves his hometown Sarajevo in order to attend a cultural
program in Kiev, and later comes to the States as part of an exchange program. Although the reasons for the two departures are very different from Victor’s father, both figures’ life trajectories challenge the conventional narrative of immigration. The arrival at a new place does not lead to permanent settlement. Nor does it resort to a narrative of permanent diasporic return. Instead, both cases introduce migratory journeys that involve contact with multiple geographies. Unlike the monologue, however, *Nowhere Man* invokes the different geographies of Pronek’s life in a less clearly structured way. The sections do not follow a strict chronological order. As I have earlier mentioned, it is only after having finished the whole novel that the reader is able to trace the trajectory of Pronek’s movements. For instance, the novel’s first section features Pronek’s presence in Chicago in the year of 1994. The second section then suddenly shifts back to the years Pronek spent in Sarajevo from 1967 until 1992. The novel’s third section, on the other hand, unfolds in Ukraine and depicts Pronek’s time there while attending a summer program in 1991.

For the first-time reader, the novel’s non-linear portrayal of migration is profoundly disorienting. In fact, each section reads as an independent story that breaks from the preceding section’s narrative. Such a reading is particularly supported by the fact that each section is told by a different narrator. The inter-relations among the novel’s first-person narrators remain unclear. It is through the recurring presence of Jozef Pronek in each section that the connection among the seemingly disparate sections becomes legible. In fact, we first encounter Pronek midway through *Nowhere Man*’s first section. Set in Chicago, “Passover” delineates the unnamed narrator’s job interview at an ESL institution. The section opens with the unnamed narrator getting ready to leave his
apartment for the interview. We learn that the narrator is currently living in exile away from his native country, Bosnia. Since his arrival to the States, the narrator is revealed to have been supporting himself through a series of temporary jobs. Feelings of despair deeply inform the opening pages of the section. As the narrator notes, he had set up an interview for an ESL teaching job “strictly out of despair” after having been laid off from a temporary job at a bookstore (4). As the narrator further notes, “I had tried other bookstores, but they didn’t want me. I had tried getting a job as a writer, elaborately lying about my previous waiting experience in the best Sarajevo restaurants, high European class all, and nonexistent on top of that. I had spent my measly savings and was in the furniture-selling phase” (5). It is, however, not just the loss of income that has been causing feelings of despair. War is revealed to be another factor adding to the narrator’s current state of distress. “When I couldn’t smash the boxes, I had obsessively read the papers and watched TV (until I sold it) to see what was happening back home. What was happening was death” (6). The home country’s state of war and the narrator’s dire economic condition in the States are revealed to be closely related factors lying at the roots of the narrator’s current precarious state of mind.

It is while observing classes at the ESL institution during the interview that the narrator recognizes a familiar face. “I remembered him, there he was out of nowhere,” notes the narrator, “I was bedazzled by the clarity of the memory” (24). The person the narrator is surprised to meet in the classroom is Pronek, a childhood acquaintance he used to know in Sarajevo. Both had been playmates living in the same neighborhood. The unexpected encounter with Pronek leads the narrator to plunge into a series of
recollections regarding his childhood past. The moment of encounter is filled with the excitement of re-encounter with a former acquaintance in a foreign place.

In another section, Pronek enters the novel as a figure the narrator, Victor Plavchuk, closely befriends during his visit to Ukraine. The section’s opening features Victor arriving in Kiev in order to attend a summer program. Upon the arrival, Victor is greeted by his roommate. “He opened the door of a room. I walked in reluctantly, Vladek dropped my suitcases, and winked the final wink. My roommate-to-be was frisking a pillow, bare-chested, wearing only shorts with an anchor pattern,” recalls Victor regarding the first moment of encounter with his new roommate. “‘I am Jozef,’ he said, and offered his hand, still warm from patting the pillow” (78). In this scene, we meet Jozef Pronek as Victor’s roommate in Kiev. Pronek is further introduced to have come from Sarajevo. “He was from Sarajevo, Yugoslavia,” states Victor, “He used to have a band and write papers. His father was Ukranian, just like mine, though his was born in Bosnia. He came to Ukraine to see his grandfather’s fatherland, but he also wanted to be away for a little from ‘crazy things’ in Yugoslavia” (80). The way Victor introduces his new roommate to the reader strongly invokes the Pronek we met earlier in the novel’s first section. The fact that both figures share the same name and are from Sarajevo strongly suggests the possibilities that the narrators are addressing the same figure.

*Nowhere Man* is filled with moments of similar instances that invite us to recognize Pronek as a recurring character. Because the novel refrains from fully confirming whether the Pronek introduced in a particular scene is the same Pronek we formerly encountered in the novel, the reader is never to know for sure whether all the Proneks that make appearance in the novel are the same character or multiple figures that
happen to share the same name. The striking similarities in personal background, however, strongly suggest the possibilities of being versions of the same character. An important shared feature among the Proneks in the novel is that they are all from Sarajevo and hold similar life trajectories away from their hometown. Repeatedly, it is brought to the reader’s attention that they have visited a group of common places. In the novel’s second section titled “Yesterday,” for instance, Pronek is revealed to have visited Ukraine’s Kiev as part of a summer program, a fact that is also supported by Victor’s recollection of his encounter with Pronek in Kiev in the third section:

The same month, his father told him that a man he knew in the Association of Bosnian Ukrainians was looking for someone who wanted to go to a summer school in Kiev, to learn more about their heritage. Pronek had no interest in his heritage, as he had suffered through his father’s history, but he thought that leaving Sarajevo and the war in Croatia for a month would help his mental health. He went to Ukraine. But that is a different story, and I have never been in Ukraine – someone else will have to talk about that part of his life. (69)

Claiming that the time Pronek spent in Ukraine is “a different story,” the narrator here only briefly mentions that Pronek once attended a summer school in Kiev. Set in Sarajevo, the section’s overall narrative focuses on Pronek’s years of growing up in former Yugoslavia. Yet, this information about Pronek’s stay in Kiev, although only introduced in a fleeting manner, comes to deeply resonate in later sections of the novel. The comment about Pronek’s stay in Kiev in this section invites the reader to view Victor Plavchuk, the narrator of the third section, as the “someone else” who informs us about the details of Pronek’s stay in Kiev. We come to read Victor’s recollections of his growing bond with Pronek as an account that compliments the above passage’s information.
Migrant Network Aesthetics

During the last decade, the network has emerged as an enabling concept for mapping complex structures of interconnection operating on varied scales within the social sciences and humanities. As a cluster of connected nodes, networks help us grasp complex webs of interconnection informing our social worlds. A wide range of social phenomena and issues ranging from transportation systems to global trade routes came to be understood through the network form. For scholars working on globalization, the concept of network has been particularly productive because it holds explanatory power for describing structures of global connectivity. In recent years, Patrick Jagoda has suggested the term “network aesthetics” as a term to “describe narrative and formal styles that channel globally interconnected systems.” According to Jagoda, the network as an analytic allows us to recognize interconnectivity as “a dominant architectural mode, a multi-valent metaphor” for configuring a range of phenomena informing today’s world including computer webs, economic systems, and terrorist networks.

Conceiving migration through the network shapes a new organizing principle for understanding migratory movement. In fact, the way network aesthetics emerges in Hemon’s Nowhere Man allows us to read the migrant’s movements as an interwoven web of local stories. As the earlier part of this chapter has shown, the novel’s seven sections invoke the structure of a connected network with Pronek serving as its mediating center. Instead of offering the comforts of a single storyline and narrative perspective, Hemon compels the reader to trace Pronek’s transnational movements through a collection of stories grounded in different national spaces. The multi-directionality of Pronek’s

movements is foregrounded by the heterogeneous nature of the sections. Each individual section bears witness to Pronek’s residence in a city or nation. A comprehensive understanding of his multi-local life trajectory arises when we read each section in close relation to the others. In order to trace Pronk’s movements, the reader needs to be able to recognize the interconnections among the differently located stories. Pronek’s recurring presence holds the narrative function of interweaving a series of accounts that are set in different nations and urban spaces.

Furthermore, Nowhere Man’s network-like structure foregrounds the locale of each section as a site of intimate encounter and burgeoning ties between the section’s narrator and Pronek. This is particularly suggested by the span of time covered by each section. One striking feature of each section is that its time frame reflects the duration of the narrator’s close interaction with Pronek. Frequently, the sections open with an unforeseen encounter between the narrator and Pronek in a certain urban space, and the endings tend to be marked by either the narrator’s or Pronek’s sudden departure from the place. For instance, the second section which features Pronek’s years of growing up in Sarajevo comes to an end with his departure for the United States. In the section’s final scene, the narrator closely describes the moment of Pronek’s departure. “I look up and see the plane disappearing into the clouds,” states the narrator, “Pronek takes the last look at the city sprawling in the valley, as of kissing a dead person, the fog creeping along between the buildings” (72). Similarly, in the third section, Victor’s time with Pronek in Kiev comes to an end with the news of his father’s death. In the section’s final scene, Victor is shown to be returning to the States in order to attend his father’s funeral. If the
section opened with Victor’s first encounter with Pronek upon his arrival to Kiev, its ending features the break of their time together in Kiev.

Thus, determined by the length of time the narrator intimately interacts with Pronek, *Nowhere Man*’s sections unfold over starkly different time periods. The first section unfolds over a single day and focuses on the narrator’s transient encounter with Pronek in Chicago. While observing an ESL class during a job interview, the narrator spots a former childhood acquaintance from his hometown Sarajevo. “Pronek looked up straight at me,” the narrator says, “I didn’t know if he could recognize me – I had changed a lot, having gone through a long and debilitating illness – but he was staring at me. I looked away, my heart thundering inside” (25). The narrator does not know for sure whether the figure staring at him is the very Pronek he used to know in Sarajevo. Despite those uncertainties, however, this unexpected moment of reconnection in a foreign place profoundly affects the narrator. At first, it invokes a series of memories that date back to the narrator’s initial encounter with Pronek. We come to learn that Pronek had been a newcomer to the neighborhood. Early interactions between the two are revealed to have been rather hostile. “They built an ugly high-rise, which we hated along with its tenants. So we would throw stones into the windows of the building and set their garbage on fire … Pronek lived in the building and when we cornered him, he would never put up a fight – his nose would bleed, and he would look at us with scorching fury, and then he would just walk away” (24). Although the narrator states that they ended up playing together, the relationship between the two is revealed to have never fully reached friendship. As the narrator recalls, “They were not our enemies any longer, but they were not our friends either. They were still newcomers, some of them spoke with strange non-Sarajevan
accents and we were the natives. We let them settle, but they were still in our land, and we never failed to let them know that” (24). The narrator’s depiction of his former affiliation with Pronek in Sarajevo reveals that, despite their growing intimacy, it continued to contain the tension between the native and newcomer.

This earlier tension between the two continues to inform the moment of re-encounter in the States. Although feeling excited to meet a former acquaintance, the narrator remains unsure about how to address his childhood playmate. At first, the narrator is able to recognize Pronek through his facial features and “heavily accented English” (24). It is while Pronek reads out an article that the narrator’s attention is instantly drawn to him. The accent, a marker of difference and incommensurability in the former Sarajevan context, turns into a feature through which the narrator is able to recognize Pronek. In this passage, accent, a former marker of indelible difference, in the ESL classroom powerfully transforms into a key medium of possible connection. The narrator’s affective response, however, is further complicated by the home country’s current state of war. As he immediately starts asking, “How did he get here? Was he in Sarajevo under siege? Or was he besieging it? I hadn’t talked to him in years, if ever” (25). Not knowing what Pronek’s political side might be, the narrator turns highly ambivalent about how to address Pronek and avoids any further eye-contact. But before leaving the classroom, the narrator pays a final look at Pronek. “As I was leaving the classroom, I glanced one more time at Pronek and he looked straight back at me, perhaps – and perhaps not – recognizing me. He still seemed angry” (25). Leaving the scene without any further exchange of words, the encounter between the two ends without resolving their former tension.
The moment of eye contact with Pronek, although ending abruptly in this scene, is important because it continues to convey the unfulfilled desires for further intimacy. Despite their former tension, the American context suggests a new ground for not only reconnection but the possibilities of a new kind of relationship. Yet, as shown by the narrator’s ambivalent response, the home country’s state of war challenges those possibilities. One could read this scene of vexed intimacy as a reflection of the sub-national division caused by the war. Former citizens of the same nation are revealed to be no longer able to re-connect through the language of shared nationhood. On the way back home, the narrator laments the unfulfilled nature of his encounter with Pronek. “I should have told Pronek who I was, I needed him to know,” laments the narrator (27). We see him confess the need of mutual recognition from Pronek. His final words seek value in the interactive dimension of the contact. As if mirroring the narrator’s yearning mind, the section ends with echoing the desperate voice of a woman searching for her lost dog. ““Lucky Boy!” I heard the woman shouting. ‘Where are you? Where you go?’” (27).

The narrator’s yearning mind culminating in the section’s final scene deeply resonates throughout the chapter. In fact, the voice of the woman searching for her dog first enters the section in the form of a note the narrator notices on his way to the interview. A sheet of paper “pinned to a tree” grasps the narrator’s attention which reads as follows:

**LOST DOG**

I LOST MASCULINE DOG, THIS COCTAIL SPANIEL AND HIS NAME LUCKY BOY. HE HAS LONG, LONG EARS AND CURVE HAIR GOLD BROWN COLOR WITH SHORT TAIL ALSO HE IS VERY FRIENDLY, LITTLE CRAZY. IF ANYONE FOUND MY DOG PLEASE PLEASE CONTRACT MARIA. (7)
The note conveys the desperate voice of a woman named Maria looking for her lost companion. From its writing, we are to assume that the dog’s owner is not a fluent speaker of English. Similar to both the narrator and Pronek, the woman in search of her lost dog is revealed to hold the status of a newcomer to the States. The woman’s note gains further meaning in light of the narrator’s longing for a recuperation of the lost tie to Pronek which is suggested to be a difficult task in the current exilic condition.

Similar to the first section, the novel’s narrative as a whole contains the excitement as well as the tensions of unforeseen encounters that are complicated by desires of intimacy. Many of the novel’s narrators happen to come to know or meet Pronek during their residence in a foreign place. In Nowhere Man, contingent encounters deeply inform the novel’s social world. Far from being merely transient, the affective intensity of such contacts, be it feelings of tension, excitement, or pleasure, hold an enduring presence. Often, the clarity of each narrator’s memory with regard to his encounter with Pronek in a certain urban space strongly supports such reading. Even though years have passed since the narrators met with Pronek, they still clearly remember the minute details of the interactions with Pronek as well as their affective intensities. Remembering such moments is shown to excite the narrator to the present day. As one of the narrators recalls, “It was as he was fumbling the word literature that I befriended him. It was painful for me too to utter that word, and I grinned in warm understanding, wanting to hug him like a stack of wheat. Even now, when I teach, when I am forced to utter the word “literature,” I have a strange sensation – my nipples tickle, my eyes well
up with tears” (82). The close attention to small details as well as the word’s ongoing effects suggests the memories’ enduring effect.

For some critics, the stark similarities between Pronek and the narrators suggest the possibilities of the narrators being Pronek’s doubles. Throughout the novel, the narrators often find themselves placed in situations similar to that of Pronek. For instance, the narrator of the first section, like Pronek, is revealed to have been recently displaced from his home country. Although we are not given much detail regarding Pronek’s life in the States, the fact that both run into each other at an ESL institution suggests that they are newcomers to a foreign country. Similarly, in the novel’s second section, both Victor and Pronek are visiting Kiev for similar purpose. Although born in different places, both figures are descendants of Ukrainian descent who have come to their ancestral homeland in order to learn its language and culture.

Indeed, the concept of double is useful for tracing Pronek’s close connection to the novel’s different narrators. Some critics have further suggested that the novel’s various characters are autobiographical reflections of the novel’s author. Aleksandar Hemon was born and grew up in Sarajevo in the former Yugoslavia in 1964. He worked as a journalist in Sarajevo after graduating from the University of Sarajevo with a degree in literature in 1990. Hemon came to the States in 1992 in order to attend a one-month-long cultural exchange program in Chicago. Due to the sudden outbreak of the Bosnian war during his stay in the States, Hemon was unable to return to Sarajevo. Like some of

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the novel’s narrators, Hemon used to work for a list of temporary jobs including work as a Greenpeace canvasser and an ESL teacher during his early years in the States.

However, such reading, although invited by varied parts of the novel, fails to address the novel’s emphasis upon the formation of ties connecting each narrator to the migrating figure. As earlier parts of this chapter have shown, the close contact between the narrator and Pronek hold a central place in each section. Not only do the narrators cross paths with Pronek in a certain place, they are highly conscious of the fact that their time with Pronek will not last for long. Not being permanent residents in the places where their paths cross, both the narrator and Pronek are acutely aware of the temporary nature of their contact and the time spent together. It is the narrator’s consciousness of the transitory nature of their contact with Pronek that clearly distinguishes Hemon’s writing from earlier narratives of immigration. While narratives of immigration tend to engage with problems of permanent settlement, *Nowhere Man* more foregrounds the precarious conditions of continued migration as a distinctive feature of late twentieth-century migration.

*The Power of Weak Ties*

During the last decade, the term intimacy has gained critical currency as a useful term for re-formulating social relations. A term which has been traditionally reserved for the private realm of the human experience, such as the familial and sexual, came to be associated with the more public realm of social interactions.\(^69\) One of the key values of intimacy as a critical term relates to its referential capacity for accounting unprecedented forms of affiliation. As Berlant states, it includes “the distractions and disruptions that

\(^{69}\) The work of Lauren Berlant has been foundational in opening up a public context for the term. See Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (1998): 281-288.
make things turn out in unprecedented scenarios” (281). According to Berlant, intimacy, far from being limited to the realm of the private, occupies a more intersectional space cutting across and thus disrupting the assumed boundaries between the public and private. “Attachments make people public, producing transpersonal identities and subjectivities,” writes Berlant, “when those attachments come from within spaces as varied as those of domestic intimacy, state policy, and mass-mediated experiences of intensely disruptive crises?” (283). Directing particular attention to intimacy’s transformative power, Berlant’s reconfiguration of intimacy highlights the term’s political potential for imagining collective life. As she contends, intimacy “links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective” (283).

The expansion of intimacy’s conceptual dimension has helped us to conceive less traditional forms of publics. For many scholars, intimacy makes visible the modes of attachment and affiliation which cannot be grasped or fully explained by the language of the state and its institutions. Early scholarship of intimacy, informed by queer understandings of the nation’s public sphere, paved the way for making legible modes of attachments not recognized by the state’s institutions, especially family and marriage. Building upon these earlier insights, recent scholarship has applied the term in order to address affective ties and political alliances traversing the borders of race and ethnicity.

70 Major scholarly attention has focused on intimacy’s potential for envisioning diverse forms of affiliation in the context of the American public sphere. For a discussion of intimacy in the context of the early America’s nation building, see Peter Coviello, Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005); Ivy Schweitzer’s Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006).

Ranging from visions of national cohesion to more local models of inter-racial friendship, the lens of intimacy foregrounds diverse scales of non-state-sponsored modes of social affiliation and belonging.

*Nowhere Man* shares contemporary scholarship’s interest in intimacy’s referential power. More specifically, the way intimacy is addressed in Hemon’s writing allows us to trace migratory movement through a trans-urban network of affiliation. Intimacy in *Nowhere Man* arises from a set of contingent forms of contact among border crossing figures. Neither rooted in notions of shared family, ethnicity, culture, or nationhood, intimacy in *Nowhere Man* arises out of the process of transitory contact with places and others. It is interesting to note that the cultural programs the novel brings attention to in each section are often designed to cultivate nation-based forms of attachment. For instance, the summer school Victor attends in the novel’s third section is revealed to have been designed to allow youth of Ukrainian descent to connect with their ancestral roots. Students of Ukrainian descent from varied countries are shown to attend the program in order to familiarize themselves with Ukraine’s culture, history, and language. The section’s narrator, Victor Plavchuk, and Pronek are part of that group of students. Similarly, the cultural program Pronek partakes in the U.S. is one sponsored by the American Cultural Center in Sarajevo. As the narrator notes, “In November, he got a call from the American Cultural Center and the director’s secretary said (the director had left, because Sarajevo was becoming unsafe) they were inviting him to visit the USA and learn more about it, as he was a young journalist likely to promote the values of freedom”
Upon accepting the offer, Pronek leaves his hometown Sarajevo for the States in January 1992.

Contrary to the initial purposes of those invitations, however, the stays abroad are primarily remembered by each narrator as opportunities to meet Pronek. Victor in the third section, for instance, recalls his stay in Kiev as a time of growing friendship with Pronek. At first, the section’s title “Fatherland” seems to mirror the main purpose of Victor’s visit to Ukraine. In light of his familial background, the section’s specific locale, Ukraine, holds symbolic value as a site of ancestral origin. Yet, what takes center stage in Victor’s account of his days in Ukraine is the growing bond he feels towards his roommate, Pronek. Among the many details of the stay, it is particularly the time he spends with Pronek that Victor most clearly remembers and is eager to depict. His daily interactions with his new roommate, no matter how brief or trivial, turn into key moments which give rise to a wide range of affective responses often intersecting with desires for physical proximity.

Victor’s account in “Fatherland” thus thwarts the reader’s initial expectation of a narrative of diasporic return as the sections’ title at first seems to imply. Although the title, “Fatherland,” invokes a notion of place as one’s homeland, Ukraine is never actively explored or embraced as Victor’s place of origin. In fact, he holds little interest in seeking out his ancestral heritage. As Victor notes during a visit to his father’s hometown, “Somewhere there – but where I knew not – was the Lvov my father had grown up in and had since left, and, bad son that I was, I had little interest in seeking it out” (91). Throughout the section, Ukraine is repeatedly referred to as a place Victor’s father is deeply attached to. For Victor, however, the importance of Ukraine as the section’s locale
lies in its role of mediating the encounter and growing intimacy between Victor and Pronek.

Although initially taking the form of companionship that resembles a fraternal bond, Victor’s feelings for Pronek increasingly follow the language of sexual desire. This particularly speaks to the sensual aspects of Victor’s response to his interactions with Pronek. Early encounters between the two are described as being accompanied by sudden eruptions of “strange sensation” and “an urge to follow” (82-83). Victor increasingly observes the growing place of desire in his relationship with Pronek. Among many others, one incident particularly stands out as a defining moment for Victor in recognizing desire’s growing place in his feelings. The incident occurs while President Bush is visiting Kiev. On that day, Victor singles out Pronek among the crowd of people gathered to see the American president and listen to the delivery of his speech. The details of the speech, however, are omitted in Victor’s recollection. Instead, the readers’ attention is directed to Pronek’s presence in the scene. We are told that Pronek all of the sudden approached the president right after the speech. “And then Bush came off the stage and after a sequence of microevents that I cannot recall – you must imagine my shock – Jozef was looking at him with a grin combined with a frown – which I can recognize in retrospect as his recognition that the moment was marvelously absurd” (105). Pronek’s sudden entrance into the scene along with the conversation that follows shapes Victor’s overall response to the scene. When Pronek tells President Bush that Ukraine is not his country and that he is from Bosnia, the answer he receives is, “It’s all one big family, your country is. If there is misunderstanding, you oughtta work it out”
In spite of Pronek’s intervention, Bush here insists upon a notion of brotherhood among Eastern European nations.

It is in the midst of witnessing Pronek’s challenging the president’s statement that Victor realizes an overlooked dimension of his feelings for his roommate. As he recalls, “I replay this scene like a tape, rewinding it, slowing it down, trying to pin down the moment when our comradeship slipped into desire – the transition is evanescent, like the moment when the sun’s rays change their angle, the light becomes a hairbreadth softer, and the world slides with nary a blink from summer into fall” (106). The confession is striking for several reasons. It is the first moment in the section that Victor openly acknowledges desire’s key place in his feelings for Pronek. Although having earlier pointed out the sensual aspects of his feelings, they had been kept hidden due to their troubling nature. In a statement immediately followed, Victor further reveals his wish for never having to part with Pronek. “Oh, smite flat the thick rotundity of the world,” he states, “so we may never be apart” (106).

More strikingly, the timing of Victor’s confession displaces the historical importance of the scene which refers to a real event. In August 1991, former President Bush went to Kiev in order to placate the growing demand for Ukraine’s independence. By blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, Hemon in this passage powerfully rewrites a moment of US intervention. On one hand, Pronek’s response to Bush’s speech challenges the assumed notion of a shared brotherhood among Eastern European nations. He insists upon recognizing the differences underlying their assumed interconnection. At the same time, by intersecting this scene with Victor’s confession of his secret desires for Pronek, Hemon troubles the assumed boundaries between private and public feeling. The
emphasis upon Victor’s intimate feeling towards Pronek foregrounds the presence of a more sub-scale yet more intense form of brotherhood feeling. The language of desire disrupts the larger narrative of fraternal bond among nation-states supported by a voice that represents the nation-state. Desire here displaces the narrative of international connection, and instead brings attention to a different kind of longing for connection emerging in this moment: Victor’s longing for physical proximity with Pronek.

The place of desire informing Victor’s attachment to Pronek achieves a similar effect when Victor speaks of the Putsch in the very same section. Not long after Bush’s visit, the independence of Ukraine is declared. During this temporary state of anarchy accompanying the dissolution of the Soviet Union along with the early days of Ukraine’s independence, Victor comes to entertain a series of fantasies. In a dream he has on the day of the Putsch, both Victor and Pronek are arrested by the KGB and handcuffed together. Together they attempt an escape. Both are depicted as running through forests and hiding in the dark. “We crossed borders and more borders, some of them were hedges, with watchtowers and sharpshooters strewn all over, waving at us, letting us through, so they could shoot us in the back” (118). Victor’s dream here envisions an escape from the state’s power of control. As foreign subjects, both Victor and Pronek are seen to pose a potential threat to the Ukrainian state during the Putsch. The fantasy, however, also plays out Victor’s longing for intimacy with Pronek. Not only featuring their shared bond under a common fate, the dream involves the pleasures of physical intimacy.

Victor’s fantasies, despite their fleeting nature, shape an alternative perspective for reading events that are primarily remembered as key historical moments of the nation-
state. Although less visible and deliberately kept hidden, the fantasies Victor secretly entertains foreground the presence of desires that operate on a non-national scale. The temporary state of political turmoil offers Victor the opportunities for entertaining alternative paths of being and forging bonds with others not mediated by family and the state. In a similar vein, rather than joining the crowd in celebrating Ukraine’s regained national freedom, Victor is instead thrilled to kiss Pronek. “So I turned to him and grabbed his face with both of my hands, and pressed my lips against his, feeling the air coming out of his nostrils on my cheek” (123). Aware that this act “could have seemed typically Slavic outpouring of brotherly feelings,” he emphasizes that it is a kiss entangled with different meanings. “We kissed for an eternity, could not separate” (123).

This moment of the kiss, however, is something that never really happened. Immediately following this scene of longing for non-separation, Victor states that it is a scene of his own imagination:

I never kissed Jozef. I pretended to be listening carefully to the speakers, while I was trying to make a decision, one moment after another, and then turn to him, grab his face, and press my lip against his, dizzyingly aware all along how impossible it was. Jozef stood next to me, oblivious to my desire, unsinged by the fires of my hell. My stomach quivered, and iron fists pressed against my temples, until my sinuses were throbbing. He might have said something, I might have shuddered. But I looked not at him, and I touched him not, and it all lasted for years. (125)

As Victor states, he never kissed Pronek during the moment, and Pronek remained unaware of his desires. This missed opportunity of the kiss is subsequently followed the next day with the news of Ukraine’s independence. Instead of joining the crowd in rejoicing the nation’s regained independence, Victor remembers it as a day for something that never happened, “the non-kiss” (125).
Soon after the Putsch, Victor hears the news of his father’s death which leads to his sudden departure from Kiev. Victor returns home in order to attend his father’s funeral. “The funeral was the day of arrival – he perished while I was in the Frankfurt Airport duty-free shop, considerately buying a few bottles of Absolute vodka that would be consumed at his wake. Straight from the airport, I sat in the first row at the Muzyka funeral home, with my sobbing, shuddering mother, dressed in deep black, while my father lay in an open coffin” (126). The section’s very last scene features Victor bidding his father farewell. “I kissed my father gently: his lips were frigid and tight. I know now when one is dead and when one lives (127). While his wish to kiss Pronek remains unfulfilled, Victor here finds himself kissing the lips of his deceased father. By juxtaposing two different versions of the intimacy of kissing, Hemon intersects the grief of lost contact with Pronek with the loss of a family member.

Considering that Victor’s father had been an avid supporter of Ukraine’s independence, the timing of his death has the effects of intensifying the tragedy of Ukraine’s national history. The father’s wishes for the nation’s independence are eventually fulfilled yet with deadly consequences. As Victor recalls his last conversation with his father, “I talked to my father, who vociferated, in an exhausted, coarse voice: “Shche ne vmrela Ukraina!” Ukraine hasn’t died yet! But he was about to die, my mother outright told me, too fatigued to lie. Everything inside him, she said, had been eaten away by cancer – it was a matter of days” (125). As if mirroring the intensity of the father’s loyalty for the nation, he is dying on the day of Ukraine’s regained freedom. He has become depleted by his own wishes for the homeland’s independence.
For Victor, the day of Ukraine’s independence marks the beginning of new kind of grief. If his father had been suffering from the forced departure from the home country, Victor foresees his own feelings of loss caused by his own departure from Jozef. “I never saw Jozef,” he states, “Although there have been passersby and strangers who cruelly wore his lovely face and sometimes I recognize him among the extras in a lame Hollywood movie. Once I saw his face on TV in the crowd of Greenpeace protestors chanting some nonsense in front of a nuclear facility. I am used to these fantasies now, as one gets used to the voices of the dead talking to him” (126). The passage reveals that Victor never met Pronek again after his departure from Kiev. Instead, the fantasies he lists in this passage refer to instances that could have been re-encounters with Pronek.

Containing the possibilities of the faces being Pronek, the images Victor encounters become possible versions of re-encounters. It is interesting to note that the visions of re-encounter are not only made possible by images transmitted by mass media, but also feature Pronek at multiple places. Not limited to a single nation or city, Pronek is projected here as a figure that might be present at a great variety of places. The images invoked by the media suggest the possibilities of Pronek living at different nations. Such reading is in particular endorsed by a later section that depicts Pronek working for Greenpeace in Chicago. In the section itself, Pronek is not shown to be protesting in front of a nuclear facility. Yet, his affiliation to Greenpeace invites the possible link. The multiple versions of Victor’s fantasies thus not only reflect the intensity of Victor’s longing mind, but more importantly open up the possibilities of Pronek’s presence across varied nations.
Desires for continued contact with Pronek hold an undeniably central presence in each section and deeply occupy the narrator’s mind. Taking the shape of desires that the narrator has for a long time kept hidden or has not been able to name, intimacy in *Nowhere Man* addresses a range of feelings the narrators experience during their brief yet intense encounters with Pronek. In doing so, the novel gives voice to a secret history of intimacy that is shaped by the patterns of Pronek’s continued migrancy.

However, as I have shown, the novel’s peculiar manner of telling Pronek’s migratory story foregrounds an alternative critical frame for conceiving the migrant condition. It is particularly noteworthy that Pronek throughout the novel remains a figure unaware of the narrators’ affective turmoil caused by his presence. As repeatedly noted by the narrators, Pronek remains “oblivious to” the narrators’ feelings and desires (125). The novel never reveals what Pronek actually feels for the figures he comes into contact with. Instead, attention is exclusively given to the narrators’ feelings and thoughts. As I stated earlier in this chapter, this very limited access to the migrant’s state of mind and feeling is a feature that starkly differentiates *Nowhere Man* from conventional migrant-centered accounts of migration. With each section serving as a reflection upon the encounter with Pronek in a particular place, the novel is able to direct attention to the social implications of the migrating figure’s temporary presence at multiple locales.

*Nowhere Man* critically responds to today’s patterns of multi-local migration in that it invokes a distinctly multi-local network of contingent affiliations. As the novel’s recurrent figure, Pronek emerges as a mediating center that facilitates varied modes of intimacy at the places he visits or lives in. His multi-local presence makes legible the excitements, tensions, and challenges of transient encounters. The intimacies of transient
encounters emerge as a key structure of feeling informing the novel’s narrative as a whole.
Chapter 4

“I will Circle Around and Arrive Again”: Trans-Pacific Intimacy and Adoption in Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*

The immigrant narrative has been a key frame of reference for critical readings of Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999). The novel tells the story of Franklin Hata, a Japanese man of Korean descent who immigrates to the States in the 1960s. It is from Hata’s perspective that we come to hear his life story. *A Gesture Life* opens with Hata portraying his current daily life in Bedley Run, a fictional town located in the suburbs of New York City. “People know me here,” Hata further announces, “It wasn’t always so. But living thirty-odd years in the same place begins to show on a man. In the course of such time, without even realizing it, the color and stamp of the prevailing dress and gait and even speech – those gentle bells of the sidewalk passersby, their *How are you* and *Good days and Hellos*” (1). He adds that “Everyone knows perfectly who I am. It’s a simple determination. Whenever I step into a shop in the main part of the village, invariably someone will say, ‘Hey, it’s good Doc Hata.’” (1). As the mode of address implies, he is not only well known, but also warmly received by his fellow citizens.

The opening lines’ emphasis upon recognition, as critics have pointed out, invokes a paradigmatic feature of the conventional narrative of assimilation. The self-portrayal reveals him to be highly conscious of the way he is recognized by the community and its members. The thirty-years spent in Bedley Run are described in terms of his changed status, from being an unknown stranger to a settled member of the community who has accrued good reputation. As he further elaborates, “The sentiment, certainly, is very
kind, and one I deeply appreciate. Here, fifty minutes north of the city, in a picturesque town that I will call Bedley Run, I somehow enjoy an almost Oriental veneration as an elder” (1). The novel’s present moment features Hata recently retired from his business. We are told that he sold his store three years ago to the Hickeys, a couple from New York City. Given the novel’s opening, *A Gesture Life* appears to be a novel about successful assimilation and settlement. Hata left Japan and arrived in the States in 1963. Unlike other places he visited since coming to the States, Bedley Run made him feel that he wasn’t “unwelcome” (3). It is a place that reminded him of the serenity of the seaside town where he had grown up in Japan.

The first two chapters of *A Gesture Life* depict Hata’s years in Bedley Run primarily through a U.S. centered domestic frame. More specifically, Hata attributes the town’s initial welcoming to its aspiration for economic growth. “In my first years in Bedley Run things were a bit different,” he tells us, “Even the town had another name, Bedleyville (this my attribution), which changed sometime in the early 1970s because the town board decided it wasn’t affluent-sounding enough” (2). It was because the town “wasn’t affluent at that time” that Hata was able to afford to move there and “open a business,” a medical supply store named Sunny Medical Supply (2). As he comments, during those years, “pretty much anybody new to town was seen as a positive addition to the census and tax base” (3). Carefully aligning his material success to the town’s transformation from small Bedleyville to the more prosperous Bedley Run in the 1970s, Hata’s self-portrayal in the novel’s opening offers a familiar version of the immigrant success story.

The novel’s relationship to the narrative of assimilation, however, is more strained
than Hata’s initial portrayal of his life in the States seems to suggest. The novel’s complacent voice is soon interrupted by a series of confession that defy the teleology of permanent settlement. As Hata confesses,

I know I told Mrs. Hickey otherwise in the store last week, but more and more the time feels right to me, not so much from a financial viewpoint but from a sense of one’s time in a place, and that time being close to done. It’s not that I feel I’ve used up this house, this town, this part of the world, that I’ve gotten all I’m going to get, but more that this feeling I’ve come to expect, this happy blend of familiarity and homeyness and what must be belonging, is strangely beginning to disturb me. (21)

Pointing out that he has been lately feeling out of place, Hata’s words in this passage challenge the early picture of his life in Bedley Run. The feelings disclosed reveal that his time in Bedley Run is reaching an end. The narrative of assimilation is further unsettled by the novel’s growing attention to Hata’s past. From a focus on Hata’s current life, the novel increasingly pays attention to his Asian past.

Such shift in temporal focus radically re-configures the U.S. sphere’s place in the novel. Departing from a U.S. centered single nation frame, Hata’s narrative increasingly takes up a multi-local perspective. It carefully brings attention to the multiple geographies Hata has spent time in before settling in the States. From a series of flashbacks, we learn that he was born of Korean descent in Japan during Japan’s colonial rule over Korea. It was through his adoption by a well-to-do Japanese family, the Kurohatas, that he gained access to the Japanese society as a colonial subject. The novel further discloses that he served as a medical officer in the Japanese Imperial Army during the Pacific War (1931-45). Extended moments of flashback offer glimpses into his wartime activities in South East Asia. At first, memories of the past only briefly disrupt the novel’s present moment. Knowledge about his past is gained in a highly fragmented
manner. As the novel proceeds, however, moments of flashback increasingly take up an extended presence with later chapters solely focusing on Hata’s war-time past. While *A Gesture Life* remains anchored in the present moment, its temporal schema of constantly shuttling back and forth in time and place invokes the U.S. sphere as one of the many locations over which Hata’s life trajectory unfolds. Hata’s past looking gaze insists upon recognizing the multiple geographies of his life.

The novel’s provincializing of the U.S. starkly departs from Lee’s former portrayal of the immigrant experience in *Native Speaker* (1995). While *Native Speaker* asks us to understand the immigrant experience in light of the multi-ethnic milieu of New York City, *A Gesture Life* locates the U.S. immigrant story within a trans-Pacific context that includes various places within Asia. *A Gesture Life*’s close attention to spheres outside the U.S. has led many critics, as Belinda Kong has pointed out, to recognize it as “an exemplary transnational Asian American text” (1).72 In particular, the novel’s transnationalism has often been addressed in light of its treatment of Asian American subject formation beyond the U.S. nation-state. For instance, according to Kandice Chuh, the novel reveals “Korean nationalism, Japanese colonialism, and U.S. racism as distinguishable but inseparably linked historical narratives that simultaneously underwrite the production of Korean and Korean American subjectivities.”73 Following a similar logic, others have identified the novel’s transnational aspect in its portrayal of the Asian American experience in relation to “colonial histories in East Asia” and the continuities

between Japanese and U.S. imperialism. More recently, the novel’s transnationalism has been discussed in light of its engagement with the transnational adoption market that connects the American suburb to military camp towns in Korea.

The writing’s transnational feature, however, lies not only in the entangled nature of different national and colonial contexts informing the formation of Hata as an Asian American subject, but also, as I will show in this chapter, in its portrayal of a history of trans-Pacific connection illuminated by the routes of Hata’s migratory travel. Far from being a singular event, Hata’s arrival to the States is shown to be part of a chain of border crossing movements. Hata’s recollections reveal that the U.S. immigrant story is deeply embedded in an extended history of serial migration. *A Gesture Life*’s re-writing of the American immigrant story relates to the notion of “passing through” which Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar have recently suggested for framing diasporic subjects’ arrivals to the States. “If we think of America not as terminus, but rather as node through which people are passing, the enigma of arrival in America is of less interest than it appears within many American studies engagements with the various diasporas traversing the United States” (26). Instead of conceiving the American sphere through the logic of American exceptionalism, Edwards and Gaonkar illuminate it as a “node in a global circuitry” (26). Something similar emerges in the way *A Gesture Life* invokes an oceanic frame for tracing migratory travel. Hata’s border crossing movements, far from randomly free-floating, disclose how different regions of the Pacific have been

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brought into vexed close contact by a history of continued military conflicts in Asia. In *A Gesture Life*, the trope of adoption is central to tracing connections among different regions of the Trans-Pacific. Focusing on a set of adoptive relations informing Hata’s migration, this chapter examines how the novel’s oceanic frame, not only enlarging the novel’s geographical span, is tied to a web of adoptive ties.

**The Problems of Narrative Voice**

Told in the form of first person narration, Hata’s narrative in *A Gesture Life* rests upon the project of re-telling one’s past. However, such a journey into one’s past, as Hata openly admits, is inevitably a flawed one. “It seems difficult enough to consider one’s own triumphs and failures with perfect verity,” says Hata, “for it’s no secret that the past proves a most unstable mirror, typically too severe and flattering all at once, and never as truth-reflecting as people would like to believe” (5). The question of truth, indeed, as Hata foresees it, is not easily resolved in the novel. Repeatedly, we find Hata correcting statements he makes about himself and his past life. Disclosures of his past are often revealed to have been only partially true or half-revealing. At times, it is much further into the novel that we begin to grasp a full understanding of an incident or scene that Hata formerly introduced to us. As if reflecting the process of Hata himself coming to terms with the implications of his own past, *A Gesture Life* consists of a series of conflicting accounts.

For many critics, Hata is an unreliable narrator whose narrative voice we cannot fully trust. Cristopher Lee who is interested in the novel’s realist project has argued that

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77 Given that many details Hata offers us about his past life relate to secrets that he has deliberately kept hidden from others, the novel’s confessional mode resembles a fictional memoir.
the limiting aspects of Hata’s voice raise problems of historical accuracy. According to Lee, it is the voice of other characters in the novel such as Kkutaeh and Sunny that offers a corrective to Hata’s flawed perspective. Lee states that Kkutah and Sunny “possess the necessary judgment and integrity to act as trustworthy sources of information” (100). Other critics, on the other hand, have interpreted the unreliable nature of Hata’s voice to be mirroring a highly traumatized mind (Carroll 22). Following such reading, the way Hata’s narrative is repeatedly interrupted by memories of the past proves the case of a deeply haunted mind. Hata’s former participation in the Pacific War and its atrocities has been regarded as the main cause of his trauma.

Indeed, all these readings address important aspects of the challenges posed by Hata’s narrative voice. Building upon these former insights, however, I would like to further suggest that the unreliable nature of Hata’s voice reflects the challenges of narrating a life of continued movement over a highly disparate body of places and settings. This particularly emerges from the way we come to question the credibility of Hata’s voice when we first discover that the title “Doc Hata” is not as truth-reflecting as Hata makes us first believe in the novel’s opening. Such suspicion is especially raised by the following comment which Hata inserts in a rather fleeting manner. “I should mention now that I am not a physician of any kind, and that I only ran a medical and surgical supply store in town” (4). First, we are surprised to find out that the title, “Doc Hata,” does not speak to Hata’s real profession. Further into the novel, we discover that “Doc Hata” is not his original name. Jiro Kurohata is revealed to have been Hata’s name in Japan. He had shortened the family name “Kurohata” to “Hata” upon his arrival to the States.
Hata’s affiliation with the name Kurohata is further complicated by the fact that he is an ethnic Korean who was adopted by a wealthy childless Japanese couple, the Kurohatas. His birth parents had been Koreans who worked as “a hide tanner and a rag maid” in the ghettos of Japan’s society (257). Throughout the novel, Hata never fully discloses his Korean name. It is only towards the end of the novel that we learn that his birth family’s family name had been “Oh” (244). His Korean first name, on the other hand, is never mentioned and remains absent throughout the entire novel. The closest information we are given is revealed during a conversation with “K.” When K asks about the Korean name, Hata provides the following answer:

‘I don’t have one,’ I told her immediately. But this was not exactly true. I’d had one at birth, naturally, but it was never used by anyone, including my real parents, who, it must be said, wished as much as I that I become wholly and thoroughly Japanese. They had of course agreed to give me up to the office of the children’s authority, which in turn placed me with the family Kurohata, and the day the administrator came for me was the last time I heard their tanners’ raspy voices, and their-birth-name for me.  (236)

Read in light of the scene’s historical context, the Korean first name’s absence could be seen to reflect Korea’s colonial state under Japan’s rule. The use of Korean was forbidden during Japan’s colonial rule in Korea. Aside from mirroring the Korean language’s material condition, however, the passage further demonstrates Hata’s tenuous ties to Korea. Referring to his birth name only as “their-birth-name for me,” Hata refuses a naturalized tie to his Korean name. Far from being a marker of his filial origin, the way Hata asks us to recognize his Korean first name is as something owned by his birth parents rather than by Hata himself. Instead of giving any meaning to the act of his parents’ calling out his name, the scene of departure is merely remembered by its sonic
Thus, rather than being markers of filial connection, the genealogy of Hata’s multiple names in *A Gesture Life* foregrounds a complex web of contingent intimacies that cannot be grasped by the language of single family and nation. Operating on multiple levels, the complicated nature of such affiliations defies a single explanation. The diverse body of names rather speaks to a complex history of tenuous ties rather than deep attachment to a single family or nation. Given this complex genealogy of names, knowing Hata through the frame of a single nation or family becomes an impossible task. The tensions caused by his intersecting affiliations, as reflected in his highly conflicted state during the Pacific War, cannot be grasped by the single title, “Doc Hata,” as he is known in Bedley Run. Thus, far from being a stable marker of identity, names in *A Gesture Life* signify the catalog of contingent identities and affiliations emerging from Hata’s multi-local life trajectory. As the absence of Hata’s Korean first name in the novel suggests, the novel’s focus on Hata’s names is not aimed towards recuperating a lost ethnic origin. Rather, it highlights a web of adopted ties that inform the trans-Pacific contours of his life. It is as the Kurohatas’ adopted son that Hata, as an ethnic minority and colonial subject, comes to join the Army. The decision to join the Japanese Army at the outbreak of the Pacific War is stated by Hata to have been an act of further extending the loyalties of an adopted son to the nation.

The complications caused by Hata’s varied affiliations particularly emerge in the way the adopted name “Kurohata” gains multiple meaning during the Pacific War. In an interesting manner, “Kurohata,” a name that mirrors Hata’s ties to Japan, comes to signify his highly conflicted state as an ethnic Korean serving the Imperial Army. Hata in charge
of the comfort women’s health comes into close contact with the women’s bodies, especially with “K.” In particular, while stationed in Burma, Captain Ono orders Hata to take special care of “K” and bring her to the infirmary whenever he places a “black flag” in front of it. When given the order, Hata immediately recognizes it to be one intended to humiliate him. He tells us, “What he [Captain Ono] had determined as the sign, the black flag, was of course meant for me. Hata is, literally, ‘flag,’ and a ‘black flag,’ or kurohata is a banner a village would raise by its gate in olden times to warn of a contagion within. It is the sign of spreading death” (224). More poignantly, not only a literal translation of his adopted Japanese family name, the sign in an ironic manner becomes a symbolic sign of his complicity with Captain Ono’s violence upon “K”’s body. “My adoptive family, I learned right away, had an ancient lineage of apothecaries, who had ventured into stricken villages and had for unknown reasons determined to keep the name, however, inauspicious it was” (224). Hata’s interpretation adds an interesting layer to the meaning of the assigned task and his role in the Army. On the surface, his responsibilities as a medic are to protect the Army from the spread of any possible disease. He is in charge of checking the comfort women’s health and making sure the camp is free from any dangers of contagion. Captain Ono’s exploitation of “K”’s body, however, is a fatal contagion that Hata fails to stop and one in which he ends up being complicit.

As if wanting to distance himself from his earlier complicity with the Japanese Empire, Hata shortens his Japanese family name “Kurohata” to simply “Hata” after coming to the States. Unlike his adopted name “Kurohata,” “good Doc Hata” is a title that he earns by working hard for it. The title presents a self-fashioned identity he chooses to go by in the States. His efforts to achieve the place of model citizen as
reflected by “good Doc Hata” can be seen as a conscious act Hata enacts to distance himself from less honorable wartime deeds. The business of running a medical supply store distances him from his former work as a medical officer. The hidden labor underwriting the making of “good Doc Hata,” however, also reveals the title to be a carefully adopted identity. “Doc Hata” after all is not a title that speaks to his real profession, but rather one that more reflects the community’s attitude towards him. As he notes early in the novel, “Most everyone in Bedley Run knows me, though at the same time I’ve actually come to develop an unexpected condition of transparence here, a walking case of others’ certitude, that to spy on me on my way down Church Street is merely noting the expression of a natural law. Doc Hata, they can say with surety, he comes around” (21-22). As the passage implies, Hata is highly aware of the way the identity of Doc Hata allows others, people of the community as well as the novel’s reader, to recognize him with confidence albeit in a limited manner.78

In his reading of the novel, Hamilton Carroll has suggested that the trope of naming in A Gesture Life mirrors Hata’s inability to constitute himself as citizen in both the U.S. and Japan.79 According to Carroll, Hata’s “Americanized name is Franklin Hata and the transit of his name symbolically maps his journey toward US citizenship” (597). However, Carroll notes, “As a self-imposed marker of national affiliation, ‘Franklin’ fails Hata because he does not signify for others what the name Franklin signifies for him. While Hata believes himself to be a venerable elder, he is not a founding father” (598).

For Carroll, the title “Doc Hata,” a name not his own choice, reveals that Hata holds no

79 Carroll, “Traumatic Patriarchy.”
control over his own identity. Yet, what the novel’s emphasis upon the plurality of Hata’s names also foregrounds is the web of contingent affiliations that inform his multi-local life trajectory. It is only if we consider the multiple shifts in names over the course of Hata’s life that we gain a full understanding of his life story. Neither singling out one name to be representative of Hata’s identity nor portraying them to be all flawed markers of Hata’s identity, *A Gesture Life* instead asks us to recognize their complex genealogy for understanding Hata’s migratory life. Beginning with his Korean name that is only partially revealed, his Japanese and American name as well as his titles, Lieutenant Kurahata and Doc Hata, reflect a chain of adopted ties that not only inform each other, but as a collective invoke Hata’s life of multiple border crossings.

**Towards a Trans-Pacific Imaginary**

In stark contrast to the novel’s opening, *A Gesture Life* ends with Hata’s announcement that he intends to depart from Bedley Run. Hata tells us that he has sold his house and plans to leave the town for good. He does not specify where exactly he is going. With regard to the nature of his journey, he merely says that the planned departure “won’t be any kind of pilgrimage” (356). Claiming it to be neither an attempt to seek his final destiny nor a travel to find his ultimate home, the departure he anticipates is referred to as another arrival. He ends the novel with the following sentences: “Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will be already on a walk someplace, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home” (356). *A Gesture Life*’s final scene purposefully defies narrative closure by refusing the teleology of permanent settlement. Instead, it poses itself as a narrative of migration that anticipates future departures and arrivals.
Stating that with his next arrival, he will “come almost home,” Hata invites us to see his life’s journey as an unfinished process.

More strikingly, the novel’s final scene alludes to the image of circular movement for envisioning Hata’s movements away from Bedley Run. The sentence, “I will circle round and arrive again,” not only points to a notion of repetition, but also reveals his next arrival to be partaking in a circuitry of movements. More specifically, the way Hata describes the process of reaching the next destination suggests the crossing of oceans. As he explains, “Perhaps, I’ll travel to where Sunny wouldn’t go, to the south and west and maybe farther still, across the oceans, land of former shores” (355-56). With the possibility of Hata crossing water, *A Gesture Life*’s ending invokes a trans-oceanic vision.

Although often not perceived in this way, Hata’s narrative from the beginning of the novel proliferates with images that invoke movements across water. More broadly, over the course of the novel we recognize that Hata’s migratory path spans different regions of the Pacific Ocean. Hata’s war-time recollections, for instance, bring into close view the circulation of people from Japan to varied outposts in South East Asia. Hata himself is revealed to have departed Japan on a ship from Shimonoseki in order to reach the outposts in Singapore and Burma. His subsequent arrival to the States reflects a movement from Asia to the U.S. Even before the novel invokes the multiple directions of Hata’s migratory routes, cross-water movements frequently inform the novel’s present moment. From the outset, Hata’s narrative draws attention to “the flagstone swimming pool” accompanying his large Bedley Run home (16). As he describes his house, “My house isn’t the grandest in our town, but it’s generally known that of the homes on Mountview, one of the original streets in Bedley Run, the two-story Tudor revival at
number 57 is one of the special properties in the area” (16). Among the many impressive parts of the house which includes “a flower and herb garden” and “a leaded glass and wrought-iron conservatory,” Hata singles out the pool as a place he feels particularly attached to and regularly spends time in (16). “I swim each morning,” he announces, “doing twenty-five steady lengths, rain or shine” (22).

Not only reserved for the pleasures of swimming, the pool in startling ways emerges as an important sphere for the novel’s project of uncovering Hata’s past. Unlike the house that signifies Hata’s economic success and settlement as an immigrant, the pool presents a fluid sphere that enlarges the novel’s social imaginary. It is here that the novel’s different temporalities and geographies closely intersect and converge. By pointing out how “the dark stone inlay” of his pool differs from the “painted blue surround that one sees so clearly from the sky when landing in most any American city,” Hata likens the act of swimming as a movement against the currents of time (151). As he states, “The water in mine appears nearly lightless, whether in bright sun of dusk and the feeling sometimes is that you are not swimming in water at all, in something material and true, but rather pulling yourself blindly through a mysterious resistance whose properties are slowly revealing themselves beneath you, in flame-like roils and tendrils, the black fires of the past” (152). Frequently, it is while Hata is under water that his narrative deviates from the present and enters the past.

This close mediation between the novel’s past and present often informs the novel’s early scenes. In one of the novel’s pool scenes, Hata is suddenly overcome by a strange feeling. “I suddenly have the thought that I’m not swimming in my own pool at all,” says Hata, “but am someplace else, in a neighborhood pool or even a pond, and my chest gives
a buckle and I actually swallow some water” (22). This small incident, not only disrupts the novel’s initial complacent voice, but also profoundly unsettles Hata who finds himself shaking “almost uncontrollably” outside the pool (23). He decides to make a log fire to warm himself. While sitting in front of the fire, Hata is reminded of a story that he once read from one of Sunny’s books:

The story is about a man who decides one day to swim in other people’s pools, one after another in his neighborhood and town, which, as described, seems very much like Bedley Run. The man, the story goes, has resolved to ‘swim across the county,’ and after some travail of walking in on his neighbors and scaling property walls and crossing busy parkways, he finally makes it back to his own home, which, to his desperate confusion, he finds locked up and deserted. (23)

The story leads Hata to further reflect upon its possible meanings. Multiple kinds of readings do emerge from this process. First, he suggests that it might be a tale about a quest which ends in “spiritual disillusion” (23). Another version he comes up with reads the story to be reflecting a man’s futile attempt to escape “from the realities of his fallen station” (23). The last reading, which he draws from the book’s side notes “scribbled in several hands,” interprets the story as a metaphor for life’s passage. It interprets the man’s swimming as “making a fitful passage, in a metaphorical sense, through the epic ‘seasons’ of life” (23). While the first two versions illuminate the man’s swimming “across the county” to be movements away from a single point of origin, be it in the form of journey or escape, the final reading is striking for its suggestion of life as an ongoing process of multiple crossings.

It is this third reading that comes to particularly resonate with Hata’s own life story. At the moment of recollection, Hata does not relate the story directly to his own life. It more appears to be a random form of memory. As the novel proceeds, however, the connection emerges in several important ways. At first, the story invites Hata to reflect
upon his daily ritual of swimming. As he states, “Sitting before the fire, I wonder, too, whether someone watching me swim each morning in the peerless quiet of the pool, steadily pulling my way back and forth, would think I was entering a significant period in life” (23). He remarks that the scene could be seen to feature “a romantic, even triumphant picture” for a retired form of life (24). Challenging such reading, he suggests that it is “a scene of some sadness as well, of a beauty empty and cold” (23). Following such comment, he begins to describe in rich detail what he had been experiencing under water during the incident. “It is an unnerving thing, but when I was underneath the water, gliding in that black chill, my mind’s eye suddenly seemed to carry to a perspective high above, from where I could see the exacting, telling shape of all … And what caught me, too, was that I knew there was also a man in that water, amidst it all, a secret swimmer who, if he could choose, might always go silent and unseen” (24). Hata’s observations evoke a larger context for reading the scene. By evoking the notion of “secret swimmer,” Hata connects the ritual of swimming not merely to a form of leisure time activity, but to a peculiar mode of life.

On one level, the notion of secret swimmer could be seen to speak to Hata’s passing as Japanese throughout his entire life. Considering his birth ties to Korea remain a lifelong secret he carefully hides from others, Hata indeed resembles the figure of secret swimmer who prefers to go unseen. Except for “K,” most of the novel’s characters are never to know about his Korean ties. Even his daughter Sunny who is adopted from Korea never comes to learn about their shared ethnic ties. On the other hand, the notion of secret swimmer also resonates with Hata’s trans-Pacific life trajectory. In fact, swimming is an activity that informs his years of serving the Japanese Army. In a later
scene, Hata makes the following observation about the pool’s water:

The water is cool, bracing and fresh as with the first morning’s swim, and I’m surprised by my strength, or the strength the water seems to lend me. For years I would never enter water that was even slightly cool, being accustomed to the shore in Singapore and Rangoon, the tropical, bath-like waters of the Andaman Sea. In the days before the war began to go badly, my comrades and I would take trips to the beach on our leave days, to swim and play volleyball and eat fresh-caught sea porgies and spiny lobsters and eels. The natives had been instructed to prepare them with a tiny ration of shoyu and the local palm wine, an attempt intended to make us feel comfortable but which unfortunately served more to remind us of Japan than anything else. (144)

Again in this passage, the pool serves as a medium that connects the novel’s present moment to remote parts of the Pacific. “I used to swim after sunset on those occasions,” recollects Hata, “the water placid and unrippled as I pulled my way through it” (144). He continues to describe what he was able to witness from the water. “I could hear the laughter and joking of my comrades,” he continues, “and sometimes the strained, rote blandishments of their companions, which seemed unbearable to me, sober I was” (144). Through his observations from within the water, Hata emerges as a close witness to the beach’s unfolding scene. Like his comrades, Hata is part of the army. And yet, he purposefully remains absent from the scene’s center. Being in the water, he merely occupies a peripheral presence. “Down the shoreline I would go,” he further notes, “in my usual steady crawl, and each time I’d lift my face for air I glimpsed the limp strings of lights and the kerosene torches and the arm-in-arm stragglers of youthful soldiers, joyously barefoot on their way back to the base, overfilled with wine and the mercies of fallen women” (144). By drawing the reader’s attention to the presence of “fallen women,” Hata reveals the pleasures of the scene to be less innocent than they first appear, and in fact to have been deeply complicit with Japan’s territorial invasion into South East
Asia. Hata’s comment further foreshadows the novel’s later treatment of the comfort women. Neither occupying the center nor being totally absent, Hata in this scene emerges as a narrator who holds the place of an observer who pays close witness to Japan’s rise as Imperial Power during the Pacific War.

In his ground-breaking work, *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy invokes the Atlantic as a unit of analysis for understanding the movements and contacts of the Black diaspora. In Gilroy’s discussion, ships come to play an important role as “living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined” including America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe (16). Ships “were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected” (16). In *A Gesture Life*, Hata’s circum-Pacific migratory path traces the intimacies of the Pacific Rim including the U.S. As a figure circulating around the Pacific, Hata offers a mobile optic for tracing the intimacies of trans-Pacific connection. If Gilroy’s Black Atlantic is shaped by the routes of the slave ships’ passages, *A Gesture Life* traces the trans-Pacific contours of the Korean diaspora shaped by wars affecting many lives in Korea. More specifically, Hata’s recollections of his encounters with “K” and Sunny put into the foreground underexplored routes of the Korean diaspora which critics in recent years have started to closely attend to.

*A Gesture Life’s* focus on the encounters with both “K” and Sunny is important for its recognition of migratory subjects who have been either overlooked or denied full recognition within official accounts of history. The difficulties of full recognition relate to their uneasy presence within twentieth-century wars in Asia. Both the comfort woman

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and the Korean adoptee figure represent stories of war that nations often want to forget rather than actively remember. As for the case of the Korean comfort women, it was only in the early 1990s that “the abduction of Korean women for military sex work” was “openly recognized.” In December 1991, three surviving Korean comfort women broke their fifty-year-long silence and came out as “former comfort women for the Japanese Army.” Similarly, the history of Korean adoptees’ migrations to the U.S. dates back to the Korean War (1950-1953). Despite transnational adoption’s long history, the adoptee’s voice only started to gain public recognition in the late 1990s. As anthropologist Toby Alice Volkman has noted, “Although adoption across national borders had its beginnings in the 1950s, in the aftermath of World War Two and the Korean conflict, it remained for decades a relatively unnoticed phenomenon.” It was the emergence of a body of cultural works produced by adult Korean adoptees that particularly brought attention to the transnational adoptee experience. Most of critical work on the comfort women’s issue and the Korean adoptee figure only started to emerge during the last decade or so. As David Eng has pointed out in his latest book, Feelings of Kinship (2010), “the figure of the transnational adoptee has until very recently been

82 Cho, Haunting the Korean Diaspora, 5.
85 For a discussion of the implications of critical attention to the comfort woman issue for Asian American studies, see Kandice Chuh, “Discomforting Knowledge: Or, ‘Korean’ Comfort Woman and Asian Americanist Critical Practice” (2003). A series of articles appearing in 2003 in Social Text such as the special issue on “Transnational Adoption” and David Eng’s essay “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas” and his book The Feeling of Kinship have brought critical attention to the transnational adoptee problem.
noticeably absent in diaspora and immigration studies, in Asian and area studies, and in ethnic and queer studies.”

Published in 1999, *A Gesture Life* brings close attention to the comfort women issue and the adoptee problem during a time both had just started to gain public recognition. Lee’s treatment of both issues in his work is unique in that he addresses them not in separate terms, but rather as closely inter-connected parts of Hata’s migratory life. The migratory paths of both “K” and Sunny intersect with that of Hata and deeply inform his most intimate and secret parts of his life. With “K,” Hata is briefly romantically involved during the Pacific War. After coming to the States, Hata adopts Sunny, a mixed-race orphan from Korea, as his daughter. In an interview following the release of *A Gesture Life*, Lee says that he initially planned to write the novel from the perspective of the comfort women. “I started a book that was more directly about comfort women, and I spent two years on it. But I didn’t like it; it just wasn’t working out. The main character of *A Gesture Life*, Doc Hata, was just a small incidental part of that story, but the more I thought about him, the more interested I became in his life.” According to Lee, telling the story from Doc Hata’s perspective brought about a significant change in the place of the comfort women’s story in the novel. “That became *A Gesture Life* which focuses on Hata and all the little ins and out of his consciousness and his memory, which of course includes the comfort women story.” In addition to the comfort women story, however, the adoptee story holds an equally important place in the novel on its own terms. Hata’s strained relationship with Sunny illuminates another important chapter of the trans-Pacific’s shifting geo-political context.

Hata’s first encounter with the Korean comfort women occurs soon after arriving at his first outpost in Singapore. There, while paying a visit to the officer’s clubhouse, he comes to witness the death of a Korean woman, which he remembers as the first dead person he had ever seen. The woman had leaped from the second floor in order to escape her lot as sex slave. It is while examining the girl’s dead body that Hata recognizes her to be Korean. “She was just a girl, otherwise unremarkable, perhaps fifteen or so,” notes Hata, “I kept thinking that she looked to be Korean, with her broad, square face” (108). Hata learns that the dead girl had been one of the four new girls who had just arrived from Japan. “It was said the four girls were shipped all the way from Shimonoseki, via the Philippines, and that in fact two others had been lost during the lengthy sea passage” (110). On the very same night, Hata runs into one of the remaining girls who also attempts to escape. Without realizing it, Hata finds himself addressing her in Korean. “‘There’s no place to go,’ I said, unthinking.’ You must stay in the house. She looked surprised at my words, staring at me as if I were someone she knew” (112). Pleading him to let her go, the girl addresses Hata as “Oppah,” the Korean word used to address an older brother or male figure (112). The encounter ends abruptly with another officer approaching. And yet, it leaves indelible marks on Hata’s psyche.

Both brief encounters at the club house become a turning point for Hata in the way he comes to re-think his relations to the comfort women. Since joining the Army, he had been well aware of the comfort women’s presence there. As he notes, “I had heard of the longtime mobilization of such a corps in Northern China and in the Philippines and on other islands …” (163). Yet, until the night’s incidents he had never been deeply concerned about their conditions at the camps. Neither had he been interested how they
came to join the Army. He merely had assumed that they must have been volunteers as they were called so by the Army. Through his increased contact with the women as the Army’s medic, however, Hata rather finds himself feeling concerned for them.

Among the many encounters he has with the Korean comfort women, it is Hata’s interactions with “K” who is the same age as he that particularly suggests their intimacy’s intra-diasporic nature. Hata meets “K” while stationed in Burma. She arrives with a group of other women. Standing amidst the crowd of soldiers, Hata watches them descending from the truck that had brought them to one of the Japanese Army’s remotest outposts. Soon after her arrival, Hata is assigned the role of taking special care of “K.” It is during their first extended moment of interaction, “K” recognizes Hata to be Korean. ‘And then she said, quite plainly: ‘You are Korean.’ ‘No,’ I told her. ‘I am not.’ ‘I think you are,’ she said, not looking away as she spoke. I didn’t know what to say’ (234). Although refuting her words, Hata finds himself feeling pleased to converse with her in his native language and listening to her Korean. “I didn’t wish to go on conversing with her any longer, and yet I found myself listening to her closely, for it was some time since I had heard so much of the language, the steady, rolling tone of it like ours and not, theirs, perhaps coming more from the belly than the throat” (235). Although feeling excited to meet someone with whom he can speak in the language of his birth, Hata refuses to define his intimacy with “K” in diasporic terms. “As we walked to Mrs. Matsui’s tent and back I felt a certain connection to her, not in blood or culture or kind, but in that manner, I suppose, that any young man might naturally feel for a young woman” (239). In his moments together with “K,” Hata rather asks us to see his relationship with “K” from a romantic light rather than through the tensions caused by their different places in the
Army and asymmetrical power relations. It is through Kkutaeh’s response to Hata’s confession of his romantic feelings for her that reminds us of his explicit refusal to acknowledge the implications of their shared tie to Korea. Not only does she repeatedly inquire about his time growing up in Japan under the care of his adopted parents, she is curious to know about his relationship with them. It is through the words of Kkutaeh that we come to learn that their intimacy cannot be fully grasped by terms of romantic love, as Hata wants us to do so.

Along with the story of “K,” Hata’s adoptive relationship with Sunny exemplifies another moment of vexed intra-diasporic intimacy. Not long after settling in the U.S., Hata decides to build his own family by adopting a girl from Japan. He is notified by the adoption agency that a girl from the city of Pusan in Korea is available for adoption. “There were no Japanese children available,” he tells us, “but it didn’t matter to me anymore. I thought of the moment of her arrival, which I had hoped would serve to mark the recommencement of my days” (74). The language Hata employs for envisioning his relationship with Sunny resonates with the early discourse of transnational adoption.

Transnational adoption, as David Eng notes, started as “a humanitarian response by a prospering North America to a war-torn Europe.” It found “its original post-war incarnation in the emigration of European orphans from Germany and Poland to the U.S.” (104). A similar view is to be found in Hata’s vision for his relationship with his adoptive daughter.

My Sunny, I thought, would do much the same. Not be so thankful or beholden to me, necessarily, but at least she’d be somewhat appreciative of the providence of institutions that brought her from the squalor of orphanage—the best of which can be only so happy—to an orderly, welcoming suburban home in America, with a hopeful father of like-enough race and sufficient means. (73)

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87 Eng, Feeling of Kinship, 104.
As this passage reveals, Hata hopes to offer Sunny with the chances of a better life. Similar to the way he had benefited from his adoptive ties to the Kurohatas, Hata desires to provide Sunny with the comforts of a well-to-do home.

In addition to its humanitarian tone, Hata’s language in this passage further belies the desires for natural affiliation. The emphasis upon his being of “like-enough race” in the passage conveys hopes for a bond that rests upon notions of shared ethnicity, if not blood. As Mark Jerng has also suggested, “the odd phrase ‘like-enough race’ raises, at the same time that it resists, the attempt to make adoption ‘natural.”” Hata’s expectations for his adoptive relationship with Sunny, although benign in his willingness to embrace Sunny as his family, are deeply underwritten by desires for a naturalized bond. “I has assumed that I would have a ready, natural affinity,” says Hata, “and that my colleagues and associates and neighbors, though knowing her to be adopted, would have little trouble quickly accepting our being a single kind and blood” (204). Although strongly desired, Hata’s hopes for a naturalized bond are never fully realized. His relationship with Sunny, as a series of recollections reveal, remains highly strained throughout their time together in Bedley Run. In the novel’s opening, we learn that Sunny left the house thirteen years ago, and Hata has since been living alone. Despite Hata’s strong interest in their shared tie to Korea as indicators of a “like-enough race,” A Gesture Life shows that the complexity of his relationship with Sunny cannot be fully grasped by the frame of familial intimacy, as he wants us to see their adoptive relationship.

For Hata, the challenges of naturalized affinity are particularly posed by the

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88 Mark Jerng, Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010), 41.
problems of Sunny’s mixed race. When Hata first meets Sunny at the JFK airport, he is immediately struck by her dark complexion. In his first recollection of the scene, Hata refrains from commenting upon her racial features. He merely states that she was accompanied by a woman from the adoption agency. “She followed behind me and the woman,” he recalls, “who was talking excitedly about the various projects the agency was developing for the benefit of Asian orphans” (55). It is only much later in the novel that he reveals to the reader that it was in fact Sunny’s dark complexion that immediately noticed when he first saw her at the airport. “A skinny, jointy young girl, with thick, wavy black hair and dark-hued skin. I was disappointed initially,” he says, “the agency had promised a child from a hardworking, of squarely humble, Korean family who had gone down on their luck” (204). He had wished to make is own family “and if by necessity the single parent kind then at least one that would soon be well reputed and happily known, the Hatas of Bedley Run” (204). Sunny’s mixed race, however, leads Hata to conclude that she must have been a product of “a night’s wanton encounter between a GI and a local bar girl” (204). For Hata, the disappointment lies in the challenges of “ready, natural affinity” he had hoped to forge with her. His assumptions about the nature of Sunny’s conception, however, further suggest that the difficulties of naturalized affiliation relate to the material conditions surrounding Sunny’s birth. Her mixed race alludes to the post-war ascendancy of another foreign military power in the Asia Pacific, more specifically, the U.S. military presence in Korea. From their very first encounter, Hata recognizes her

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89 Although the novel never reveals details about the circumstances of how Sunny became an orphan, in many ways, Sunny’s adoption strongly resonates with the Korean adoptees’ migrations to the States in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War. As Jeeyhun Lim has noted, “one of the oldest and most active overseas adoption agencies in South Korea, Holt Adoption Program, for example, was established shortly after the Korean War with the initial intent of finding homes and families for mixed-race Korean children in the U.S.” (13).
birth and migration to be linked to the U.S. involvement in wars in Asia. Yet, similar to the way Hata insists upon reading his relationship with “K” through the language of romantic intimacy, he never attempts to fully come to terms with the larger context surrounding K’s adoption. Hata insists upon depicting his encounter with Sunny solely through the troubled relationship between father and daughter rather than in light of their shared ties to wars in the Asia Pacific region.

Given the geopolitical context informing Sunny’s birth and adoption, the story of Hata’s encounter with Sunny resonates with that of the comfort women. One way *A Gesture Life* particularly makes the connection between both stories legible is by intersecting the novel’s different temporalities. Hata’s reflections upon episodes involving Sunny often overlap with those of the comfort women. For instance, while remembering the day he visited the Gizzi house in order to search for Sunny, Hata tells us that he was reminded of the time he was stationed in Burma and Singapore. As he notes, “And there as I stood on the ruined cobble of the patio under a wide starless sky, the reports of music and voices playing off the hidden trees, an image of another time suddenly appeared to me, when I began my first weeks of service in the great Pacific war” (105). With this comment, the chapter’s narrative digresses into a detailed account of Hata’s specific encounters with comfort women during the war. This frequent overlap between the novel’s different temporalities has led critics to read the place of Sunny’s story in *A Gesture Life* as one that not only mirrors, but even repeats Hata’s former relations to “K.” Hata’s caring feelings for Sunny also tend to be seen as an attempt to undo the wrongs of his former relationship with “K.” As one of the novel’s characters notes, “But it’s as if she’s a woman to whom you’re beholden, which I can’t understand … You act almost
guilty, as if she’s someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you’re obliged to do whatever she wishes” (60).

Considering Hata in the end fails to save “K” from her brutal death at the camp, his adoptive relationship with Sunny could be seen as a means of self-redeemption. Such reading, however, forecloses the way Sunny’s adoption story enlarges the novel’s engagement with migration. A familiar narrative of Korean migration to the States has been one of seeing it as a post-1965 phenomenon. Indeed, the U.S. had held and in fact continues to hold a key place within the Korean diaspora. Departing from a U.S.-centered frame, *A Gesture Life*'s oceanic vision, not only featuring Hata’s multi-local migratory past, widens the historical span of the Korean diaspora. It invokes the trans-Pacific as a realm that highlights varied migratory paths shaped by wars of the first half of the twentieth century. The co-presence of Hata’s memories of “K” and Sunny not only highlight different instances of diasporic intimacy, but also shape a Pacific-centered frame for tracing histories of the Korean diaspora.

*Adoption as Contingent Intimacy*

In *A Gesture Life*, the enlargement of the novel’s social imagination, not only holding a haunting presence, further leads to important changes with regard to Hata’s relations to others. Departing from the scripts of naturalized affinity, we see Hata gradually embrace more contingent models of family and kinship. The novel’s vision of intimate life gestures towards a burgeoning web of affective ties. This revised notion of kinship not only informs his newly formed bonds with former associates in the Bedley Run neighborhood, but also his renewed ties to Sunny. Hata’s recollections of the past, as
former parts of the chapter have shown, invoke a trans-Pacific imaginary for envisioning his overall life trajectory. Hata’s migratory life brings into close view varied regions to be connected by the ascendancy of Japan and U.S. as military powers in the Pacific region. As a figure that is related to both Japan and the U.S., Hata’s migratory life evokes the trans-Pacific as an inter-connected network of places. At the same time, with the past unfolding, Hata is not merely haunted by his past, but develops a series of new relations that radically re-write traditional forms of filial connection and belonging.  

Perhaps the most striking example relates to Hata’s newly formed ties to two figures from the neighborhood, Liv Crawford and Renny Banerjee. Early in the novel, an unattended log fire nearly puts Hata’s house on fire. When the log fire starts to gain force, Hata is in the middle of talking with Liv Crawford on the phone. Liv, the town’s real estate manager, had been calling to persuade Hata to put his house on the market. While listening to Liv, he notices “the carpet in front of the fire starting to smolder” (34). Although sensing a burst of flames is imminent, he finds himself continuing to listen to her. The incident nearly puts the living room on fire. It is an accident that he later comes to reflect upon as a “self-made conflagration” (128). Because of this accident, Hata is briefly hospitalized.  

In unexpected ways, the recovery process turns into an important occasion for reconnecting with former acquaintances of Bedley Run. It is especially Liv along with Renny, the hospital purchasing manager, with whom Hata is brought into close contact. Liv is first introduced in the novel as someone eager to persuade Hata to put his house up

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90 A Gesture Life has often been seen as an “Anti-Bildungsroman” due to the lack of Hata’s successful development into a national subject. See Carroll and Kong. I counter this former view by arguing that development occurs in the way Hata comes to rethink conventional forms of belonging.
for sale. In the novel’s opening pages, Hata tells us that he has lately been receiving calls from Liv who is trying to persuade him to sell the house. It was for the very same reason Liv had called him on the day the accident happened. The house’s near conflagration fundamentally transforms their relationship and moves it in an unforeseen, new direction. After Hata is hospitalized, Liv not only takes up the responsibility for putting Hata’s house back in shape, but also supports Hata as he is recovering from the accident. Along with Liv, Renny is another figure that comes to deeply care for Hata through his recovery. Through both figures’ support and help, Hata is able to recover quickly from the accident. The changed nature of their relationship makes Hata view his ties to Liv in a new light. As he notes, “For a long time, particularly after Sunny left, I was certain that I would never get to enjoy the pleasantness and warmth of this kind of filiation and modest indulgence” (193). A notable feature of Hata’s choice of words for describing his changed relationship with Liv is the way they draw upon notions of filial intimacy. Although sharing no blood ties, Hata here likens his new relationship with Liv to the intimacy of filial connection. Later when he reflects upon his newly forged ties to Liv and Renny, Hata proclaims that “I feel as if I have been warmly taken up, in some manner adopted by Liv and then also by Renny Banerjee, who called on me two evenings ago to see if I was ‘getting enough rest’” (193).

Hata’s announcement that he feels like being adopted by Liv and Renny offers a stark contrast to the way adoption has held presence as a recurring trope in the novel. From the outset, adoption has been closely linked to border crossing movements and the creation of conflicting webs of affiliation. Hata’s adoption, for instance, does not directly entail the physical act of border crossing. He never actually resides in Korea. And yet,
Korea’s colonial state during the time of his adoption by the Kurohatas makes his departure from the birth family similar to one of crossing the nation’s border. Through his adopted ties to the Kurohata family, Hata not only gains access to Japanese society, but also comes to pass as Japanese in various places including the States. The trans-Pacific contours of Hata’s life are closely linked to his identity as an adoptee. However, as indicated by Hata’s difficulties of coming to terms with his ties to Korea during the war, adoption not only suggests the possibilities of new geographies of kinship and belonging, but also exists as a highly conflicted site of affiliations that defies allegiance to single nation and family. The tensions of Hata’s multiple affiliations particularly culminate during his encounters with “K” and Sunny. The most intimate parts of Hata’s life are profoundly affected by a trans-Pacific history of military conflict. However, his deliberate refusal to read his relationship with “K” and Sunny in light of this broader world-historical context surrounding the Asia Pacific ultimately leads to a history of vexed intimacy. The presence of such history suggests that complexities of Hata’s relationships with “K” and Sunny can only be fully grasped if we consider them in light of a history of trans-Pacific connection. Thus, adoption in *A Gesture Life* speaks to a history of displacement caused by a continued history of foreign military power’s influence in the Asia Pacific, and at the same time reminds us of a history of contingent contact and intimacies which cannot be expressed by the language of nation and family.

Given this affective history, Hata’s reconnection with Sunny towards the end of the novel reflects an attempt to refigure their relationship beyond the terms of naturalized filiation. While hospitalized, Hata learns that Sunny currently works as a shop manager in the nearby Ebbington Center Mall. Soon after his recovery, Hata visits Sunny at the mall
where he finds her with a boy “inside the scratched and hand-smudged Plexiglass windows of the Kiddie Care” (208). He recognizes the body to be her son. As he notes, “the boy must be hers, bestowed as he is with her high, narrowing eyes and her black hair” (208). After this re-encounter after thirteen years, the relationship between the two is slowly restored. Their renewed tie, however, quite differs from their former father and daughter relationship. Most distinctly, it is radically revised from the “ready, natural affinity” he initially desired during their early years together in Bedley Run (204). Instead of a naturalized affinity, Hata and Sunny agree upon a close yet contingent relationship.

As he states, “I am pleased enough, too, that Sunny and I have so far remained on decent and civil terms, no matter if they are ones eternally provisional” (30). He is acutely aware that their re-connection departs from the conventional language of familial kinship. As he further notes, “They shouldn’t be, certainly not if we were real father and daughter, but maybe even those who share blood and love believe only their devotions are unconditional, to be sustained through every crucible” (30). The way Hata newly defines his terms with Sunny still draws from the language of familial intimacy. Yet, it carefully remains a provisional one. The devotion for each other is instead acknowledged as its key binding force. Following a similar logic, Hata willingly embraces the distance of being known to Sunny’s son, Thomas, not as his grandfather, but a “family friend” (272).

The novel’s reconfiguration of Hata’s relationship with Sunny introduces a model of intimacy as a stark corrective to his earlier desires for naturalized filiation. Following a similar logic, the decision of Liv and Renny to adopt Hata as their surrogate father makes close association resemble the intimacies of filial connection. Adoption, in *A Gesture Life*, thus takes on a larger meaning than the practice of adoption. Rather than defined by
the laws of the state, adopted ties point to more contingent forms of affiliations that revise the traditional family form firmly grounded in notions of shared blood. It could be said that the novel through the trope of adoption enlarges the notion of kinship. Rather than insisting upon naturalized forms of affinity, Hata over the course of the novel comes to embrace the contingent and thus provisional nature of his relationships with Sunny and her son as well as Liv and Renny.

The contingent nature of these relationships is also embodied by the process of formation itself. For instance, the fire that almost puts Hata’s house in danger brings Hata into close contact with Liv and Renny in an unexpected way. It is amidst the recovery process that their relationship is re-defined towards a filial one. Both Liv and Renny move from being associates to having a family-like status in Hata’s life. Similarly, it is while being hospitalized that Hata accidentally hears news about his estranged daughter. Given the re-connection’s contingent nature, the newly formed ties Hata forges with other characters might be seen to be of minor importance. Read against the backdrop of the longstanding history of failed and vexed intimacy, however, this body of affiliations increasingly informing the novel’s present moment offers a striking contrast to Hata’s past relations for envisioning intimate life.

The contrast between the past and present is particularly demonstrated by the scene that takes place at the Bedley Run town pool. Hata spends an afternoon with Thomas at the town pool. While talking with Liv and Renny, Hata is alarmed by the fact that Thomas has disappeared from his view. In order to search for Thomas, he dives deep into the water. While looking for Thomas in the water, Hata witnesses Renny, who also has been looking in the water for Thomas, undergoing a sudden heart attack. In the midst
of stark turmoil, Hata saves both Thomas and Renny. The accident at the town’s pool radically rewrites Hata’s stance of close yet detached observer during the Pacific war. While he formerly failed to save “K” from her brutal death in the past, Hata here turns into the savior of Thomas and Renny. The fact that Hata saves Renny from a sudden heart attack simultaneously recalls and re-writes his former complicity with the Japanese Army’s violence upon colonized subjects’ bodies. In particular, it is the wartime medical experiment conducted on a Burmese man that particularly resonates with the above scene. An earlier moment of the novel features Captain Ono, the outpost’s doctor, conducting a hand massage upon a Burmese man’s heart. While Hata at that time remained a spectator of the horrific scene, Hata in this moment feels determined to do whatever is possible to bring Renny back to life, even if he must “reach inside his chest,” he tells us, “I shall, reach inside and roughly clasp his heart and will it back alive” (324). Saving Renny’s life gains significance as a gesture that counters Hata’s former complicity with the many deaths caused by the Japanese Army. If the pool is a sphere where Hata revisits his past, the novel’s town pool scene stages a series of attempts that not only re-write his past deeds, but strengthen his filial-like ties to Thomas and Renny.

The novel ultimately ends with Hata’s announcement that he intends to depart from Bedley Run. Hata announces that his departure is not the ultimate purpose for his journey. “I won’t be seeking out my destiny or fate,” he states, “I won’t attempt to find comfort in the visage of a creator or the forgiving dead” (356). Instead, the journey away from Bedley Run becomes a statement about his migrant condition. “Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones. I will fly a flag … I will circle around and arrive again. Come almost home” (356). The notion of repetition emergent in the novel’s final
sentences connects the departure to Hata’s former border crossing movements across the Pacific. It links the novel’s present moment back to the trans-Pacific contours of his migratory past. Simultaneously, the statement “Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones,” brings the journey in proximity to a description of Hata himself. Something similar is achieved by the sentence “I will fly a flag.” If Hata means “flag” in Japanese, Hata in the novel’s final scene becomes an enactment of his very name through this departure.

By ending with the anticipation of another arrival at a new place, *A Gesture Life* defies the closure of permanent settlement. If the novel opens with Hata’s realization that his time in Bedley Run is coming to an end, its final pages bear witness to its end. Hata’s departure gains meaning in Lee’s novel in that it compels us to locate his years in the States as part of a longer history of migratory movements. Rather than featuring his failure to fully assimilate into the Bedley Run community, Hata’s departure follows the rhythm of migration’s circular shape that connects disparate parts of the Pacific into an intelligible whole. Simultaneously, it leaves behind a legacy of adopted intimacy gaining shape over the course of the novel. Hata’s departure in this light can be seen to leave the formation of adopted kinship as a project that has started to take form, yet one which further remains to be told.
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