

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on silence as wrought and refracted through transnational Asian American gender formation in the works of Maxine Hong Kingston, Rupi Kaur, and Tarfia Faizullah. Experimentation with the genres of memoir and poetry forms a critical feature of these texts, and captures the nuanced forms of articulation each narrator adopts as she grapples with the transnational layers of her subjectivity. For my purposes, “transnational” serves as a mode that destabilizes the American and Canadian home life Kingston, Kaur, and Faizullah each detail in their writings. As a result, a transnational framework facilitates the discussion of how these texts and their narrators broach lineage and history that traces back to the lands from where their parents emigrated. I utilize the tropes of matrilineal storytelling and gendered discipline to facilitate this meditation on transnationality as symptomatic of each author’s narrative vantage point as a second-generation daughter of Asian immigrants. In pairing Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* with Rupi Kaur’s *Milk & Honey* and Tarfia Faizullah’s *Seam*, this project incorporates South Asian North American authorship within the discourse of Asian American feminist literature. This pan-ethnic conjunction stems from a transnational feminist approach that groups these texts for their potential place these Chinese American, Punjabi Canadian, and Bangladeshi American women writers in conversation about silences exacted through gender formations that implicate transnationality.

**NO NAME WOMEN WRITE BACK: SILENCE AND
TRANSNATIONAL SUBJECTIVITY IN ASIAN AMERICAN
WOMEN'S LITERATURE**

By Aria Pahari
Advisor: Iyko Day

A thesis submitted to the English Department in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with honors.

Mount Holyoke College
South Hadley, Massachusetts
2017

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost a thank-you to my parents, who have consistently invested emotionally and financially in my knowledge in order to provide me with the best possible education. Also to my sister, who I become more proud of everyday. I hope you read this one day. But I also know that what is here, is already in you.

I stumbled into the prospect of doing a thesis during my junior year, and would not have realized it through with any semblance of stability without the support of my advisor, Professor Iyko Day, who was kind enough to believe in this project despite not ever having had me as a student prior. Thank you to Professor Kavita Khory, whose riveting classes affirmed my decision to minor in Politics and view literature and art as political channels, rather than as somehow untouched. In addition I must thank Professor Wesley Yu, who has consistently provided me with nuanced and tailored validation and advice whenever I have needed it most (which has been often).

To my dear thesis sister, Libby Kao. Our mutual pride and faith in our scholarship and each other has sustained me more than you will ever know. Mary Pura, Anqa Khan, Zainab Amjad, and Michele Cubillo: you all are such magnificent scholars and thinkers who will change the world in your own impactful ways. It has been an honor to “thesis” alongside each of you. Also an enormous thank you to Izzy Westcott and Erin Hutchinson—the SAW Thesis Circle you both managed so effortlessly helped keep me afloat this year.

On the whole I also have to thank my kind, patient, and supportive friends on campus who have not only coped with my consistent states of stress and unavailability, but most importantly,

cheered me on.

I must thank the English Department at Mount Holyoke College, which has empowered me profoundly as a literature student and lover of books and writing. I would not have had the courage to attempt a thesis had it not been for the palpable support from such stellar faculty.

Lastly, to my fellow women of color, and Asian American women: I see and hear us, and read us in fiction, in poetry. We are art that writes back, looks back, and talks back, in our own, heartfelt articulations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
CHAPTER ONE: “NO NAME WOMAN”	15
CHAPTER TWO: <i>MILK & HONEY</i>	39
CHAPTER THREE: <i>SEAM</i>	59
CONCLUSION	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY	85

INTRODUCTION

“It matters how we arrive at the places we do.”

-Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

In 1975, Maxine Hong Kingston published *The Woman Warrior*, her first book, and first memoir. In 2015, forty years later, Rupi Kaur debuted *Milk & Honey*, her first book of poems. Tarfia Faizullah released *Seam*, also her first poetry collection, in 2014. Despite the forty-year gap that precedes Kingston from Kaur and Faizullah, these texts and their second-generation Asian American daughter narrators seem to speak to one another. Ironically enough, this dialogue between the texts finds common ground through encounters with silence. In “No Name Woman,” the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator Maxine discloses that she knows to never ask her mother for information, specifically as it concerns her aunt: “If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore. . . I would have to begin, “Remember my Father’s drowned-in-the-well sister?” I cannot ask that” (Kingston 6). *Milk & Honey*, meanwhile, contains a sparse, incisive parallel to Maxine’s silence: “it is your blood / in my veins / tell me how i’m / supposed to forget” (Kaur 14). Finally, a final line from a poem in *Seam* serves to encapsulate this intertextual conceit of silence: “Tell me, / you say, / about 1971” (Faizullah 10, 22).

Each of these passages contain suspended moments in which the Asian American daughter narrators confront a silence that implicates an event outside of her reach. The familial renderings of these confrontations, however, outline a proximity to these seemingly far-off, forgetful events. The narrators of “No Name Woman,” *Milk & Honey*, and *Seam* grapple with this proximity and

its potential to carve out a self. The forms that arise from this articulation orient this self as a second generation Asian American daughter who knows of and/or encounters histories, harms, and practices that stem from the geographically distant, yet subjectively proximate birth nation of her parents and previous generations. A distinctly gendered site serves as the daughter narrator's point of access to these knowledges and encounters. These access points emerge in the forms of matrilineal storytelling and gendered discipline. In "No Name Woman," these forms appear in tandem with each other through the telling of the no-name aunt's story. *Milk & Honey* details a heavily gendered and experiential disciplinary landscape. *Seam* discloses the potency of story and its narrative potential.

Transnational Orientation

Given the movement and calibration these points of access undergo in each text from ancestral land to second-generation North America, I apply a transnational reading to the positionality of these narrators and their articulations. In addition to an examination of how they articulate this positionality, I also devote attention to how they got there. For as Ahmed reminds, "It matters how we arrive at the places we do" (2). I posit that within "No Name Woman," *Milk & Honey*, and *Seam* this "how" emerges in the aforementioned transnational and gendered mediums of matrilineal storytelling and discipline, which prompt an arrival to "places" in which these narrators conceptualize of their transnationality as Asian American daughters and women. Silence, however, emerges in these each of these texts as both an impediment and enabler to this gendered, transnational conceptualization, and thus serves as a critical "how" upon which to hone. Leslie Bow emphasizes the significant yet overlooked notion of these conditions as she notes in *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion* the scant fixation upon this critical component of

identity formation:

[While] postmodern theories of marginalized identity seek to allow for the subject's intervention in potentially determining constructions of race and gender, they can also imply that identity formation takes place in a value-free space; more attention is devoted to furthering the concept that one can "shuttle between identities" than to analyzing how one goes about it or what it means to make that attempt. (25)

My project explores what I observe as actors within what Bow characterizes as a supposedly "value-free space," and seeks to embark upon channeling "attention" to the conceptualization and attempted determination that a transnational, gendered "identity formation" entails for these second generation daughter narrators. I impose the gendered structures of storytelling and discipline upon this supposedly "value-free space," and the extent to which silence layers and pervades these structures prompts me to draw once again from Sara Ahmed, who writes how "The orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies. Importantly, even what is kept at a distance must still be proximate enough if it is to make an impression" (3). I couch my transnational discussion of silence within this phenomenological model of orientation, space, proximity, and distance. Silence largely determines these narrators' "orientations" to other gendered subjects within their ethnic communities, which radiate out from their "relations" with immigrant parents. Furthermore, silence "shape(s) the contours of space" that arise between these narrators and these subjects. These "contours" of silence serve to fill this "space" with "values," but their contoured quality, while profoundly felt, require extensive contemplation to articulate, let alone determine. The simultaneity of proximity and distance confounds this articulatory process due to a transnational silence that sets up conditions in which "what is kept at a distance must still be proximate enough if it is to make an impression." The geographic metrics of transnationality

demand and entail interactions that must transgress “distance,” an experience which resonates profoundly with the positionality of these Asian American second-generation daughters. Their positionality as daughters, however, simultaneously imbues a “proximity” to transnationality through their parents and ethnic communities. Matrilineal storytelling and gendered disciplinary structures punctuate this proximate orientation. The silences within these structures, however, elicits a “distance” between these daughters and their process of conceptualization and orientation.

Literature & Formal Experimentation

The application of a literary analytical framework facilitates the examination of the fraught navigation that characterizes these narrators’ comprehension of their respective gendered transnational orientations. As she foregrounds her methodology in *Ingratitude*, erin Ninh writes of literature and how what it “can offer to the larger investigation into Asian American socialization is. . . a cultural product enmeshed in the symbolic, attentive to language, and self-incriminated with every word” (15). These “enmeshed” symbols constitute the particular formal experimentations these texts embody. Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* bears the subtitle “Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts,” yet its chapters, including “No Name Woman,” lack the chronology and exposition that characterize memoirs. Rather, Kingston’s opening chapter brims with internal grappings that confronts silence as it emerges through the transnational telling of a no-name aunt’s story. Despite the controversies of *The Woman Warrior*’s genre classification, I work from an understanding of this text, and specifically “No Name Woman” as a work that “violates the popular perception of autobiography as an ordered shaping of life events” (Wong 31). In Kaur’s *Milk & Honey*, the pages not only bear narrative poetry, but also

swathes of white space and Kaur's own sketches that she pairs with select poems, both of which complicate the notions of silence and expression: the white space serves as an impactful silence on the page, while the sketch does the work of another articulative form. In *Seam*, Faizullah embarks upon an ethnography of *birangonas*—Bangladeshi rape survivors of war—which she transcribes in the form of poetic interviews and notes. Through this combination, *Seam* experiments with ethnography with a narrative voice who reveals her own relationality to the *birangona* as a Bangladeshi American woman and daughter. This gendered relationality also emerges in “No Name Woman,” and *Milk & Honey*, albeit calibrated to a more domestic scale in their transnationality. Maxine, the narrator of “No Name Woman,” bears this relationality to her aunt through the story her mother tells her. *Milk & Honey*'s narrator reveals the extent to which she knows of, witnesses, and encounters the extent of gendered discipline in her immigrant community. I interpret these relationalities through the lens of intent, grounded upon “self-incriminated” deliberation of transnational orientation. To cement this connection between orientation, transnationality, and literature I draw from Eliza Noh, who theorizes on how,

Unlike romanticized emotional attachment, “kindred” intimacy created through material and psychic labor marks the most deeply and closely hidden and, therefore, revolutionary sites of struggle. I think “transnational feminism” and “feminism” in general must be rehistoricized to focus on how...women of color have always been concerned with cross-national issues of...racialized gender—which includes their radical departures from both modern and postmodern Eurocentric definitions of gendered communities or subjectivities. (144)

The intentionality of self-incrimination underscores these gendered, “kindred” intimacies “created” through the textual experimentation, or “material and psychic labor” that occurs within “No Name Woman,” *Milk & Honey*, and *Seam*. Intimacies also persist not just exclusively “within,” these selected texts, but without. The gendered, transnational, and orientational

concerns within this literary grouping, forged through experimentation, draws out an intimacy founded not on “romanticized emotional attachment” that derives solely from the ethnic, gender, and generational identifications the authors narrators share. Noh’s emphasis on the continuity of how “women of color have always been concerned with cross-national issues of...racialized gender” contextualizes this project’s pairing of an older prose publication by formidable Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston with recent releases from South Asian North American poets Rupi Kaur (*Milk & Honey*) and Tarfia Faizullah (*Seam*). Each of these women of color writers weave racialized gender formations throughout their narratives that manifest in “cross-national” contexts. Thus, with Kingston, Kaur, and Faizullah’s respective genre experimentations that navigate and craft kindred intimacies, they write to acknowledge, confront, and question transnational silence as it emerges through matrilineal storytelling and gendered discipline. In light of this fraught navigation through silence, I hesitate to adopt Noh’s “radical departures” reading that centers on opposing Eurocentric “definitions of gendered communities or subjectivities.” My analysis instead approaches these definitions as they depart from not only Eurocentric contexts, but also those of the ethnic as they emerge in transnational forms. Within this transnational positionality, I specifically parse through these narrators’ silent and silenced orientations toward ancestral gender paradigms.

Articulate Silence

I configure the work of silence in “No Name Woman,” *Milk & Honey*, and *Seam* as a transnational entity the narrators encounter through matrilineal storytelling and gendered discipline. As they articulate these encounters, the narrators neither reclaim nor repudiate silence. In my approach to silence in this literature I consult the work of King-Kok Cheung’s *Articulate*

Silences, which also tackles the motif of silence in three texts by Asian American women authors: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Joy Kogawa. Through their respective articulations, Cheung accounts for these authors' positionality that "subvert(s) a monologic reality. Their dialogic visions are rooted in their marginal position as women and as members of ethnic minorities" (15). I argue that through experimental, non-monologic articulations, these narrators complicate the silence and marginality they encounter as second-generation daughters. I emphasize, however, that in their articulation of transnational silence through their experimental forms, these narrators refrain from wholly privileging speech over silence. To arrive at this stance I incorporate Patti Duncan's work, *Tell This Silence*, which analyzes silence in Asian American women's writing in relation to national and historical legitimacy in the United States. Duncan notes, and complicates "Anglo-American feminist analyses that valorize speech and equate voice with subjectivity" (xi). Although my project approaches these questions from a transnational frame, I maintain the importance of her distinction between feminist conceptualizations of silence that vary with race and region. As liminal, transnational subjects, I argue that these second generation Asian American daughters practice a liminal approach to their narration of silence: a project of deliberate recalibration rather than complete reclamation.

Chapter Outlines

I begin with a chapter devoted to "No Name Woman" from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. I select the first story/chapter from Kingston's memoir rather than tackle the entire text due to the shape of matrilineal storytelling that "No Name Woman" takes, and the gendered disciplinary structures woven throughout this telling. Due to this structural combination, "No Name Woman" contains implications for transnational feminism and

positionality that offer foresight for the chapters on *Milk & Honey* and *Seam*. I examine “No Name Woman” from its first telling through Maxine’s mother Brave Orchid, to its conclusion that takes the form of Maxine’s own retelling/rewriting. This chronological approach helps to track Maxine’s relation to transnationality, which shifts throughout these tellings, and eventually into a form more calibrated to her orientation as a second generation Chinese American daughter.

The subsequent chapter looks at select poems from *Milk & Honey* that do not contain the thread of matrilineal storytelling that sets up “No Name Woman,” but rather articulate the pervasiveness of gendered discipline and silence that the narrator experiences multidimensionally in her Punjabi Canadian immigrant community. Similar to how I examine “No Name Woman”’s experimentation with storytelling, in *Milk & Honey* I read the poems in tandem with how Kaur/the narrator situates them on the page in relation to white space, as well as the drawings she includes with certain poems. With this attention to placement and articulation, *Milk & Honey*’s narrator endeavors to orient herself within a visceral landscape of communal harm that she must confront, rather than psychically internalize through storytelling practices. *Milk & Honey* thus captures how physical relationality to ethnic and gendered subjects who undergo the same harm fails to quell the second generation daughter’s articulatory urge.

This urge takes shape in the form of a journey in *Seam*, Tarfia Faizullah’s poetry collection in which the narrator travels to Dhaka, Bangladesh, to conduct interviews that expose more about the War for Independence than the scattered, withheld information she receives from her mother back home in Midland, West Texas. In this process of exposure, however, the poetic narrator, who eventually emerges as ethnographic interviewer, grapples with the subjectivities of

her interview subjects, the *birangona*. These women survived rape and torture during the course of this 1971 war, often in the hands of the opposing side: the Pakistani Army. My readings of poems from *Seam* follow this narrator from when she learns of the war at home through her mother, then as she travels to Bangladesh, and finally once she interviews the *birangona* and must grapple firsthand with silences and gendered disciplinary structures that prove less accessible than she anticipated.

In concluding this thesis I assess where each of these narrators end in regard to their positionality within transnationalism as gendered and generational subjects, and discuss the potential of transnational approaches that account for subjectivity, orientation, and Asian American feminist pan-ethnicity. These coalitions would, at their cores, form not as a result of not only the categorical, but as Noh writes, a “deeply and closely hidden” psychic lining within the categories of gender, race, and ethnicity.

CHAPTER ONE: “NO NAME WOMAN”

“No Name Woman” forms the inventive first chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, in which a young narrator Maxine first learns about her paternal aunt through a story her mother, later referred to in the book as Brave Orchid, tells. The chapter opens with the voice of Maxine’s mother, who tells of how back in the family’s village in China, this aunt married a man who left for America and had not returned for years. One day, this aunt began to show telling signs of pregnancy. The villagers showed no outward signs of shock, but processed this news and documented its course through the size of the aunt’s stomach, “counting” (1) down the projected date of childbirth. On the night the child was to be born, the villagers raided the family’s home to punish the aunt. After the raid, the aunt gives birth, and then drowns herself and her baby in the family well. Brave Orchid recounts this story to her daughter with a disciplinary intent, given the fact that Maxine “ha[s] started to menstruate” (5). But Maxine’s perception of the story hinges upon its transnationally gendered, subjective potential.

Maxine endeavors to learn more about her aunt upon hearing this story. This strand of thought folds into her larger efforts to understand Chineseness in America as a child of the second generation. Yet her mother’s words to her, which double as the first words of the story, obstruct these efforts: “You must not tell anyone. . . what I am about to tell you” (1). These instructions foreground the matrilineal storytelling which serves as Maxine’s point of access to a configuration of her transnational gender orientation. Concurrently, however, they set the tone for the gendered disciplinary structure that constrains Maxine’s potential for verbal articulation and configuration: “You must not tell anyone.” I refer to this convergence of storytelling and

discipline upon Maxine's gender formation as her transnational gendered subjectivity. Within this reference I invoke Cheung once again, who in *Articulate Silences*, describes *The Woman Warrior* as a "work, insofar as it can be construed as mimetic, mirrors not objective truth but the subjective experience of an imaginative girl growing up as a member of a racial minority amid conflicting imperatives" (79). Thus, when examined as a memetic piece of memoir, "No Name Woman" recounts a scene easily envisioned in real life: the telling of a story about an aunt from mother to daughter. Maxine's absorption of this telling and her ensuing configurations, however, do not "mirror[s] objective truth," but rather the "subjective experience" grounded in the transnational act of this matrilineal storytelling. Thus, Cheung's emphasis on the subjective over the objective, specifically as it concerns the traditionally memoiric, "mimetic" lens, functions as the point of departure in my examination of Maxine's transnational gender navigation in "No Name Woman." This navigational process must contend with "conflicting imperatives" of silence and gendered discipline that Maxine must navigate as a "racial minority" with generational ties to an ancestral land. The subjectivity of the narrative in context of this navigation, then, registers as an articulation of palpable transnationally gendered and disciplinary conditions rather than solely a product of an "imaginative" mind. Ninh expresses concern with this reading of Maxine's experience with her observation of how early scholarship on *The Woman Warrior* sets up a "false dichotomy between discursive production and an apparently non-discursive 'real'" (56).

In light of the felt conditions this disciplinary storytelling produces, I read "No Name Woman" as a story that houses three separate tellings. Each of these tellings enable Maxine to process her positionality that must contend with Chinese and American structures of gendered

discipline that work transnationally to form her. Brave Orchid issues the first telling, which she cements with disciplinary monologue that centers upon Maxine's gender. This monologue contains silences in the form of the unsaid that Maxine seeks to fill with interpretations that account for her aunt's transnationality and subjectivity, and her own by extension. Filling these gaps proves no easy task for Maxine, however, who must contend with conditions of gendered discipline that bar her access to facets of the story that concern her aunt's approaches to sexuality, feminine gender presentation, and overall comportment within a village structure that sought to discipline her. Given this scant and precarious access point to the story that she obtains through her mother, Maxine wrestles with and retells the aunt's narrative twice, on her own. Her first telling elaborates on the events of the story, yet continues to operate within the disciplinary absolutes that she acquires through Chinese communal norms she hears throughout her upbringing. While this disciplinary language spurs Maxine's first articulation, its limitations prevent the attainment of her desired access to the details of her aunt's story. I thus characterize this telling as consisting of "breach attempts." Maxine's subsequent and final telling, however, strays further from the gendered disciplinary language of her mother's oration and explores of gendered subjectivity as manifested in both the aunt as a Chinese woman *and herself* as a second-generation Chinese American girl. I term this telling the "transnational telling" due to its inclusion of transnational elements such as migration and gender discipline that transgresses borders. This telling fills in the unsaid and unexplained gaps in Brave Orchid's initial telling, and imbues the story with an interpretive quality that drives not only Maxine's comprehension of her transnational and gendered orientation, but also the rest of *The Woman Warrior*, whose later chapters proceed to retell and rewrite Chinese legends. As Sau-Ling Wong details in

Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?, these “deviations” from the “raw material” inserts, magnifies, and complexifies women protagonists” (33). Thus, Maxine’s transnational telling of her aunt’s story, which she executes through “pages of paper” (16), grounds itself in profuse textuality and explication, as opposed to Brave Orchid’s brief, oration whose locus lies in its simultaneously told and untold quality.

This chapter follows the course of Maxine’s tellings and the transnationally gendered obstacles she encounters as she navigates the story of her aunt and its revelatory potential. This navigation occurs *as a result of* the matrilineal storytelling and gendered discipline that this story encases. These enclosing forces thus prevent access to a fleshed-out version of the aunt’s story. This blockage in turn motivates Maxine to formulate versions of the story on her own that form an experimental, transnationally gendered articulation.

Conditions of Silence and Boundary Marking

In order to foreground the gendered dimension of these obstacles, I will first contextualize them within the positionality of the second generation within the schema of migration and immigration, and then proceed to carve out the distinctly gendered boundaries they entail for Maxine as a second generation daughter. To begin this contextualization I draw from Maxine’s initial reflections of how this incident captures the subjective experience of the second generation at large: “Those of us in the first American generations had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America” (5). Maxine speaks for an “us” that encompasses second-generation children, daughters *and* sons, who must configure these “invisible” and “solid” worlds on their own. This invocation of an “invisible world” that not just parents but “emigrants” built establishes intangible, malleable conditions that

permeate borderlands and resist comprehension. Yet the presence and proximity of this invisible world “around our childhoods” demands a level of confrontation. Maxine expands upon these notions of intangibility, comprehension, and questioning when she considers the mindset of these emigrants, who in her conception, “Confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways—always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable” (5). The attempts to “get things straight” and “name the unspeakable” reiterate the process of comprehension as a response to the invisible and/or incoherent narrative threads that sprawl transnationally and create confusion in their wake. Even when these threads emerge as potentially tangible “things,” the emigrants utilize confusion tactics similar to those they wield upon the gods. This falsification and obfuscation withholds access from two entities that share in a transnational positionality: the “gods,” who traveled with the emigrants, and the “offspring” who form a critical milestone in this migration and embody the migration themselves.

The extent of this embodiment escalates with girlhood and womanhood, which serve as preservationist modes, even in shifting transnational contexts such as Maxine’s. Leslie Bow writes how “As symbolic boundary markers for ethnic and national affiliations, women embody ethnic authenticity, patriotism, and class solidarity—and their repudiation. For Asian American women, these symbolic boundary markers are especially fraught” (1). This passage applies a fluid relationality to symbolic boundary markers. Firstly, women *are* these markers and therefore “embody” ideals upon which ethnic and national subjects define themselves. Asian American women also *encounter* “fraught” symbolic boundary markers as they embody them. Maxine

must grapple with these contexts as she hears her mother's warning at the conclusion of the no-name aunt's story: "Now that you have started to menstruate. . .Don't humiliate us. . .The villagers are watchful" (5). The command to not "humiliate" reinforces Maxine's role as a symbolic boundary marker for her family's "ethnic authenticity" as a Chinese family that births and raises daughters worthy of pride. Emphasis on the start of menstruation and its implications for humiliation captures the degree to which daughterhood and burgeoning womanhood instill this boundary marking. When the mother adds, "The villagers are watchful," she summons the proximity and surveillance of a geographically distant community. This juxtaposition creates a "fraught" landscape for Maxine as a Chinese American daughter, who must account for this transnational invocation that emerges as not an abstract yet distant symbol, but rather as an entity—present and "watchful."

Due to the transnational disciplinary weight that bears down upon her second-generation positionality as well as her gender, Maxine deliberately hones in on the figure of the no-name aunt, her "forerunner" (8), and embarks upon articulations of her story. erin Ninh writes how Maxine's retellings "are versions [of her aunt's history] which can help her explain something about herself" (*Ingratitude* 67). This form of "help" that aids with "explain[ing] something about herself" responds to Maxine's desire for the configuration and identification of what the "emigrants" conceal from the second generation, as well as the gendered discipline her mother impinges upon her throughout the story, including at its beginning.

Transnational Blockage & Gendered Intuition

The Secret Telling: Brave Orchid

This section focuses on the layers of disciplinary silence that pervade *Brave Orchid's* telling

to Maxine that opens the story. Her initial demand to Maxine constitutes the most emergent layer, which invokes silence through a verbalized command. The secreted layer persists in what the story deliberately leaves unsaid. The memoir begins with the first layer, an injunction from Brave Orchid that defies its own logic of telling: “You must not tell anyone,” my mother said, “what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born” (1). Brave Orchid says to Maxine, “you must not tell anyone,” but then proceeds to disclose, “what I am about to tell you.” This instruction that precedes Brave Orchid’s telling exposes her transgression of the command she issues to her daughter. Brave Orchid’s warning also reveals the inconsistency that dictates the “we,” or the rest of the family. The collective decision to “say that your father has all brothers” emphasizes rather than erases the silenced figure of the aunt. The story and its disciplinary clout hinges upon the aunt’s mortality—she “killed herself”—and yet the family claims that she “had never been born.” The silencing structure that Brave Orchid describes also hints at an element of female emotional labor, for the “we” who “say[s] that. . .father has all brothers” executes the work of this familial revision rather than the father himself. Although the “we” may not necessarily consist of women, the indication that the father himself does not participate in this verbal rearrangement of his siblings implies a gendered quality in this work. Brave Orchid’s contradictory directive seeks to initiate Maxine into this familial realm of silence. Kingston thus immediately initiates readers of *The Woman Warrior* into this realm in order to introduce them to the language Maxine had to confront. This verbalized yet silencing start to the “No Name Woman” story and *The Woman Warrior* in its entirety sets the tone for the articulation that Maxine embarks upon in order to situate herself

transnationally as a subject whose knowledge of gendered Chinese sensibilities influences her American experience, and whose second generation American positionality spurs her questioning and exploration of the Chinese practices she hears and observes.

Silence persists throughout Brave Orchid's telling of the story, yet through a second layer that adopt forms more subtle than commands. As she introduces the aunt's perceived sexual deviance that propels the violence against her and her family, Maxine's mother establishes gendered boundaries of sexuality and mobility: "She could not have been pregnant, you see, because her husband had been gone for years. No one said anything. We did not discuss it. In early summer, she was ready to have the child, long after the time when it could have been possible" (3). In the case of the aunt, whose "husband had been gone for years," the idea that this lengthy absence could have wielded any influence over her situation was an impossibility. In this stranded condition, she could not have met someone else and bore his child. Brave Orchid puts additional pressure upon this logic that she intends for Maxine to "see" and thus understand. She then adds the communal weight that the perpetuation of this perceived impossibility entailed when she points out how "No one said anything. We did not discuss it." This passage demonstrates the extent to which Brave Orchid serves as a conduit for a village structure that instills silence and stifles the possibilities that women's sexuality entails. Brave Orchid's perpetuation contextualizes her role as a disciplinary authority to her daughter and situates this role within a transnational village. This position contains gendered implications for Brave Orchid as well, who through the instillment of these values in her daughter, must enact on a transnational scale the preservation that the village structure demands of women.

These instances capture the extent to which Brave Orchid incorporates layers of disciplinary

silence within the story. Their prevalence hovers over Maxine's approaches to articulation as she attempts to acquire more information about her aunt through her first telling. Due to the blockage these silences form, Maxine's articulation emerges through limited language which appears not only in her syntax, but also her internalization of gendered disciplinary silence. Thus, this telling consists of an attempted breach rather than a breakthrough.

Breach Attempts: Maxine's First Telling

After she hears the no-name aunt's story from her mother, Maxine yearns to know more. Yet Brave Orchid implicitly bars this inquiry, for her immediate instruction to Maxine to not tell of her aunt's story also housed a prohibition against future questions and discussion. Based on her sustained encounter with her mother's "stor[ies] to grow up on" (5), Maxine anticipates this prohibition to the point where she imposes it upon herself as she outlines how, "If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to begin, "Remember Father's drowned-in-the-well sister?" I cannot ask that. My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts" (6). The associative contrast between "my aunt" and "Father's drowned-in-the-well sister" indicates the different outlooks that result from Maxine and Brave Orchid's positionalities as second-generation daughter and immigrant mother. This positioning also serves to highlight the matrilineal channel through which this silence travels and impedes Maxine in her attempts to breach this transnational gap. In her initial efforts to traverse this silence, Maxine's articulation resembles the exacting language Brave Orchid employed throughout her storytelling. She begins with the desire to "learn what clothes [her] aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary." This idea based on clothes and their degree of flashiness and ordinariness poses a limited, binaristic outlook on her aunt's subjectivity due to the fact that

Maxine issues this inquiry from scant wells of the unsaid. This approach contrasts with Maxine's intention to "learn"—a process that connotes absorption and sustained thought that typically stems from explanatory material. While this absolute language inhibits a multidimensional conception of her aunt, Maxine invokes it due to the stories and claims couched in the unexplained that Brave Orchid has wielded throughout her childhood.

This language of limitation that results from attempts to craft information from the unsaid, however, does not negate the importance and intent behind Maxine wanting to "learn" about her aunt's clothes. This knowledge, although based on surface-level judgements of clothing, would nevertheless equip Maxine with information that she had been able to access previously. Yet the commonplace nature of this particular question renders her pursuit of access not only unattainable, but illegitimate due to conditions of gendered discipline: her aunt's clothing fails to constitute itself among the story's "useful parts." This judgement that surrounds a concept as subjective as which components are "useful" in this transnational narrative echoes Erin Nin's assertion on how the "banality of second-generation experience is a structural constant and, in fact, an anxiety shared across the present body of literature" (59). The "banality" of knowing the type of clothing her aunt wore, "flashy or ordinary," fails to fall within the category of "useful" information Brave Orchid chooses to reveal, and will only reveal "once and for all": the aunt drowned in the well because she betrayed her village. This discrepancy works itself into the home in the form of a "a structural constant" that silences a self-disciplining Maxine from ever asking about her aunt, and forbids revisitation in the form of "begin[ing]" the story again. Her internalized and unquestionable opposition to this revisitation—"I cannot ask that"—reflects the "anxiety" that this structure instills, in which Maxine shuts down the prospect of asking not

due to a reprimand from her mother, but from herself. This anxious reflex characterizes what Ninh describes as the “paranoid daughterly subject [who] need trouble her family very little to punish her or restrict her” (143). Yet this gendered self-discipline does not prevent Maxine from exploring her aunt’s story, for the lack of “need” to “trouble her family” presents the opportunity for Maxine to utilize her own stores of knowledge as she endeavors to “learn.” Maxine’s articulation of her self-disciplinary obstruction from inquiry frees her in the sense that Maxine acknowledges she cannot “ask” her mother because she will not encounter explanations that resonate with her transnational and gendered positionality and help her navigate through “solid America” (5). Maxine thus glimpses a variety of possibilities and versions despite the persistence of the unsaid throughout the language Brave Orchid employs. But because this is the language she grew up hearing, Maxine draws upon its unexplicated claims in order to pick apart her aunt’s story.

Maxine’s nascent efforts at comprehension thus fail to immediately lead her to clarity due to her utilization of language ridden with the unsaid, particularly in relation to women’s mobility. This obstacle demonstrates the degree to which the prevalence of disciplinary and transnational silence in her home impedes her course and binds her to language that limits female gendered subjectivity. She wields this language after she eliminates the option of asking Brave Orchid about additional details and attempts to utilize communal knowledge for her own purposes:

My mother spoke about the raid as if she had seen it, when she and my aunt, a daughter-in-law to a different household, should not have been living together at all. Daughters-in law lived with their husband’s parents, not their own; a synonym for marriage in Chinese is “taking a daughter-in-law.” Her husband’s parents could have sold her, mortgaged her, stoned her. But they had sent her back to her mother and father, a mysterious act hinting at disgraces not told to me (7-8).

Maxine aims to use her inherited command over gendered Chinese practices in order to

check the storytelling power of her mother and further explicate the silences within her speech. But the knowledge Maxine employs persists in the unsaid and leaves Maxine in a place where she must once again confront silence that withholds instances of deviation from the rules, or “disgraces,” which persist as “not told [to her].” This untold “mysterious act” alludes to information that could potentially incriminate the authority with which her mother tells the story. Maxine notes this omitted past knowledge when she notes how although Brave Orchid “spoke about the raid as if she had seen it,” her points of reference prove untrustworthy to Maxine given how much she did *not* say. Maxine then attempts to breach this divide based on what she knows about familial organization in China: “when she and my aunt, a daughter-in-law to a different household, should not have been living together at all.” The “when” that links Brave Orchid’s telling to Maxine’s own knowledge of Chinese living arrangements reveals the extent to which she strives to harness the same cultural logic in order to comprehend her aunt’s story. Maxine then employs additional pieces of information that appear to lead her to specificity in regard to her aunt’s condition: “Daughters-in-law lived with their husband’s parents, not their own; a synonym for marriage in Chinese is “taking a daughter-in-law.” With its default assumption in regard to where the daughters-in-law live (in a space that is “not their own”), and the embeddedness of “taking” within Chinese language itself as it pertains to daughters-in-law, Maxine’s knowledge, despite its revisionary efforts, replicates the language around gender mobility within the village that Brave Orchid weaves into the aunt’s story, which relies upon the implicit and unsaid. This limitation cannot assist Maxine with comprehending the “mysterious act” of sending her aunt back to her natal home, which was the question that led her on this point of inquiry. Maxine thus gleans no satisfaction or closure through her embarkation upon piecing

apart the story through language she borrows from Chinese communal norms. Instead, she arrives at a place of mystery that only “hints at” rather than reveals to her the “disgraces” she endeavors to know. Maxine does deduce, however, that her aunt’s in-laws did not sell, mortgage, or stone her, despite the fact that they “could have.” While this elimination “hints at” other possibilities that produced a less violent outcome for her aunt, Maxine’s mentions of these acts reveals her knowledge of the consequences of gendered betrayal.

“Women’s Intuition”

As Maxine begins to conceive of possibilities outside the boundaries that her mother draws through layers of explicit and implicit disciplinary silence, she retains a knowledge of the gendered dimensions of sexual mobility and transgression. These dimensions close in upon women actors as they permit men to escape. Maxine demonstrates her grasp on this transnationally applicable double standard when in the midst of the questions she raises regarding the events that unfold with the story, she simultaneously muses upon and demonstrates certainty in its outcome, which undoubtedly entails the participation of her aunt’s rapist: “I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family” (6). While Maxine continues to “wonder” as she forays into the story on her own, the source of her wonder also contains an unquestioned certainty in the actions of the man who impregnated her aunt. Maxine questions the degree of anonymity this man incorporated into his participation in the raid rather than his participation itself when she expresses his involvement in the raid in the form of “when he joined” rather than “if” he joined. The possibility she chooses to entertain is that of “whether he masked himself.” This point questions the extent to which men express shame or transparency as they execute their sexual privilege that isolates and places the blame upon their women peers.

Maxine's grasp of these gendered sexual dynamics reveals a degree of familiarity that suggests she knows of their gravity from experience.

Another moment in which Maxine inserts her own perspective as she attempts to navigate the story on her own occurs when she further ponders the sexual dynamics between her aunt and this man on a more intimate scale, before the raid. At this early stage in her telling, Maxine imagines her aunt as a rape victim who must encounter varying levels of fear. She expresses an empathy with the ubiquity of fear when she states: "I want her fear to have lasted just as long as rape lasted so that the fear could have been contained. No drawn-out fear. . . The fear did not stop but permeated everywhere" (7). This self-insertion indicates a familiarity with this type of "drawn-out fear," and Erin Ninh's reading of the constant threat of abandonment that haunts Maxine's subjectivity further supports the idea that she empathizes with this insidious trauma. Ninh writes, "[Maxine's] affiliation with her parents is alive with the threat of disownment, much as a woman's existence may be shaped by the threat of rape" (64). For the aunt, the contained and intimate spatiality of the village raises the chances of another rape and thus causes this fear to amplify and "permeate everywhere." This insidious trauma also magnifies for Maxine as a second-generation daughter whose subjectivity endures the impact of not only the fear of rape and sexual violation endemic to women, but also the threat of abandonment that hovers over her home life. The charged domestic conditions Maxine and her aunt endure as a Chinese woman and Chinese American daughter thus draw out further an already "drawn-out fear." Maxine appears to sense this similarity, which prompts her to continue with the exploration and articulation of a story that can resonate with her gendered, transnational experience and its impact on her subjectivity.

A Transnational Telling

The concurrent dialogic forces of transnational gendered discipline that limit women's mobility and permit that of men influence Maxine's second telling, which places her aunt's story in a transnational context more suited to her generational positionality that in turn implicates migration and gender. Her earlier unsatisfactory attempts to utilize language that invokes the communal norms she has heard throughout her childhood invoke Audre Lorde's metaphor about how "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us to beat him temporarily at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (*Sister Outsider*, 27). Maxine used the communal "tools" of unquestionable gendered regulations in order to begin to "dismantle" the version of the story she heard from Brave Orchid. This approach, however, only "temporarily" supersedes village authority that her mother summons, for despite attempt at articulation, Maxine proves unable to unearth the "genuine change" she seeks in the narrative: its potential to assist with rather than discipline her navigation of gendered transnational subjectivity, for this entry point emerges as Maxine's source of "genuine" connection with her aunt.

In the pursuit of this connection, she continues to operate on the assumption that men possess greater mobility within a village context. This approach prompts Maxine to imagine her aunt as a figure who also notes this discrepancy, and yet claims mobility for herself. This perceptiveness and agency emerges in Maxine's description of her aunt's position within the village, where this gendered double standard of mobility impels rather than hinders her:

They expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection. The heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning. But the rare urge West had fixed

upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space. (8)

Maxine first sets up the context of a transnational gendered division of labor and expectation with this passage that assigns women with the task of “maintain[ing] the past against the flood.” This formidable duty results in a “heavy, deep-rooted” sensation that contrasts with her aunt’s brothers’ freedom to “fumble without detection.” This freedom illustrates a mobility and a lack of burden that to which the aunt lacks access, since “they expected her alone to keep the traditional ways.” This expectation contains an element of security for those who inflict them upon her, since the maintenance she and the rest of the women must execute keeps the past “safe for returning.” Leslie Bow’s comparison between women and their function as “boundary markers” (1) bears relevance once again here, for the upkeep of boundaries resembles that of protection against “a flood” that ensures that “traditional ways” remain “safe.” Yet Maxine indicates that her aunt “crossed boundaries” rather than maintained them. This transgression emerges from the observation that the village permitted men to embark upon a “rare urge west.” The aunt thus allows herself a migration as well in the form of a journey across “boundaries not delineated in space.” Maxine renders the logic of this decision through the fluidity with which she connects the two movements: “the rare urge West had fixed upon our family, *and so* my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space.” She undercuts male mobility with that of her aunt, which adopts a less tangible form, but nevertheless concerns itself with the “urge” for movement.

Yet Maxine also explicitly reveals the undeniable distinction of how mobility in the form of transnational migration works in favor of male sexual transgression when she details how the “Uncles, cousins, nephews, and brothers. . .left, fearful that their glances, like a field of nesting birds, might be startled and caught” (10). Leaving as a form of escape captures how transnational

migration has permeated the village to assist with the coverup of these deviant “glances.” This departure allows the men to skirt blame and utilize their journeys from home as a security measure in order to prevent being “startled and caught.” Maxine’s comparison of their “glances” to a “field of nesting birds” points to the degree of intimacy that a single space has the potential to contain. Based on the “fearful” reaction these male relatives display toward the village’s discovery of their inclinations, they nevertheless receive security not just in the form of their migration, but also a security in communal silence: “But another, final reason for leaving the crowded house was never-said” (10). As its inventive syntax indicates, this descriptor deliberately emphasizes the lack of verbal acknowledgement that pervades this attraction. Yet Maxine does not go as far as to say that this attraction was never *felt*. This omission thus reveals a silent acknowledgement of illicit male sexuality that renders them unaccountable, and thus unpunishable: while silence disciplines women, it accommodates male sexual promiscuity.

Another gendered transnational tie that Maxine forges as a point of connection and access to her aunt emerges in the form of an inherited beauty practice. Maxine imagines how her aunt would thread her eyebrows, with “closed. . . fingers as if she were making a pair of shadow geese bite, [and] the string twisted together catching the little hairs. Then she pulled the thread away from her skin, ripping the hairs out neatly, her eyes watering from the needles of pain” (9). This description reveals the knowledge and empathy Maxine retains in regard to this practice, from the way she recounts how the finger positioning looks like “a pair of shadow geese,” to her characterization of the “needles of pain.” Maxine’s sense of familiarity expands when she details how “[her] mother did the same to me and my sisters and herself” (9). The fragility of this transnational link reveals itself, however, when Maxine notes how Brave Orchid would rebuke

her daughters' complaints about the pain of threading: "my mother said we were lucky we didn't have to have our feet bound when we were seven" (9). This comment highlights the delicate balance of transnational gendered bonds that undergo the checks and balances of distance and context. Brave Orchid utilizes this distance to chastise her daughters, who she claims are "lucky" to have a childhood which entails little pain in comparison those of their Chinese-born and raised counterparts. The transnational misalignment to which Brave Orchid deliberately points establishes a hierarchy that assigns validity on the basis of physical pain. Ninh highlights how this scale invalidates the intangible hauntings of second-generation daughters, and thus produces a barrier to articulation: "the second-generation narrator is at a distinct disadvantage. . . given that her sufferings amount neither to legends of folk history nor to epics of nation-building, nor great toil or trouble" (71). The fact that this scale of "sufferings" also emerges within and applies to the physical dimension of feminized pain illustrates the extent to which transnationality pervades Maxine's subjectivity and articulatory ability. Maxine's recollection of her mother's admonishment fails to halt her contemplation on transnational gender expectations, however, as evident from when she states that "I hope that the man my aunt loved appreciated a smooth brow, that he wasn't just a tits-and-ass man" (9). Maxine refuses to victimize her aunt and participate in the discourse of women's diminution in comparison to male power and sexual agency when she centers this hope around "the man my aunt loved." This syntax centers the aunt's feelings and choice, even though what Maxine discusses here is what this man "appreciated." What the man's appreciation entails, however, is Maxine's configuration of a feminine beauty standard that accounts for transnationality in its accommodating estimation of "a smooth brow" and "tits-and-ass." The former traces back to a beauty practice that passed through

her mother (and she assumes her aunt) to herself and her sisters, while the latter incorporates distinctly American vernacular English and desired physical attributes. She attributes additional subjectivity to her aunt with these qualities in the sense that they are not only transnational, but also differ in their scale. Appreciation for her aunt's brow indicates an attentiveness to a trait that reads as less overtly physical and sexual than "tits-and-ass." Through this differentiation, Maxine conceives of a beauty standard outside of hegemonic American femininity that incorporates Chinese femininity.

Ancestral Help

Maxine conceptualizes her aunt as in control of her feminine gender presentation and sexuality in order to help with her own self-conception as a Chinese American female subject who begins to grapple with sexuality. In this vein, she calibrates her aunt's sexuality with her own. Although Maxine acknowledges that her aunt's desire "could very well have been" that of a "wild woman" with "rolling company," she rejects this conduct and claims that it "doesn't fit" because she knows no adult in her life who freely approaches sex (8). Based on what Maxine reveals later about "add[ing] 'brother' silently to boys' names," she does not approach sex freely either, and harbors no plans to adopt such an approach (12). These real-life applications contextualize Maxine's concession of how "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (8). This notion of ancestral help seeks applicability to Maxine's life and emerges in the moments of her retelling that invoke her Chinese American, gendered upbringing.

In addition to her approach to sexuality, Maxine's comportment of her body and volume of her voice emerge as fraught sites upon which conflicts both American and Chinese expectations and norms of femininity unfold: "Walking erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward, not

pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine) and speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself American-feminine” (11). The lines in parenthesis mirror the stream of consciousness that likely occurs as Maxine endeavors to remind herself of these distinctions during the seemingly uncomplicated task of “walking.” The extent to which she tries to conform and “turn herself American-feminine” reveals the taxing nature of this transnational negotiation. This impact on her subjectivity then produces a vulnerable foundation upon which Maxine searches for clarity and guidance through her reimagining of her aunt as a figure who straddles, and even evades these gendered expectations. For example, between “Chinese communication...[which] was loud, public” and “at the dinner table where. . .no one could talk,” Maxine details how her aunt used “a secret voice, a separate attentiveness” (11). This utilization serves as a gateway to forging a path of articulation amidst the extremes of “public” loudness and domestic silence. Although this path is “secret,” it nevertheless constitutes a “voice,” as well as an “attentiveness” that nevertheless remains “separate.” These qualities indicate that this path articulates itself without adopting the hegemonies of loudness and silence.

In her daily life, however, Maxine internalizes the hegemonic notion that the sexuality of the daughters, rather than those of the male relatives, must serve as the site of restraint. She confesses, “As if it came from an atavism deeper than fear, I used to add “brother” silently to boys’ names” (12). The village structure mentality of kinship emerges in her American social setting not as a result of a fear-based, defensive instinct, but rather, “atavism.” This brotherly neutralizer she places upon the boys’ names “came from” this place of atavism, which wields a generational influence that exercises both proximity and distance within Maxine’s subjectivity. She acts upon this atavism in order to determine her approach to the opposite sex, yet she

describes this act in passive, distant terms: “it came from” somewhere rather than appeared at her bidding. The fact that she employs this term “silently,” however, contrasts with the shouted, externalized reminders of kinship ties that resound in the village, where residents “called their friendships out across the fields” (11). Maxine poses an alternative to this silence when she reflects, “But, of course, I hexed myself also—no dates. I should have stood up, both arms waving, and shouted across libraries, “Hey, you! Love me back” (12). Through her “no dates” self-hex, Maxine applies an additional transnational layer of control onto her sexuality in order to navigate American dating culture. What she professes she “should have” done mirrors the description Maxine provides of the village’s sonic landscape, in which members “called their friendships out across the fields” (11). In both scenes, “fields” and “libraries” serve as open spaces for socialization and work between the sexes. Yet Maxine envisions waving and shouting to profess a singular “love” rather than multiple “friendships.” She tells herself that she “should have” publicly vocalized her intentions. This act combines the Chinese volume and American dating to form a method of romantic attainment. Maxine confesses, however, that a lack of knowledge on self-regulation prevents her from enacting this scene:

I had no idea though, how to make attraction selective, how to control its direction and magnitude. If I made myself American-pretty so that the five or six Chinese boys in the class fell in love with me, everyone else—the Caucasian, Negro, and Japanese boys—would too. Sisterliness, dignified and honorable, made much more sense (12).

Once Maxine acknowledges that she “had no idea,” she then assesses her transnational gender positionality in order to arrive at a point of “sense.” This solution states that the avoidance of love materializes as the “dignified and honorable” solution that Maxine must pursue or the sake of “everyone else”—a body which constitutes her male classmates of various nationalities and ethnicities. The persistence of the verb “to make,” which first appears in its

infinitive and then twice more in the past tense, illustrates the degree of weight Maxine places on herself to make something of conditions as abstract and subjective as “attraction,” “American-pretty,” and “sense.” This weight shifts beneath transnational gender expectations and conditions, from the appeal of “American-pretty” to boys of different backgrounds, to the Chinese village norm of “sisterliness,” a word that Maxine creates to describe her approach of choice. She deems this option the one of “sense” due to its perceived neutralization of her sexuality and those around her. While Maxine posits these approaches as opposites, they both entail little “sense” due to how they both implicate her “control” over the “magnitude” of her sexuality and gender presentation. Maxine’s transnational positionality instills two structures of self-regulation whose outcomes she cannot predict, especially given how even in the village, men predate upon women regardless of their sisterly presentation.

“Fight Better”: Transnational Feminist Recalibration & Solidarity

Despite the pervasive gender disciplining that this village structure enacts on a transnational scale, Maxine recalibrates this discourse to her own positionality rather than rescinds her transnational positionality altogether. An especially reclamatory example occurs when Maxine retells the scene of her aunt’s childbirth. The only information Maxine gleans from *Brave Orchid* is that her aunt “gave birth in the pigsty that night” (5). This statement lacks context, and combined with the slurs from the villages raiders of “Pig. Ghost. Pig,” (5) paints an unflattering, shameful picture of the aunt’s final moments. Yet Maxine’s final telling portrays this birthing scene in a more dimensional and deliberate light, for when her aunt gives birth in the pigsty, she reclaims the gendered work of preservation as a form of protection for her child. When Maxine imagines how “She got to her feet to fight better and remembered that old-fashioned women

gave birth in their pigsties to fool the jealous, pain-dealing gods, who do not snatch piglets” (14). The congruence between “get[ting] to her feet to fight better” and “remember[ing]” a trick that originates in an herstory of “old-fashioned women” grounds the aunt’s resistance to misogyny and shaming in ancestral womanhood. This approach also transcends the “jealous, pain-dealing” behavior of gods who are not above kidnapping babies. These traits of jealousy and manipulative “pain-dealing” also resemble the mortal figures of the villagers, who Maxine suggests “punished [the aunt] for acting as if she could have a private life” (13), and for whom adulterous behavior “became a crime when the village needed food” (13). These respective vantage points stem from the resentment of agency and the pain of hunger, and thus the aunt’s protective gesture toward her child also symbolically sidesteps the villagers’ malicious intent to “punish her at the birth of her baby” (13). Her decision to give birth in the pigsty thus functions as a doubly protective shield from both supernatural and earthly antagonists. Although the baby does not survive, the aunt exercises maternal love over her child’s death when she carries it with her to the well rather than abandons it somewhere on her family’s property. Maxine destigmatizes this fate when she concludes, “Mothers who love their children take them along” (15). This conclusion rings all the more impactfully as a decisive statement amidst the language of uncertainty that Maxine employs throughout her storytelling. She exercises more certainty when she states: “It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys” (15). Maxine thus envisions her aunt as a mother who would “take” her daughter with her to the well in order to protect her from the inevitable lack of forgiveness that she would encounter. This additionally gendered dimension reads as resistant to the communal shame and harm that hovers over the fate of a “girl” child, to the point where the aunt prevents these structural forces through their paired death.

Despite the degree of uncertainty and imagination that runs abound in Maxine's telling of her aunt's story, this telling ultimately proves productive in articulating an interpretive, rather than disciplinary account of this aunt, and in turn of Chinese and Chinese American gendered subjectivity. Given this impact, although the aunt predicts that "there would be no marker for her anywhere, neither in the earth nor the family hall. . .no one would give her a family hall name," (15) Maxine nonetheless highlights the manner in which this aunt's story "marked" her growing, as well as marks the start of her memoir. This marking pushes back against the assignation of women as markers of societal values and instead emphasizes their transnational importance for a second generation daughter such as Maxine, who "devote[s] pages" (16) to her aunt upon which multiple tellings of her story converge. This textual production rife with subjectivity amounts to and exceeds the importance of a single "name" that appears in a "family hall." Yet Maxine envisions the aunt's reaction to this devotion as precarious—neither grateful nor resentful—for she "haunts [her]" and "does not always mean [her] well" (16). This indefinite response captures the fluidity of transnational bonds and solidarity, and how these conditions cannot "always" persist between women of different generations and birthplaces, even if they do share in a gender-based oppression. The persistence of a haunting, however, indicates a phantomly yet forged proximity that permeates the transnational subjectivity of a second-generation daughter. As King-Kok Cheung writes, "[Maxine's] aunt—who could not possibly inhabit all these versions—remains inescapably silent. This haunting silence is precisely what gives wings to the niece's imagination. . .Not the aunt's but the narrator's subjectivity is unfurled" (85).

CHAPTER TWO: *MILK & HONEY*

Milk & Honey, Punjabi Canadian poetess Rupi Kaur's self-published book of poems, features the narrative voice of a second generation daughter who attempts to situate herself within a landscape of communal harm. The poems this chapter examines detail these harms as they manifest in the forms of discipline, silence, and the threat of physical and sexual abuse. This heightened experience forges an awareness of gendered positionality in the narrator that appears to quell the need to seek help through matrilineal storytelling. Yet despite this lack of urge for ancestral help, an articulation of gendered transnational subjectivity persists in the poems of *Milk & Honey*. I argue for this persistence and its revelation of how proximity to sites of communal and gendered harm cannot, in this case, satisfy the compulsion to produce articulations that account for the narrator's transnational subjectivity. This narrator thus creates poetic and artistic interpretations of her nearness to these harms, and where she can locate within it her own trauma, testimony, and insight. The fraught work of *Milk & Honey*'s locational process and its resulting articulations emerges within the context of erin Ninh's interpretation of hierarchical legitimacy to speech:

Suffering yields returns in legitimacy, or authority to speak, as if status in a dialogue. . . must be earned through tears, sweat, or blood. The second-generation narrator is at a distinct disadvantage in this respect, given that her sufferings amount neither to legends of folk history nor to epics of nation-building, no great toil or trouble (71).

Through her intricate relationship to communal harm, the narrative voice of *Milk & Honey* blurs boundaries of "legitimacy" between the "second generation" and the generation that wields the "authority to speak" due to their narratives of "tears, sweat, or blood." This liminality occurs due to how this narrator suffers both the physical traumas of the latter group and the psychic traumas

of the former. Psychic traumas, however fail to register as “sufferings” due to how they “amount” tangibly to nothing. In light of this duality of “legitimate” sufferings and intangible (and thus illegitimate) violences, the narrative voice in *Milk & Honey* merits a transnational reading despite its absence of traversal across boundaries through matrilineal storytelling. As for her “status in a dialogue,” this narrator constructs her own dialogue of poetry and drawing. I undergird the intentionality of this experimental articulation with an observation from Cheung, who writes of the authors she examines in *Articulate Silences*: “Many of their characters (and perhaps the authors themselves) distill onto the page what they cannot say out loud... Yet they all excel on paper: their unspoken emotions break into print” (26). In the case of Kaur, I expand upon Cheung’s observation to include how *Milk & Honey* “break[s] into” both drawing and “print” as a method of distillation that accounts for her “unspoken emotions” which manifest viscerally through the four parts of the collection: “the hurting,” “the loving,” “the breaking,” and “the healing.”

This chapter focuses on poems from “the hurting” and “the breaking” due to their confrontations with the pain and breakage of communal harm and its gendered, disciplinary manifestations and ties to silence. Each of the sections that follow constitute a layer of the narrator’s proximate interactions with communal harm that combine to form her transnational subjectivity. These layers emerge in articulations of knowledge, witness, and endurance in relation to this harm. While overlap certainly occurs between these layers, they nevertheless elicit distinct threads that converge to weave together *Milk & Honey*’s narrative voice amidst the viscosity of her conditions.

Knowledge & (Un)Learning

While the poems of *Milk & Honey* detail the narrator's subjectivity, they also reveal the extent to which she objectively understands and internalizes gendered communal harm in her community. This process of learning and indicates how the narrator has come up with deductions due to the pervasiveness of this harm. A piece titled "the art of being empty" demonstrates the emergence of this knowledge based upon both individual and collective experience:

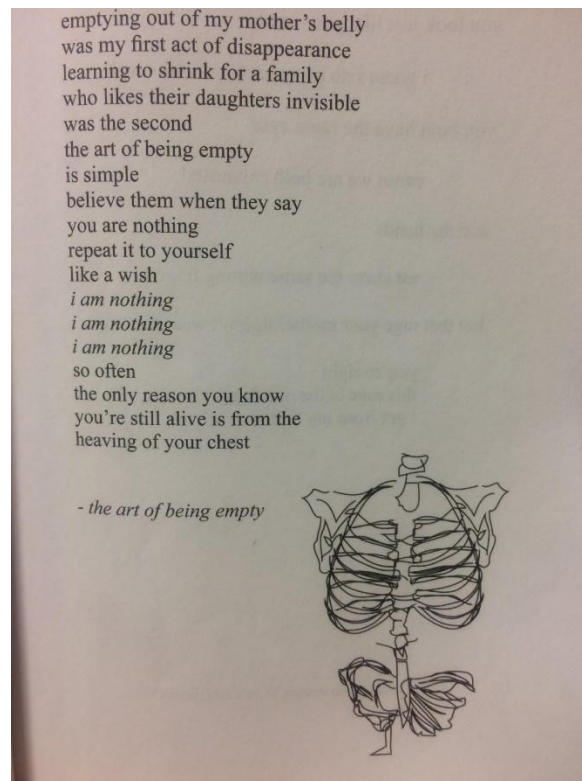


Figure 1

Rather than begin with a title, this piece instead begins with an image that opposes titularity as the narrator describes her birth as an "emptying out," promptly followed by "learning how to shrink." These processes of "emptying" and "learning" appear ongoing given their verb forms and set up a contradiction that demonstrates how the narrator must continue "learning" and accumulating knowledge to ensure her constant "emptying," in order to "shrink for a family /

who likes their daughters invisible.” This state provides context for the illustration that accompanies this poem, which is that of a skeleton. The invisibility that pervades the daughter’s subjectivity prompts her to expand her articulation beyond that of poetry and into the realm of drawing. Here, the bare-boned drawing provides visibility to her experience as a subject who must pare herself down to “the heaving of [her] chest.”

I must note, however, that the line in the poem itself does not refer to the narrator’s chest, but rather that of a second person voice. The second person serves as a point of reference that invites the reader to experience what these “daughters” fall subject to. She can describe this experience with objectivity because she knows that she is not the only one who endures it. The second person compounds itself with the line, “believe them when they say / you are nothing.” The second person in this scene illustrates the isolation, a “them” that positions itself against a “you,” that persists despite the fact that a plurality of “daughters” endure this gendered disciplinary formation. This placement captures the nuance that *Milk & Honey* unfurls: the fact that isolation persists despite distance and despite a general knowledge of what fellow daughters and women experience communally. The “you” that emerges at the poem’s conclusion signifies this duality. The final lines function as both a continuation of the claim that “you are nothing / ...the only reason you know / you’re still alive is from the / heaving of your chest.” In this context, the final usage of second person serves as a progression of the discipline that descends from a “them.” Another facet of this duality is the isolating quality of the second person as it describes this “heaving” sensation that occurs not only viscerally, but also objectively: this is how “you” feel in an environment where a collective “them” says “you are nothing.” This statement not only emerges once, but several times after the narrator writes, “repeat it to yourself.” This line reads

as both the “them” instructing the narrator to do so, and the narrator articulating and issuing the affect of this demand that registers as spoken due to the shift to italics. Speech as it emerges here signifies a continuation of subjectivity loss, which in turn configures silence as a mode of non-participation in the act of telling oneself “i am nothing.” This interplay between silence and speech recalls Duncan’s contextualization of the two forms and their Eurocentric implications: “Invisibility, loss, absence, repression, oppression, the unspoken, the unknown—these concepts continue to be equated with silence, while visibility, gain, presence, liberation, and “truth” are equated with the act of speech itself” (7). Duncan complicates these binary throughout *Tell This Silence*, and this moment in the poem does so as well. Here, repetition that adopts a spoken modality reiterates the “invisibility” and “repression” that an embodiment of “nothing” entails. Meanwhile in this context silence reads not necessarily as “liberation,” but nevertheless as an abstinence from this repetition rather than its perpetuation. The narrator invokes this repetition, however, in order to highlight the didactic quality of this discipline upon its gendered subjects, which consists of both herself and other daughters. While this learned silence combined with the narrator’s language and drawing of physicality certainly bears a visceral quality, she also chooses to aestheticize and sanitize this experience as an “art” when she claims, “the art of being empty / is simple.” The first part of the phrase, “the art of being,” evokes the idea of constantly ascribing a lens of “art” onto one’s being, which maps a rubric or standard onto subjectivity. Despite this cost that a concept as appealing as “art” places onto a process as supposedly natural as “being,” the narrator describes this existence as “simple.” This characterization contrasts with the placement of the title at the end of the poem, which demonstrates in this case the physically and mentally exhaustive process of learning that results in the ability to identify or term an

experience. The internalization and standardization of this process, however, contextualizes this contrast as it emerges through the voice of a disciplined and eventually self-disciplined narrator.

While “the art of being empty” details the communal, socialized landscape of gendered silence as it impacts the narrator through instruction, she also discloses how this knowledge embeds itself not only in her environment, but also within her genealogy. Despite the communalized context of these origins, the narrator articulates an isolation that seeps into this ancestral knowledge, as well as her individual efforts at unlearning this discipline. In the poem “the idea of shrinking is hereditary,” the conflicts of ancestry and the isolating experience of not only realizing, but also unlearning this knowledge that bears down upon the narrator:

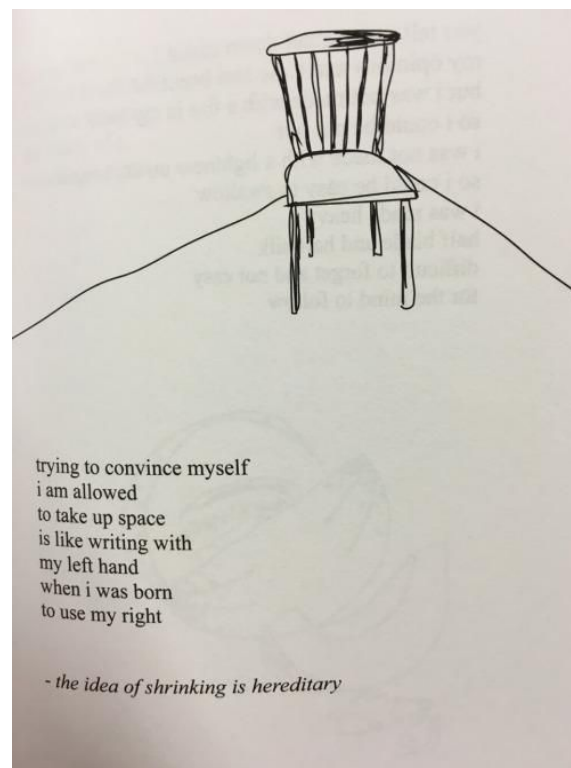


Figure 2

The drawing contains two lines that form a triangle. At the point where the lines converge rests a single, empty chair. The poem itself appears inside this triangle. The coexistence yet

distance on the page between the text and the illustration depicts the narrator's struggle with the prospect of filling that chair and taking up space that would immediately catch the eye of whomever sees this page. Yet this tension captures the struggle to unlearn, which the narrator defines in the poem as the process of "trying to convince myself / i am allowed / to take up space." The crux of this unlearning as feeling like whether she is "allowed" reveals the extent to which discipline instilled in her this "idea of shrinking," for this language of permission evokes the specter of an authority who would reverse her sentiment and "convince" her she *cannot* "take up space." This fraught relationship with "space" and whether or not the narrator is "allowed" to occupy it manifests in the poem's this spatial arrangement that contains considerable white space despite the text and drawing. In contrast with this individual attempt at self-conviction that endeavors to prevail over discipline, an inherited and therefore instilled conflict appears and places additional weight on her attempt to unlearn, which resembles "writing with my left hand / when i was born / to use my right." For the narrator, taking up space translates as forced, stifled, and unnatural—a form of expression that she was not "born" to execute. Yet she notably compares the process of taking up space with that of "writing": an interpretive and intentional articulation that combats this structure and functions in direct opposition to its practical "idea" form.

Witness & Observer

In addition to the narrator's own experience, stores of knowledge and (un)learning accumulate through her position as a witness and observer of the gendered silence and harm that inflicts her home, particularly the most impactful woman figure within that space: her mother. This untitled piece recounts a scene the narrator witnesses, and for whom its implications register

profoundly:

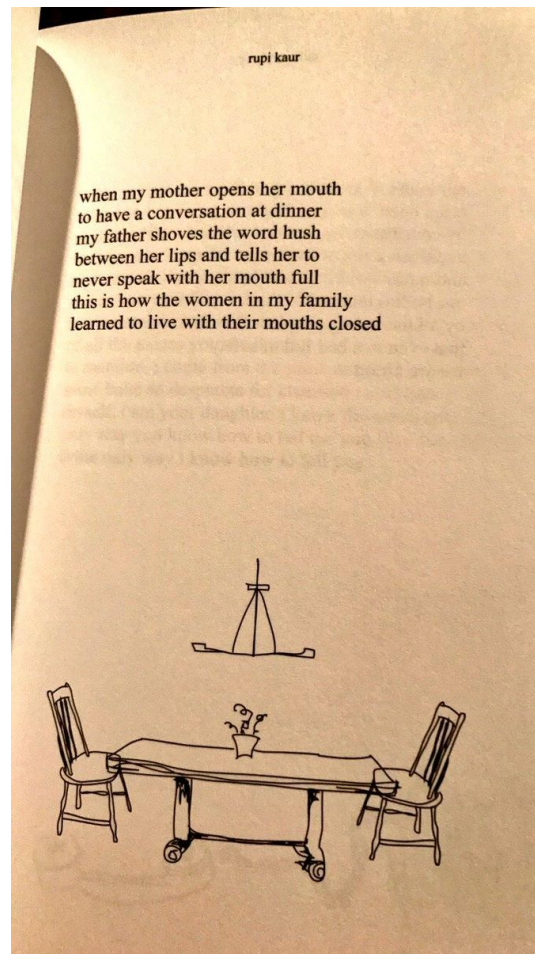


Figure 3

In this untitled piece, the narrator depicts her father as the source from where the injunctions to silence not only emanate, but descend. This dynamic contributes to the visceral manner in which the narrator must navigate these silences in spaces as simultaneously communal and intimate as “dinner.” She conveys the charged nature of this occasion and space through the accompanying drawing, which consists of only two chairs, and a light that appears to hang from no source, and thus could descend upon the table at any moment. The setup of two chairs at the table contrast with the poem, which depicts the narrator as witness to this exchange, and would thus also likely to be seated at the same table as her mother and father. The drawing does not

depict her presence as however, for this table only seats two people—the narrator has no place here. This setup indicates the degree of the narrator’s omniscience as a witness during this confrontation. This distant positionality is ironic considering that these figures are not strangers, but her own parents. The dinner table setup contains another element of irony due to the fact that although the narrator witnesses her mother’s silencing, the flowers on the tabletop and the chairs that face each other appears to invite conversation. A transnational thread also appears in this context of the rectangular dinner table, which carries connotations of American domesticity. This scene points to how communal harm manifests in the most mundane and intimate of contexts, including transnational ones, for the poem captures the hostility that unfolds in this seemingly inviting domestic setting. This hostility takes on not only the form of the father’s verbal command, but also an abusive physicality that underscores the entire interaction as the narrator recounts how “[her] father shoves the word hush / between her lips and tells her to / never speak with her mouth full.” The final line cements the degree to which this scene impresses upon the narrator, who witnesses this interaction and deduces: “this is how the women in my family / learned to live with their mouths closed.” This conclusive structure captures the impact these single interactions have on both the daughterly witness who describes her “mother,” as well as “the women” as a whole who both witness and experience such interactions.

Another structural point that depicts the charged nature of this moment is the fact that the poem lacks punctuation. This omission allows the poem to read as rushed in one breath, as if the narrator articulates this sentiment quickly in order to avoid the order to “hush” that she witnesses her mother receive. Her detached phrasing in the final line of “the women in my family” evokes the tone of a witness who observes, yet remains implicated in not only the observation this poem

recounts, but a collection of observations that construct a narrative about the “women” in her “family.” This overarching narrative appears in this short poem at the start, when “my mother opens her mouth,” and traces to the conclusion about “how the women...learned to live with their mouths closed.” This imagery combined with the third person positionality reveals the narrator’s overall understanding of “how” this discipline works based on the encounters she has seen and heard. The dominant first person in the poem, however, reminds of the intimately subjective experience of the narrator, who witnesses this gendered silence unfold at her own family meal.

As she continues to observe the fraught relationship between her mother and father, the narrator also articulates her inability to discern and draw conclusions from what she sees. Although this untitled poem reads as about the parents, its contents and appearance on the page reveal the effects on the narrator’s subjectivity as a daughter:

i can't tell if my mother is
terrified or in love with
my father it all
looks the same

(Kaur 40)

The narrator records the unobservable quality of her observation when she opens with “i can’t tell.” The lowercase “i” captures her diminutive, childlike position in this scene as a daughter in relation to her parents, as well as the invisible position of a person who watches, unnoticed. Yet the narrator cannot completely remove herself from what she watches, and thus maintains her individual, daughterly subjectivity through the first person. This poem addresses and observes the core of a relationship, rather than one specific interaction. The affect of this lack of specificity evokes an environment that aligns closely with Ninh’s reading of Maxine’s home life, of which she asserts how “To be a daughter in this context is to be subjected to a low buzz of

discursive violences in that very space which is home, and to be so afflicted by what one hears and sees that one cannot discern the image or tone of love through the storm of static” (58). Ninh’s reading, however, derives from a passage in *The Woman Warrior* in which Maxine herself, as a daughter and girl of her household, emerges as the target of the “low buzz of discursive violences.” Meanwhile, in Kaur’s poem, the narrator attempts to “discern the image or tone of love” not as it applies to herself, but rather from what she observes of her mother. Yet despite this generational shift in gendered disciplinary target, *Milk & Honey*’s narrator nevertheless experiences an impact upon her subjectivity “in that very space which is home” due to the “discursive violences” she witnesses between her parents, and specifically the impact they wreak upon her mother. More specifically, articulates her observation as “it all / looks the same,” which resonates with Ninh’s claim regarding the “afflict[ion of] what one hears and sees.” This impact, which precariously hinges upon looking for expressions that read as “terrified” or “in love,” also connotes domestic or intimate partner violence: a dynamic that involves the entwinement of fear and love, as well as a child as witness. While this compact poem does not concern itself with the specificities of what the narrator “hears and sees,” or witnesses, the narrator’s difficulty in “tell[ing]” between terror and love because “it all looks the same” reads as reminiscent of a “storm of static.” This condition thus emerges as witnessed, yet incomprehensible for the narrator.

Endurance

While layers of knowledge and witnessing permit a degree of distance from communal harm, the narrator eventually endures its gendered, disciplinary, and silencing repercussions through conditions that involve her body, and that of another. As a result, her trauma registers as

physically individualized and subject to the endurance of “the forces of resistance which act between two bodies, even when they are at a standstill” (Ninh 79). In “midweek sessions,” the narrator describes a scene that exhibits “forces of resistance” which appear on a twofold scale: between the “bodies” of both the narrator and the therapist, and the narrator and her molester(s). This dimensionality occurs due to the psychic effects of sexual abuse:

(trigger warning: rape and sexual abuse)

the therapist places
the doll in front of you
it is the size of girls
your uncles like touching

point to where his hands were

you point to the spot
between its legs the one
he fingered out of you
like a confession

how're you feeling

you pull the lump
in your throat out
with your teeth and
say *fine*
numb really

midweek sessions - rupi kaur

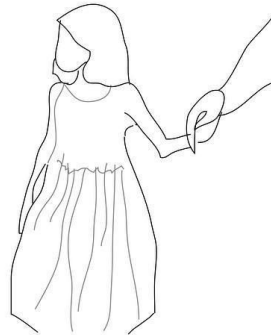


Figure 4

This piece captures endurance as it consists of not just one incident, but rather a relived trauma that the narrator must navigate through the recurrence of “midweek sessions.” This title’s appearance at the end of the poem emphasizes the weight of this revisitation of trauma, for the poem reads in its entirety as a single interaction, and yet the titular phrase at the end reveals the constancy of this interaction and its revisitation of another interaction: molestation as it happened

to her, and happens to other “girls” in her community. A single object, “the doll,” prompts this revisitation that conveys the magnitude of this harm that affects the narrator as well as other “girls.” The figure of “the therapist” offers this object as a literal point of reference and then tells the narrator to “point to where his hands were.” This spoken presence introduces the tension between speech and endurance. These questions seem to help the narrator work through, albeit painfully, how she is “feeling” about this trauma that registers as both individual and communal. These registers are so powerful that the narrator must attend “sessions” alone in order to process her own trauma outside of the community, yet in a space that does not erase the gravity of communal harm. The doll serves as a conduit in this realization through its function as an object of reference. This “sessions” thus emerges as case in which the help the narrator encounters is not ancestral, because the narrator must leave the ancestral through “midweek sessions” in order to process her own positionality.

This process does not entail completely erasing the ancestral but rather processing it in a different setting which prompts her to endure a psychic exacting of speech through two modes: her trauma, and the process of talking about said trauma. The first mode appears through when she describes this visceral and forceful act: “the one / he fingered out of you / like a confession.” Although confessions are usually difficult to extract, they retain a voluntary and cleansing element that this scene rejects with its forcefulness. The second mode manifests through the narrator when she “pull[s] the lump / in your throat out / with your teeth / and say *fine / numb really*.” This scene captures the culmination of this therapy session that entailed fraught revisitation through spoken articulation. The functions of speech and silence appear ambiguous here. The narrator perhaps needs a spoken mode of articulation in order to counteract the silence

that contains her testimonial of communal harm. A question also remains about whether the silence this process undoes is useful or necessary to this narrator's comprehension of her orientation remains ambiguous as the narrator's final words: "*fine / numb really.*" The drawing of the girl holding an unidentifiable person's hand that accompanies this poem also exudes ambiguity. The visibly young girl alludes to the doll and the innocence of these subjects, for the primary point of comparison that arises for the narrator between the doll and the girls is not gender, but "size." This correlation sets up a vulnerability in this girl, who is being led by a hand detached from a body. This detached entity that forges a point of physical contact with this girl raises the question of where the girl is being led, and whether or not she is safe, for the poem raises the issue of safety in relation to the "uncles" who come in contact with these girls. The drawing, despite its depiction of a single girl, accounts for the plurality of girls who may experience this trauma through the fact that the girl has no face. This omission captures the simultaneous individuality and ubiquity of this harm: perhaps one could put the face of any girl there, and she would be able to relate to this poem in her own way. This face faces the verse about the lump in the throat, and thus serves as a visual representation of how "fine" and "numb" don't really convey anything in particular. This distance from feeling embodies itself in the usage of the second person, which registers as a narrative distancing from the viscosity of this scene. This distance serves as a manifestation of how difficult it is for the narrator to revisit this incident and come to terms with its prevalence for not only her, but other girls. This distance actually works to bring the reader closer into this text and encounter the revisitation of trauma that the narrator must endure on a weekly basis.

This discipline remains gendered even in the brief poems I am to discuss below, each of

which contain no female pronouns. I maintain this gendered framework due to Kaur's own remarks on what issues *Milk & Honey* tackles: "love / loss / trauma / abuse / healing / and femininity" (*about the book*). The order of these themes and the finality of "femininity"'s placement in this order illustrates its importance and applicability to each of the above terms. In this manner, femininity serves as a framework that appears in each of the seemingly separate themes that characterize each section of the book. In Ninh's work, femininity appears as a critical comparative framework through which to view the disciplinary structure of designated failure that haunts Asian American daughters: "As with cultural norms of femininity, familial norms of filial obedience are devised in such a way as not to be attainable and are. . . effective precisely *because* they cannot be attained" (45-46). The narrator of *Milk & Honey* articulates her struggles with these standards that prove "not to be attainable" in not only the context of her home, but also in relationships that appear to take place outside of the home, in individual encounters. Thus, even contexts that do not bear distinctly daughterly, communal attributes, the narrator continues to encounter forms of discipline that persist in their gendered form of operation. An untitled piece captures this persistence of structures that align with that of femininity in an agendered formulation:

you pinned
my legs to
the ground
with your feet
and demanded
i stand up



Figure 5

This second person address captures how the source of this power registers as both traceable and vague, for this scene contains an intimate “me-you” dialogue, yet the identity of the “you” retains a vastness in applicability that evokes power structures that exact unattainable standards. The narrator, meanwhile, persists in the first person. This perspective places her in the easily traceable position of disciplinary target. In this scene, her physical mobility remains “pinned” beneath the “feet” of the second person authority, who “demanded / i stand up.” The relationality between the narrator’s “legs” and the authority’s “feet” which hold her down indicates the extent to which the authority deliberately impedes the part of the narrator’s body that would work to fulfill the demand to “stand up.” The second person demands that the narrator stand up *as they stand on her legs* in order to prevent her rise, and thus her attainment. The past tense shows the impact this dynamic left upon the narrator, who continues to recall and attempt to articulate it even after the fact. This scene thus portrays the extent to which, as Ninh describes, demands are “devised in such a way to not be attainable,” and how this calculation designates failure upon the subject. The drawing that accompanies this poem demonstrates the despair that this

unattainability inflicts. In this illustration, a person who appears gender neutral, rather than overtly feminized like the figure in the “midweek sessions drawing,” kneels and bends over. Their hands cover their face, and an arrow embeds itself in their back. The drawing attributes no source to this arrow: the shooter, a bow, or even a motion. This lack of source captures the extent to which this disciplinary subject functions as a target for an arrow anyone can wield. This arrow not only strikes, but cripples and destabilizes the subject who according to the poem, already cannot stand. The subject’s turned back emphasizes not only the untraceability of the entity that issues this demand, but also the unpredictable quality of this discipline, which can assail the subject at any point—especially when they are not looking. The drawing’s depiction of a gender neutral subject depicts the pervasiveness of designated failure, which enacts itself in not only interpersonal, but also institutional contexts that control for factors other than feminine gender presentation.

While the above untitled piece demonstrates a lack of fulfillment of a demand to “stand up,” other poems in *Milk & Honey* reveal an ample fulfillment of demand that receives no recognition. These works appear in “the breaking” section of *Milk & Honey*, which details the narrator’s experience in relationships not specific to family that result in emotional abuse. This abuse enacts a disciplinary form that resembles and builds upon those she detailed in “the hurting.” This conceit across sections emphasizes the prevalence of “femininity” as a lens that spans the collection as a whole rather than confines itself to the domestic and communal. These poems from “the breaking” support this expansive positionality in the actions and scenes they describe. The first of them reads,

i am a museum full of art
but you had your eyes shut
(Kaur 100)

The narrator describes herself as abundant and expansive: “a museum full of art.” Using “full” in particular emphasizes the fulfillment of demand that occurs with this embodiment of a “museum” vastness. A “museum” space also evokes the labor and fulfillment of curated “art” compiled for public display. This poem reveals, however, that this intended “display” failed to occur because the viewer, who once again emerges as an authority figure in the second person, “had [their] eyes shut.” This action reveals a deliberate, devised intent to ignore the narrator’s abundant provisions, among which include beauty and knowledge. The symmetric appearance of the two lines sets up a balanced dynamic, yet the contents of the second serve to emphasize the degree of misalignment that occurs within this interaction that the viewer refuses to acknowledge. This viewer, however, forms an inconstant part of this poem, for they embody a past tense construction in how they “*had* their eyes shut” (emphasis added). This syntax renders this viewer as an isolated incident, while the speaker describes herself in the present tense: “*i am* a museum full of art” (emphasis added). This difference in tense permits the interpretation that the narrator remains in this state, whose preservation does not hinge upon the approval of the viewer. The lack of illustration in this piece embodies this permanence that does not necessitate revelation or viewing because the narrator has asserted, “i am,” and therefore has nothing more to prove if the authority chooses not to look. This empty space appears all the more deliberate considering the role of visuality, namely “art,” plays in this poem.

The absence of drawing once again emerges in the following untitled poem, which also addresses designated failure within the context of looking. While the previous piece entailed a sense of permanence for the narrator, this one prevents her from the possibility of self-fulfillment due to the conclusive nature of her actions that once again pass through unacknowledged:

i came all this way
 to give you all these things
 but you aren't even looking
 (Kaur 110)

The past tense of how the narrator “came all this way” characterizes both this moment and the narrator’s actions as expended. “To give” indicates the fixed intent behind this journey that bears the additional weight of “all these things.” This plural vagueness alludes to the range of “things” that the disciplined subject must “give”: time, energy, obedience, capital, as well as material items that circulate within these structures. The phrase also captures how these “things” must be provided “all” at once rather than through separate interactions. The repetition of “all” further demonstrates, especially within a poem of only three lines, the sheer investment and labor that entails this work. Once again, this work proves lost upon its recipient, whose actions the narrator characterizes as ongoing: “but you aren’t even looking.” This figure fails to see, and thus undermines, the work of excess that the narrator embodies through her bestowal of “all these things.” The past tense of the narrator’s position and the present progressive of the second person’s indicate the extent to which the authority figure will continuously neglect the subject’s accomplishments and gifts, even after the latter has undertaken taxing work that she cannot undo. The white space that frames this poem indicates a refusal to disclose these “things,” as well as the extent to which the other character’s deliberate overlook renders these “things” nonexistent.

Together, these two untitled poems barren of illustration and rife with critical tense shifts manage to articulate the simultaneously interpersonal and structural conditions that the narrator endures as a gendered, disciplinary subject. This nuance opens her condition to interpretation. The first poem contains a residual power that persists even once the authority “shut” their eyes, for the narrator asserts at the start: “i am [a museum full of art].” The second, however, situates

the present within the authority figure who “[isn’t] even looking,” to articulate the constancy of designated failure that refuses to see the subject and notice—let alone praise—her efforts. This idea of not being seen echoes back to the acknowledged and witnessed yet nevertheless persistent and visceral states of communal harm that the narrator notes in herself and her women peers, including her mother. She recounts her relationality to this harm through terms that account for transnationality and its impact on her subjectivity while addressing its communal scale. Thus, she does not rescind her ancestral/immigrant community—specifically her ties to the women of this community—in her articulation of transnational subjectivity, and articulates complex relationships to silence and speech rather than issues an endorsement of either. This calibration of subjectivity, gender, and village structure captures *Milk & Honey*’s iteration of a psychically forged transnational feminism.

CHAPTER THREE: *SEAM*

With the release of her book of poetry titled *Seam* in 2014, Tarfia Faizullah, a Bangladeshi American raised in Midland, Texas, debuted a work that grapples with memory and complicates methodologies of form, structure, and narrative. *Seam* resulted from of a Fulbright research trip to Dhaka, Bangladesh, where Faizullah traveled to interview the *birangona*—Bangladeshi women who underwent rape, abuse, and imprisonment during the War of Independence that granted Bangladesh freedom from Pakistan in 1971. The term *birangona*, which translates to “war heroines,” arose from a state policy Bangladesh issued in 1972 in an effort to counteract the invisibility surrounding the experiences of the two hundred thousand women who had survived torture and rape during the war (Faizullah 25). In light of the violence and repression that the *birangona* underwent during the months of the war and the years that followed, *Seam* centers the narratives of these women and dismantles the silence and stigma they continue to carry. The narrator and interviewer of *Seam* who forges this narrative excavation inhabits a plotline of her own as a Bangladeshi American woman who journeys to conduct research in her parents’ homeland.

Before she embarks upon this research and crafts these interview poems, the narrator first delves into the history and memory of the war on her own, with only a sparse account from her mother as a guide. Through her project and travel, she enacts a physical manifestation of what Maxine sought to unearth from her aunt’s story. In this manner, *Seam* serves as an example of seeking ancestral help at its source. For while the narrator experiences and witnesses transnational silence and its gendered manifestations through matrilineal storytelling, she does not grapple with the gendered communal discipline and harm that Maxine and *Milk & Honey*’s

narrator must confront as barriers to mobility. *Seam*'s narrator, then exhibits a mobility across national boundaries which allows her to probe the gendered disciplinary silencing structures that surround the *birangona*. This investigation fails to emerge seamlessly, however, within the hands of a narrator who harbors affinities of lineage and gender to her research site and subjects. I thus characterize the narrator and interviewer's presence in the collection as a positional seam at once proximate to and distant from her project, which focuses on the gendered devastation of a war that her family, particularly her mother, endured.

Recuperation through a mode of proximate distance sets up yet another seam: that of liminal, non-linear temporality. The Bangladeshi American narrator's proximate position of gender and ethnicity in relation to both her mother and the *birangona* as Bangladeshi women produce a "history" that in *Seam*, shifts toward a herstory. Within the poems, the gendered and psychic effects of the war detail a "memory" that seeps into the present through matrilineal storytelling and testimonials from the *birangona*. This proximate reconfiguration of memory and a gendered herstorical lens, however, do not guarantee the narrator-interviewer access to this past she recovers through the voices of her mother and the *birangona*.

This recovery occurs in *Seam* at its most direct through an ethnographic mode consisting of eight questions the narrator-interviewer poses to the *birangona*. An interplay with scholarly discipline thus arises given this investigative context. The title of "interviewer" and the tasks it entails constitute the lens of anthropological and ethnographic discipline through which the narrator accesses the subjectivities of the *birangona*. A question-answer structure facilitates this access and illustrates how a disciplinary framework produces the conditions in which subjective, interpretive language emerges. This emergence occurs due to the disciplinary pressure of

ethnographic interviews that prompts articulation. The interview questions align with the dominant timeline of the Bangladeshi War for Independence and the *birangona*'s fateful collision with it. In other words, these questions lack complexity in their direct inquiries into the lives of the *birangona*. The *birangona*'s response appears in the form of a poem that reads directly below the question. Despite this orderly arrangement on the page, however, the *birangona* responses refuse to cater to or mimic the the compartmentalization of the question. Rather, they answer with incisive detail that subverts the illusion of linearity. This liminality of response and subversion operates as a dialogical seam within this aptly titled work. With *Seam*'s title as a guide, then, this chapter forays through the positional, temporal, and dialogical seams detailed above, and the forms they adopt as the poems render them textually visible through narration and interviews.

[Positional] *Seam*: Second Person & Fractured Narration

The narrator in *Seam* inhabits first, second, and third voices, each of which implicate the struggle to delineate the self as a wholly situated entity. This fraught identification features as a critical attribute of transnational subjectivity that gendered silence and erasure only aggravates. *Seam*'s varied narrative form disrupts Johannes Fabian's ethnographic assertion that "The fundamental communicative situation which encompasses the genres of discourse/commentary is dialogical: An *I* addresses (reports to) a *you*. But only the first and second persons are distinguished along the axis of personness" (85). In the "discourse/commentary" of *Seam*, a "you" reports to a "you." As opposed to the "I" and "you" dynamic, this second person framework presents a complex and destabilizing "communicative situation" that resists a didactic, dialogical approach. Rather than place emphasis on the "I", *Seam*'s second person

narration exists on a hypervisible “axis of personness” that summons both the narrator and the audience present for and accountable to the articulations that emerge from the silenced intersection of war and Bangladeshi womanhood. Thus, the narrator uncovers information alongside the reader rather than authoritatively provides reports or addresses events. In addition to this second-person deviation from the purpose of pronouns, *Seam* also distorts poetic formulations of the first person as they apply to women of color poets. Dorothy Wang writes of the dynamic between Marilyn Chin and the first person, and contrasts Chin’s loaded “I” with the individualized voices of white women poets:

Chin does not feel she has the “luxury” or desire to limit her focus to the private or personal “I.” So much of her psychic pain and that of women like her mother...find their roots in the traumas of emigration, racism, assimilation, and sexism. Admittedly, white women poets do often invoke larger social issues of sexism...nonetheless, “racially unmarked” female poets have more leeway, and choice, to be solely concerned with the individual and the personal if they should so choose. (Wang 155)

Chin’s first person narration lacks a “private or personal I” due to the “psychic pain” and intersectional “traumas” that precede her in the form of women such as her mother. The loaded quality of this “I” misaligns with the first person who “addresses” and “reports to” a “you” on an “axis of personness” in which solely these two voices reside. For the “I” that Wang describes in Chin’s case cannot dialogue with a “you” if it remains anchored in a dialogue with intersectionally gendered traumas of past generations.

Wang details how Chin perceives the “I” as limited; unable to account for the “roots” of gendered and generational psychic pain. In Chin’s case, the “private or personal “I” cannot contain the vast and intersectional “traumas” of transnational identity and movement. White or “racially unmarked” female poets lack this legacy, and thus possess greater individual reign over the first person voice. Meanwhile for the Asian American female poet, the “I” carries weight due

to its presence as often the first voice to articulate the silenced and stigmatized narratives of generations from a certain ethnicity or nationality. While Chin refrains from personalizing the “I” in light of this gendered transnational narrative arc, Faizullah implements the first person through the voice of a second-generation female narrator as a disjointed representation of transnational subjectivity. The refractive quality of this “I” thus resists the simplistic narrative reduction to ethnic and cultural identity that consistently occurs with poets of color, leaving them with little “leeway,” as Wang writes. This disjointed “I” also accounts for the narrator’s lack of interaction with structures of gendered discipline that permit Maxine and the *Milk & Honey* voice to identify with women counterparts in their respective transnational village communities. The *Seam* narrator, however, exists on her own plane due to this distance from communal, gendered disciplinary mechanisms.

When this narrator does identify herself with a collective, it is that of the audience, which she couches alongside herself in the second person. Even this combination, however, manifests in distinctions within the poetry. Similar to how Fabian describes how “the first and second persons are distinguished,” the second person narrator and audience in *Seam* possess distinctions despite their coexistence on one “axis.” For although the narrator undermines herself as an authority, she writes her own lineage into select poems in *Seam* through her invocations of her mother and grandmother as survivors, witnesses, and participants in the landscape and figures who form her. These references invoked through the second person delineate a generational and gendered transnational subjectivity whose accessibility depends upon the audience. With this seam between audience and narrator, the second person voice monitors her place throughout the narrative. A poem that captures this seam and the charged narrative positionality it produces

through the second person is “1971 part v,” in which the narrator reveals degrees of both distance and proximity to both place and audience. She begins:

Two oceans between you, but still
you can see her running a finger
along the granite counter in the sun-

spilled kitchen, waiting for the tea
to boil before she drives past old
west Texas oil fields still bright

with bluebells. *But tell me*, she asks,
why couldn't you research the war
from here?

(10, 1-9)

The narrator first professes a distance of “two oceans” that persist “between” the two voices in the poem. She then undercuts this distance with the modifier, “but still,” which she uses to immerse herself in a scene which takes place “two oceans” away: “you can see her running a finger / along the granite counter in the sun-/spilled kitchen.” This level of detail that reveals knowledge and intimacy in relation to both the “her” and the domestic space which she occupies indicates the proximity the narrator retains with this place despite the distance. The stanzas that shape the poem contribute to this sensation of proximity and distance, for the verses resist temporal and aesthetic alignment in each of their three lines that contain an element that materializes separately from the surrounding scene. The overall symmetry of the lines, however, force these scenes to exist in a present dimension. The second verse exemplifies this convergence as it merges the kitchen scene with a landscape of “old / west Texas oil fields still bright / with bluebells.” This scene builds upon the nuance and familiarity of the previous, for the narrator assigns a vitality to these “old” fields when she describes how they are “still bright / with bluebells.” The narrator demonstrates an intimacy with this landscape through this

distinction which resists static representation. Both scenes contain fluidity through this persistence that hinges upon the “but still” that precedes the first scene, and the “still” that precedes the field’s continued brightness. Another constant emerges in the form of “tea,” for which the figure in the poem waits before she “drives past” the west Texas landscape. The importance of tea as a point of transition between interior and exterior landscapes propels the narrator to invoke it once again as the poem continues:

Gather these materials,

 these undrowned ceremonies—
 tea poured into a cup, a woman
 stepping lightly across green field

 into a green pond—
 (9-13)

The narrator frames tea within this concept of “undrowned ceremonies,” which resonates with the ceremonial quality of drinking tea before embarkation. This process appears here with the scene of “a woman” who steps across “green field,” which follows from “tea poured into a cup.” The narrator forges this connection in sequence, gender, and mobility across distance between the “her” in “west Texas” and a “woman” who interacts with “green field” and a “green pond.” This juxtaposition appears as a response to the question the west Texas woman directs to the narrator: “*But tell me, she asks, / why couldn’t you research the war / from here?*” The line break that follows the impulse to “Gather these materials” illustrates the importance of distance for the narrator, for this distance allows her a vantage point from which to “gather” resonant “materials” from both sites. The demand to “tell,” however, and its accompaniment of “why couldn’t you,” forcefully calls into question the narrator’s impulse to traverse this distance, as

well as the purpose of bridging distance to begin with. The narrator follows this question with a response grounded in objectivity and “research”—she must go to “gather these materials”—but holds onto another reason that centers her own subjectivity:

but don't tell
her the country of her birth
became a veined geography inside
you, another body inside your own—
(13-16)

While the “her” questions the narrator and asks that she “tell,” the narrator reacts with a self-command: “but don’t tell / her.” The conjunction at the start of this command points out that the narrator chose to reveal some information about the need for this distance, but not all. What she keeps for herself due to its implications for the questioner is that “the country of her birth / became a veined geography inside / you.” This incident reveals an explicitly generational tie that links the narrator and the “her,” which the reader can presume to be the narrator’s mother. Through this articulation of what she tells herself to not tell, the second person narrator forges a distinct personhood that removes her from complete objectivity in this project that entails her own internal “veined geography.” Thus, when the narrator concludes the poem with “*Tell me, you say, about 1971,*” she responds to her mother with her own demand to be told “about 1971,” a year in which “the country of her birth” was embroiled in an independence war. This quest for information, then, involves more than “research,” but also the narrator’s desire for ancestral herstory that she does not appear to receive through her mother. The second person throughout this piece, as well as the lack of maternal terminology in reference to the mother, who goes exclusively by “her,” thus serves to objectify this work as “research.” This “you” voice and its relation to the “her” also discloses, however, the deeply personal nature of this research.

The narrator reveals her grappling with personal motives and the supposed neutrality of research when she confronts their friction in the poem “Interviewer’s Note: v. [But wasn’t it the neat narrative].” This piece employs the second person in relation to the objectivity of research and the interviewer’s subjectivity, but in this instance the second person accuses both these lenses of romanticization and narrative construction:

But wasn’t it the neat narrative
 you wanted? The outline of the rape
 victim standing against a many-winged
 darkening sky, shadow flurrying across
 shadow?

(46, 1-5)

From the outset, the narrator reveals her initial intent to portray a “neat narrative,” one that manifests in a visible “outline.” Her second-person address, however, implicates not only herself, but also the research itself for maintaining biases despite its claim to objectivity. These implications escalate within the context of rape, which falls susceptible to romanticization and misconceptions, especially as it occurs in non-Western countries and implicates non-Western women. The pervasive victimization of women from these regions through a Western lens, including that of anthropology, encourages this desired narrative of the “outline of the rape / victim.” The absence of line breaks in this poem facilitates this concept of a neat narrative in its depiction of cohesion on the page. This emphasis on a “neat narrative” recurs with the image of “standing against a many-winged / darkening sky.” This backdrop points to an image in which the victim is not only “against” the many wings and darkness in terms of physical location, but “against” also places the victim in a defensive position. The imagery of a “many-winged / darkening sky” accentuates this defensiveness, for a “many-winged” entity connotes a

heightened mobility that the victim appears not to possess while “standing.” The “shadow flurrying across / shadow” scene contributes to this portrayal of mobility and thus more a enticing “outline” that caters to the desire for a “neat narrative” that entails perpetration and victimization. The narrator exposes herself as complicit in this desire as she invokes her own lineage of womanhood and confesses,

—you want
 the darkness she stood against
 to be yards of violet velvet
 your mother once cut into dresses
 for you, your sister when she was still
 alive (7-11)

This line invokes once more the idea of “darkness” and its position “against” the rape victim. Here, the dark backdrop is no longer dramatized but rather pacified as the narrator describes the “violet velvet” that undergoes an objectively violent change, a “cut,” but when taken into context, the final product is innocent: “dresses / for you / your sister.” This context indicates the narrator’s distance from the rape victim, for her mother cuts the velvet to make “dresses,” a design that originated in the West. In the making of these dresses, the narrator places herself, her mother, and her sister in relation to “darkness,” but its characterization proves starkly less harrowing than that which she imagines around the rape victim. The narrator also invokes mortality and nostalgia with the mention of “when she was still / alive.” This line could refer to either the mother or the sister, yet in either case the association between this memory and the desired narrative remains and draws a connection between the rape victim and death. The narrator reveals the extent to which this comparison collapses when she quotes a *birangona* in the poem:

*They tossed me into that
 river but the river wouldn't kill me*

she said yesterday

(5-7)

This testimony reveals survival and vitality rather than death and nostalgia. The fact that the *birangona* issued this remark “yesterday” highlights the fact that she is very much alive and able to speak about her experience. Yet rather than honor and preserve this testimony, the narrator exposes her manipulative treatment of the voice:

Rewind. Play. Rewind. *They tossed—
me—river—me—you want the splayed heart
of another’s hand clasping yours*

(12-14)

The control the narrator exerts over this voice evokes Fabian’s remarks on how the third person cannot access the “axis of personness” that belongs to the first and second person. Here, the narrator tampers with the voice and testimonial of the *birangona*. For as the narrator rewinds, the sole words that emerge are “they tossed,” “me,” and “river.” The piece about how the river would not kill her fails to appear once the narrator edits the voice and reverts back to what she wants: “the splayed heart / of another’s hand clasping yours.” This image evokes solidarity, intimacy, and comfort with not only mention of a “hand,” but also its comparison to a “heart.” Clasped, connected hands push back against the individuality and distinctness of the *birangona*’s survival testimony. This degree of contrast reveals the extent to which the “you”—both the narrator and the audience—upholds preconceived, “neat” narratives that fail to capture the stories the *birangona* recount. With its expressed desire to uncover a “neat narrative” of rape, victimhood, and survival, the second person voice in the poem “Interviewer’s Note: v. [But wasn’t it the neat narrative]” confronts the audience as well as herself with participation in a reduction and manipulation of narrative. These states contrast deeply with the actual account of

survival and present-day persistence from a *birangona*. This contrast persists when the “you” yearns to identify her generational womanhood with the experience of a rape victim. The discrepancy that occurs here demonstrates the degree to which the narrator endeavored to bridge these generational, gendered darkneses that she eventually realizes are not as compatible as she may have conceived them to be.

While the second person narrator in “Interviewer’s Note: v. [But wasn’t it the neat narrative]” endeavors to forge a gendered, transnational connection with the Bangladeshi subject and the interview questions seek definitive answers, the *Seam*’s first person narrative moments reveal a fractured subjectivity as the narrator ponders her relationship to other Bangladeshis. She reflects in “Reading Willa Cather in Bangladesh”: “Each day, I begin / to disappear into yards / of silk or cotton— / the one that is me but not / begins to emerge” (Faizullah 35, 1-5). This concurrence of disappearance and emergence, framed by the verb “begin,” evokes an evolving duality. Even the title of the poem, “Reading Willa Cather in Bangladesh,” represents a narrative transnational interwovenness. Yet the first person harbors a dissonance with national subjecthood when she makes this observation in “En Route to Bangladesh, Another Crisis of Faith”: “this damp, dark horde of men / and women who look like me— / because I look like them—” (Faizullah 12, 33-35). The narrator disassociates with the “damp, dark horde” around her to the point where she generalizes them as a “horde.” The line break between “men” and “women” signifies a disassociation with women as well, which indicates the reality of the fact that the narrator cannot issue such a direct and transferable gendered bond between herself and non-Western women. But she also cannot disconnect herself completely from the people she views as a “damp, dark horde,” for she recognizes that they “look like me— / because I look like

them—” The circular structure of this statement suggests that the narrator needs to repeat this fact to herself as a reminder of this resemblance. The emphasis on “me” in this poem, as well as the lines from “Reading Willa Cather in Bangladesh,” functions as the site upon which the first person narrator negotiates her transnational subjectivity through the “I.” This first person positionality emphasizes perception and being acted upon rather than the actor. This negotiation manifests in the realization of a disjointed positionality, in which *Seam*’s second-generation narrator turns away from the first person and its heady individualism and instead destabilizes the “I” as the varied and unstable embodiment of transnational subjectivity. This fractured invocation of the “I” avoids the problem of little leeway for poets of color, whose usage of “I” tends to not resonate as individually or personally due to the assumption that they speak for every member of their identity group (Wang 347n86). Despite this assumption that produces a homogenous reading, however, the work of racialized poets nevertheless read as autobiographical rather than universal. Thus, the narrator of *Seam* deploys the “I” selectively, and notably in situations of misalignment that resist blanket readings of autobiography or universality. She straddles these two lenses through her usage of the second person, which dares the reader to step into the text and its universal applications of harm, discipline, memory, history, and place. The second person also keeps readers at a distance, however, through its distinct transnational, generational, and gendered invocations in the form of references to her mother and grandmother. Although these ties prevent the narrator from achieving complete objectivity and neutrality, they remain important in the fact that this lineage and its impact on her subjectivity prompts her to conduct this research and highlight the experiences of the *birangona*, whose accounts transcend limitations of linearity, history, and policy in order to articulate the

permanent impact that gendered discipline and trauma wreak on their subjects.

[Temporal] *Seam*: “Why call any of it back?”

Through the second person, the narrator of *Seam* channels her matrilineal ties yet simultaneously distances herself from this history that she did not live through, but yearns to summon from silence. The poem that embodies this approach is titled “1971” and consists of five parts, each of which address the impact the war engendered upon the subjectivities of one or several of four figures: the second person narrator, a mother, a grandmother, and a Bangladeshi rape victim. This section will center on part iv, which introduces through figments of telling from the narrator’s mother a project of confrontation and excavation that works to counteract the silence that shrouds Bangladeshi women’s perspectives from the 1971 War for Independence, and underpins the significance of this gendered transnational narrative project. The first line of the poem asks, “Why call any of it back?” This question at the start of the poem in turn reflects how revisitation prompts resistance in the form of what can be fairly read as a question of dubiousness, contestation, and even surprise. Though not imposed with disciplinary force, this question challenges the recuperatory nature of this project that asserts the persistence of memory and trauma upon subjectivity. In the narrator’s specific case, her witnessing and inquiry into this mother character’s subjectivity and how it hinges upon a memory during the time of this war propels her to “call. . .it back” and even immerse herself in its landscape:

Why call any of it back? Easy
 enough to descend with your

 mother, down

 and down hard
 stone steps—*how I loved,*
 she says, *to watch her—*

(7, 1-5)

The arrangement of the words on the page resemble the motion of going “down / and down hard / stone steps,” in a manner that invites the reader to descend into the events whose revisitation the first line calls into question. The precision with which lines 3-5 mirror this descent allows each line to sink in with as much ease as how a pair of feet descend steps. The placement of “Easy” encourages this ease as it undermines the doubt of the opening question and supports a logic that assumes linearity in the act of calling back. Easy “enough,” however, introduces a whisper of tension that implicates doubt and raises stakes. Snippets of dialogue disrupt the narrator’s complete descent into the past, however, and serve as a reminder that she cannot fully access this moment for herself as someone who did not actually experience its direct impact on her subjectivity. The first of these snippets appears soon after the poem opens with a formulaic, step-like ease: “stone steps—*how I loved, / she says, to watch her*—” The dash that breaks from the concrete image and alliteration of “stone steps” encapsulates a disruption that nevertheless remains tethered to the preceding clause. The dash that follows “to watch her” bookends and contains this dialogue within these two lines, yet these italics nevertheless remain embedded in the poem’s overall structure. Another contained departure appears within the italics as the “she” describes a loving gaze bestowed upon a “her.” In addition to distinguishing dialogue from description, the italicized lines insert a fluidity into what the poem previously presented as a solid, gradual descent into the past. This fluidity arises from the fact that these lines document the statement *as it happens*: “she says.” The immediacy of this moment points to how a reengagement with the women who live in the present must occur in order to call back 1971 and the narratives it secretes.

The poem proceeds to call back scenes that hinge upon a gendered subjectivity as the narrator deviates from the generational thread of the poem while continuing to remain in 1971. She directly invokes the date and sets the following scene that anticipates a rape: “—1971 / and a Bangladeshi / woman catches the gaze / of a Pakistani soldier” (21-24). The dash once again functions to depart and adhere as it separates yet remains connected to the previous scene between Mother and the narrator. “And” evokes a synonymy between 1971 and the interaction between the Bangladeshi woman and the Pakistani soldier. This linkage prompts an association with 1971 that prioritizes the perspective of the Bangladeshi woman who “catches” the Pakistani soldier’s gaze. This exchange maintains the power dynamic between Bangladesh and Pakistan as they operate on opposite sides, yet the poem positions the woman as an agent within the war landscape rather than as a propaganda image projected onto the military to spur men’s desire to fight. But the woman in the poem “catches” rather than gets caught by, or falls victim to, a “gaze.” This action could also indicate that she not only senses the gaze, but grasps its meaning, an act which the verb “catch” can also connote. Agency only lingers, however, before victimhood barges into the poem and imbues the woman in violent passivity: “her sari is torn / from her—” (25-26). The torn sari captures a subjectivity displaced due to sexual violence, for the sari persists as a sari, but only in conjunction with “torn” as both a condition and descriptor. The source of the torn state remains a mystery, since “from her—” evokes both somewhere yet nowhere, and the dash at the end of the line serves to enhance this ambiguity and assert a guarantee of impact.

[Dialogical] *Seam*: Question & (Un)answer Interviews with the *Birangona*

This impact emerges most saliently through the interviews with the birangona that the

narrator conducts. In the two interview poems I will discuss, the *birangona* responses push back against this disciplinary language with their own accounts of the gendered, communal discipline they must undergo *in addition to* the mental and bodily violation at the hands of soldiers. These poems form the first and last interview of the eight interviews with *birangona* that *Seam* contains. As bookends in the interview process, these poems reveal the change and continuity that occurs within and without the *birangona*'s subjectivity throughout the course of the war. This revelation magnifies the nuance and distinctness of the *birangona* experience that history, ethnography, and the state seek to categorize through reductive, linear terms. The narrator recounts this reductive language and state approach to the *birangona* with the following context that appears before the first interview poem:

In 1972, the Bangladeshi state adopted a policy to accord a new visibility to the two hundred thousand women raped during the War of Independence by lionizing them as birangonas (war heroines), though they were frequently ostracized by their families and social circles. (25)

With this information, the narrator places emphasis on the “state” as the entity that decided to “accord a new visibility” to these women. Thus, rather than a silencing act, the goal of this “policy” was to revise, and bring about a “new visibility.” This newness indicates that this “visibility” was not originally present. The narrator contrasts the effort of this single policy with the frequent communal ostracization that the *birangona* endured despite this lionization. This context exhibits the inefficacy of reclamatory terminology that assigns a label rather than holistically tackles a stigma. The interview poems that follow this prose exposes the degree of subjective and communal harm that a state-lionized title fails to treat.

The first interview poem proceeds after this prose text and asks the first question: “*What were you doing when they came for you?*” The poem then proceeds in the to describe a young

girl by the water, whose sari dries on two palm trees. Then, her grandfather appears in the poem.

His role reveals how the *birangona* narrator's subjectivity entails both mobility and limitation:

Grandfather calls to me:
mishti maya. Girl of sweetness.

Aashi, I call back. I finish braiding
my hair, tie it tight. I twine a red string

around my thigh.

(5-9)

In this exchange, the construction of “calls *to* me” rather than “calls me” evokes a level of objectification on the part of the narrator, who seems not to identify with the title “*mishti maya*. Girl of sweetness.” This nickname distills the narrator to a particular trait—sweetness—rather than acknowledges her as a whole person, or even as a granddaughter, which is likely closer to how the narrator views herself, since she refers to the man as directly as “Grandfather.” In response to her Grandfather, the narrator reveals how she defines herself through her response and body language: “*Aashi*, I call back. I finish braiding / my hair, tie it tight. I twine a red string / around my thigh” (7-9). She calls back with a name, *Aashi*, presumably her own. The combination of her name with the firm tone of “call back” illustrates a reciprocity that the narrator upholds in contrast to Grandfather, who refers to her in an infantilizing manner. The present tense of this scene, however, indicates a degree of ownership on the part of the narrator, who recounts this familial, domestic memory as if she continues to reside in its realm. The acts of physical self-sufficiency and possession that smatter these lines—“braiding,” “tie,” “twine,” and “around my thigh”—sharply vanish in a span of little time, as the narrator recounts how,

around my thigh. That evening,
a blade sliced through string, through

skin, red on red on red.

(9-11)

In this flash of violence, the tense shifts to the past despite the fact that the events in the present happened earlier during the same day. This shift in tense parallels another swift transition from the earlier self-possessed lines to a vague, hazed state where “a blade / sliced through string.” The narrator seems unaware of additional details about this blade, such as who wields it upon her, what it resembles, or whence it came. The “red string” she had carefully twined around her thigh now appears as simply “string” that the blade “sliced.” The repetition of “red on red on red” contrasts with the single “red string” that the narrator finely handled and “twine[d] around her thigh,” and evokes the overwhelming sensation of blood flow. This dramatic disassociation from a single object points to the trauma that the narrator endured, which dislodges the self-assurance she displays in the previous lines that describe a scene from earlier in the day. She does sharply recall, however, how her rapist derogatorily refers to her:

skin, red on red on red. *Kutta*, the man
in khaki says. It is only later I realize

it is me he is calling *dog. Dog. Dog.*

(9-13)

The tense shifts back to the present and thus exhibits the salience of this moment which continues to haunt the narrator. The gravity of this derogatory term, however, dawns upon the narrator after the fact: “It is only *later* I realize / it is me he is calling *dog. Dog. Dog*” (12-13). The lag and the realization that accompanies it further depicts the trauma that plagues the narrator, who was unable to process the word’s meaning at the time of its utterance. Once she realizes, however, she recounts that “it is me he is calling,” which emerges not just in the present tense, but in that of a present participle she continues to experience psychically after the incident.

The repetition of “dog” further illustrates this psychic trauma, which presently echoes through the narrator’s subjectivity, which this poem demonstrates receives varied gendered messages. The dehumanization she endures due to the male figure of her rapist contrasts with the treatment her Grandfather displays. This contrast emerges in their separate names for her—“Girl of sweetness” and “dog.” Yet these titles correlate in their refusal to refer to the narrator by her name, or by any term that shows they acknowledge her as a nuanced being. Thus, the first interview poem details the grappling of the narrator’s subjectivity as she seeks to possess herself, yet rape upends and distorts her efforts with violence, leaving her with a trauma that forcefully lingers.

Trauma not only pervades the subjectivity of the *birangona* after the rape, but exclusion from the home contributes another layer of dejection and hurt that impedes their process of healing. The final “Interview with a Birangona” poem asks, “*After the war was over, what did you do? Did you go back home?*” (49). The poem response then begins:

I stood in the dark
 doorway. Twilight. My grandfather’s
 handprint raw across my face. *Byadob*,
 he called me: trouble-
 maker.

(1-5)

While the interview question asks straightforward questions of “what did you do,” and “Did you go back home,” the poem immediately counteracts this supposition as it invokes the setting of a “dark / doorway” and “Twilight”—threshold images that each embody the seam between inside and outside, night and day. The handprint evokes the process of branding as it spans “across” the narrator’s face and leaves a “raw” mark, as if as a reminder that her body belongs to someone

other than herself. This image portrays another form of control that marks her. Like in the first interview, grandfather figure appears in this poem yet inhabits a colder, more distant position in relation to the narrator. Rather than call her “girl of sweetness,” this grandfather employs the term “*byadob*,” which the narrator translates to “trouble-/maker.” This compound effect manifests in the line break, where “trouble” and “maker” embody their own respective weights that depict the gravity of this insult and the blame the grandfather directs at the narrator. He then demands her exile from the home:

Leave. Don't come

back, he said.

(10-11)

The grandfather who in this poem demands the *birangona* narrator to “leave,” and to not “come back” provides a stark contrast to the grandfather in the previous interview poem who “calls to” his granddaughter. This comparison demonstrates the shift that occurs once the *birangona* return to face judgement that bases itself on what happened to their bodies, or rather, what they *allowed* happened to their bodies, according to the grandfather, who admonishes, “*How could you let them / touch you?*” (6-7). The line break here serves to illustrate the burden this expectation places on the (grand)daughterly subject. This structure of blame, however, falls completely by the wayside as the *birangona* narrator describes the ceremonial gesture the state displayed to her:

the new
president had wrapped me in our new

flag: a red sun rising
across a green field. *You*

saved our country, he said. I said
nothing.

(17-22)

The repetition of “new” to describe both the president and the flag depicts the state’s urge to start afresh as an independent nation. This official state mintedness, however, contradicts the fact that despite the revisionist move to coin the war’s rape survivors as *birangonas*, heroines who “saved” the “country,” the home continues to function under a patriarch, the “grandfather,” with whom the woman stands in precarious relation: at the “dark / doorway,” during “twilight.” These thresholds are not nearly as vibrant as the “red sun rising across a green field” that the “new flag” broadcasts. The *birangona* in the poem proves privy to this dissimilarity, and when the new president espouses the state narrative to her, that she “saved” Bangladesh, she recalls that she “said nothing.” Her refusal to verbally participate in this exchange illustrates her acknowledgement of its shallow impact that fails to find its way into her own home. Structurally, the couplets in the poem serve to emphasize this contrast that exists between these private and public spaces that form the narrator’s life: her home and her government. Neither of these spaces acknowledge the subjectivity and experience of the *birangona*, for the former shames her, and the latter glorifies her. These acts work to discipline the narrator into adhering to these meanings of her experience in order to participate in each realm. In its portrayal of events that occur on a both public and private level, this interview poem reveals the seams between sanctioned, masculinized, linear narratives—the interview question itself and the remarks of the new president—and the reaction from the *birangona* that occurs within yet complicates them. What the *birangona* narrator bluntly states, however, is how in response to the interviewer’s initial question of “Did you go back home?” she firmly posits: “No. No. Not since” (25). This concise repetition serves as the poem’s final line and cements the extent to which gendered communal discipline impacted the *birangona*’s subjectivity. For not only does she state “No” twice, but also

emphasizes the incident when she recalls, “Not since.” She makes no mention of to what this “since,” refers and thus exercises another purposeful silence that indicates a refusal to provide information that should already emerge as obvious to the reader. With this approach, the *birangona* responds to the question, but withholds repetition and clarification that could result in the potential reduction of her experience to a single incident. This silence, however, also retains specificity in its implicit allusion to this altercation with her grandfather that sealed her off from her home.

The responses to these interviews warn against reductions that distort what happened, and the questions that preface them sharpen this warning in how they compare to the multilayered answers that the *birangona* provide. The fact that these answers reveal themselves through poetry rather than verbatim prose indicates the parsing of meaning that their responses underwent, and how even after this process of sifting, multiplicity nevertheless rises to the surface. This nuance and the strident first person that punctuates these lines containing memory, sensation, and trauma, poses a compelling contrast to moments when the interviewer navigates her own subjectivity as a second generation Bangladeshi American woman in the land of her parents’ birth. Although this interviewer traveled to Bangladesh for this project, the sharp determination and certainty of this mission does not directly translate into her sense of self in this space.

CONCLUSION

Not wanting

to *write this up* for the public not wanting
to *write it down* in secret

just to lie here in this cold story
feeling it trying to feel it through

-Adrienne Rich, "Tell Me"

While the experimental articulations in "No Name Woman," *Milk & Honey*, and *Seam* complicate silences and their transnational origins, they simultaneously enact care in the form of preservation. These narrators hold onto their transnational positionalities, as fraught and entwined with silence and discipline as they may be. This is complex work, for an articulation that both pushes back and holds on requires deliberation, recalibration, and, last but by far the most stirring: empathy for whatever is held, and faith in its narrative potential.

These lines from Adrienne Rich evoke this process toward an articulation that entails neither a writing up "for the public," nor a writing down, "in secret." Instead, Rich invokes a liminal space, before the writing, in order to "just lie here in this cold story / feeling it trying to feel it through." The second generation daughters of "No Name Woman," *Milk & Honey*, and *Seam* detail a "feeling through" that unfolds as a result of remaining within their orientations rather than upending them. Regardless of whether these narrators touch upon anything throughout the course of feeling, they are nevertheless "trying," as they reach for articulations that capture their subjectivities, which endure as irrevocably transnational and gendered.

For this project I also embarked upon an initiative of "trying" to incorporate South Asian American women's narratives within the realm of Asian American literary studies. I did not

intend to incorporate a chapter from *The Woman Warrior*, perhaps the most heavily incorporated text in Asian American feminist literary analyses, and Asian American literature as a whole. But upon reading “No Name Woman,” the urge to pair Maxine’s articulations with those in Kaur and Faizullah’s respective poetic texts loomed over my consciousness to the point where finding another South Asian American poet seemed disingenuous, and a missed opportunity to merge rather than compartmentalize these women authors of East Asian and South Asian descent.

After poring through each of these texts, their resonances of silence, gender, discipline, and transnationality serve as a bedrock for this coalition that withstands difference in ethnicity, genre, and publication period. In an explanation for her focus on Asian American intergenerational conflict texts that represent a range of publication dates, erin Ninh raises this exact point in reference to this thematic prevalence: “its forms of power, its discourses of subject formation—replicates with compelling faithfulness across an era of seemingly imposing historical changes” (*Ingratitude*, 3). Ninh also notes this consistency of subject formation across Asian ethnicities, from East, to South, to Southeast Asian (*Ingratitude*, 160). While Ninh deploys these arguments to support her excavation of intergenerational conflict, her observations nevertheless prove themselves applicable in the case of Kingston, Kaur, and Faizullah as demonstrative of a pairing bound through form and discourse. As a result, works by these authors merge to craft a landscape upon which to examine the effects of transnational silence and gendered disciplinary formation as they affect Asian American women across ethnicity, region, and articulatory method.

This landscape rife with carefully rendered articulations of identity and affiliation functions as a space for thought and breath amidst less accommodating landscapes of contested affiliation,

especially for women of color. These texts disclose a method that accounts for both individual subjectivity and a transnationally manifested communal context. Neither undergo sacrifice.

Rather, formed through experimentality and articulated with care, both persevere.

As do the narrators. Maxine, through her own talk story about “Ts’ai Yen, a poetess born in A.D. 175” (207), who “brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well” (209). *Milk & Honey*’s narrator, through visceral, minimal verse:

you split me open
 in the most honest
 way there is
 to split a soul open
 and forced me to write
 at a time i was sure i
 could not write again

-thank you

And the narrator-interviewer of *Seam*, who notes: “The moon filled a dust-polluted sky: a ripe, unsheathed lychee. It wasn’t enough to see clearly by, but I still turned my face toward it” (65).

These concluding lines of each work magnify the impact of coalitions that radiate outward from embedded, even undetected material. I hope to have uncovered at least some of this promise through this project, which has embarked upon a translation of transnational proximity, a splitting open of gendered discipline, and a turning toward a dimly lit yet nonetheless discernable path of literary study that accounts for the subjective, even amidst supposedly incapacitating silence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Bow, Leslie. *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women's Literature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Cheung, King-Kok. *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Duncan, Patti. *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983., 1983.
- Faizullah, Tarfia. *Seam*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014. Crab Orchard Series in Poetry.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing, 2007. 110-14. Print.
- Kaur, Rupi. *Milk & Honey*. Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Ninh, Erin Khuê. *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.
- Noh, Eliza. "Problematics of Transnational Feminism for Asian American Women." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003): 131-49. Web.
- Wang, Dorothy J. *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014.
- Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese American Autobiography Controversy." Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. 29-48. Print.