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**Exploring Narratives in Film, Literature, and Drama**



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## Introduction



### Cynthia Baron

The articles in the spring 2014 issue of *The Projector* illustrate the value of scholarship that carefully examines narratives in cinema, literature, and theatre. Just as stories or perhaps fictions can, as contributor Annette Cozzi proposes, be seen as crucial to human life, the articles in this issue reveal that discerning analysis of characters' negotiation of the structures of thought and power illuminated by fictional narratives can be considered essential to our understanding of the stories we encounter and societies in which we live.

In "Assuming Identities: Gender, Sexuality, and Performativity in *The Silence of the Lambs*," Lynne Stahl draws on work by Judith Butler, Carol Clover, Judith Halberstam, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and others to analyze the film's exploration of conflicts between the existential reality that identity is complicated, mutable, and unstable, and the social fact that "identity is a performance that tends to be reduced and reified by those in power." Stahl sees the film repudiating "the notion of one-dimensional personalities"; the ability of Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) to negotiate binaries (rich/poor, masculine/feminine, etc.), for example, gives her "a more inclusive field of vision."

Attentive to questions of reception, Stahl examines ways in which Jonathan Demme's 1991 film grapples with audiences' "aversion to non-normative sexuality." She proposes: "Arriving as it did alongside a heightened scrutiny of homosexuality during the AIDS crisis and concurrently with newly emerging theories of gender and sexuality, the film offers and affirms an assiduous queer reading practice that allows for and even demands difference, ambiguity, and the dissolution of normative assumptions." In her well-argued analysis of *Jame Gumb/ Buffalo Bill* (Ted Levine), Stahl also notes that the film "anticipates that audiences will find his monstrous deeds infinitely more interesting than the reason behind them." She thus suggests that the film's massive commercial success (domestic box office of \$130,742,922M) and landmark official recognition (five Academy Awards) reflect its strategic reliance on ambiguity, which created a space for "hegemonically-encouraged incomplete readings and self-serving willful misinterpretations and oversimplifications."

In "West Eats East: Revolting Consumption in *301/302* and *The Orphan Master's Son*," Annette Cozzi also considers how narratives that challenge "'the idea of a coherent sense of subject'" can likewise reflect the reality that dominant modes of thinking will remain in place. As she explains, while Adam Johnson's novel *The Orphan Master's Son* (2012) and Park Chul-soo's film *301/302* (1995) "deliberately shatter the Western [Orientalist] mirror, in the end their attempts at dis-orientation become subsumed by the sheer rapacity of capitalist consumption." As I read her argument, Cozzi suggests that in both of these narratives about (North and South) Korea, the discordant tone of their "happy endings" signals an opposition to the West's all-consuming appetite, as well as a resigned awareness that "the capitalist repulsive appetite is unstoppable." Cozzi's analysis illustrates the texts' shared "disorienting style" where "genres shift and slide," and their shared understanding that "food is never just sustenance; it is memory,

family, and desire. When we eat, we consume story, identity, and meaning; and we hunger for more than food: we hunger for communication, family, belonging, and power.”

“Out of the Shadows: Three Asian-Canadian Playwrights Confront Film Noir” by Karen L. Gygli continues the issue’s look at narratives that explore value-laden binaries. Her article illustrates ways that *The Tale of a Mask* by Terry Watada, *Nancy Chew Enters the Dragon: An Impenetrable Oriental Mystery* by Betty Quan, and *Mom, Dad, I’m Living with a White Girl* by Marty Chan challenge classic film noir’s “use of race, ethnicity, and gender . . . to establish physical and psychological danger zones” for the standard white male heroes. Gygli notes that the era of classic noir “coincided with racial and ethnic tensions . . . exemplified by the notorious Executive Order 9066 [that] interned Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans who refused to sign a loyalty oath,” and that the “shorthand use of Chinatown to symbolize exoticism, danger and sexual perversion goes back to the early twentieth century,” when Asian North Americans who had been “driven out of small towns after the passage of the [U.S.] Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882” were required to create ethnic enclaves in urban settings.

In *A Tale of the Mask*, the white unnamed Detective is at the margins of the story, whereas “Mrs. Harrison, a Japanese-Canadian resident of Chinatown” is the reliable source of information. *Nancy Chew Enters the Dragon* parodies Nancy Drew and classic noir depictions of femme fatales by presenting Nancy Chew as a “Chinese-Canadian woman [who] owns her own narration as the center of the drama and freely travels over many boundaries of behavior within Chinatown.” *Mom, Dad, I’m Living with a White Girl* builds on noir conventions by having a B-movie nightmare world intrude on the real-life world of protagonist Mark Gee, and inverts those conventions, as when his mother travels from Chinatown “to find Mark’s new Anglo-Canadian neighborhood, which is portrayed as exotic and frightening.” Thus, just as scholars have shown

black noir and African American crime fiction reveal ways that “the forces of white privilege fracture and distort African-American existence” (Flory 26), Gygli’s analysis shows that these plays by Asian-Canadians use film noir conventions to challenge the racial prejudices built into classic (white) noir.

### **Works Cited**

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## Assuming Identities: Gender, Sexuality, and Performativity in *The Silence of the Lambs*



**Lynne Stahl**

In the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses the instability of the ignorance/knowledge binary, which generally equates the latter with power and the former with impotence. She argues that ignorance (or the appearance thereof) can be a tool of power as well, citing as an example the 1986 ruling by the United States Justice Department that employers “may freely fire persons with AIDS” provided that those employers “can claim to be ignorant of the medical fact, *quoted in the ruling*, that there is no known health danger in the workplace from the disease” (5). That this very fact was made explicit in the ruling itself preposterously encourages and makes advantageous *misknowledge* of the law with regard to AIDS, and it implicitly facilitates discrimination against homosexuals, who at the time of the case were (and to some extent, are still today) conceived of as promiscuous, selfish vectors of contagion, imposing their scourge upon the heterosexual world. The ruling essentially sets forth that ignorance is safer than information, at least for employers, and that they ought to limit themselves to knowing or assuming only what serves them. Such a privileging of assumption serves to “enforce discursive power” by discouraging anyone to look past stereotypes—if one

employs a gay man, evidently, it would be safest to presume not only that he has contracted HIV, but that he will also engage in behaviors that would put others at risk as well (6).

Written and released during the peak years of the United States AIDS panic, both Thomas Harris's novel *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) and Jonathan Demme's cinematic adaptation (1991) take the form of a detective story, the quest for knowledge incarnated in a search for serial killer Buffalo Bill's identity. Every character, of course, has his or her unique background and methods, which in turn structure the way they handle knowledge and ignorance and their conceptions of not only Buffalo Bill's identity but also their own, the instability, performativity, and ambivalence of which manifest themselves throughout.

The movie presents endless chains of dichotomies both relational and conceptual, prompting the implied spectator to ask, "which?"—and the film invariably responds with, "some of both." The question driving the plot is that of Buffalo Bill's identity, an unresolved muddle of gender, sexuality, and the ambiguous link between the two, which sets up the implied audience to examine the complicated identities of Jame Gumb and the rest of the characters as they perform and function within the parallel real and diegetic worlds of 1991, both dictated by hegemonically-encouraged incomplete readings and self-servingly willful misinterpretations and oversimplifications.

**Jame Gumb: "He *thinks* he is. He *tries* to be."**

In *Silence*, the mass of confusions and contradictions that comprises Gumb serves to exemplify the performativity of identity and the hegemonic misreadings thereof. As Judith Halberstam writes in *Skinflick*, serial murders carry "something of a literary quality," taking place over a period of time with a plot, a motivation, a "consummate villain and an absolutely pure" victim, or at least one not guilty of any crimes against the killer, and most importantly,

they “demand explanation” (580). Though here Halberstam’s article is referring to Hannibal, the film establishes Jame Gumb as at once author, narrator, and main character. To describe him as “consummate” would be ironic and unfair, given his violently desperate quest for self-fulfillment, but like his jailed counterpart, he is undeniably “supremely qualified” for what he does, which demands a high level of proficiency not only in the entomological and sartorial arts but also entails a certain sense of imaginative flair as well (*OED*).

As an author, Jame Gumb constructs Buffalo Bill as the pro/antagonist, a Machiavellian but misunderstood underdog victimized by an oppressive society, whose goal is to overcome rejection and achieve his ends through the only means he has. He deliberately disrupts the *sjuzhet* of his story, a mangling that Clarice Starling notes as she and Ardelia Mapp pore over the trajectory of the murders. The former remarks that the order is “desperately random,” and observes that Buffalo Bill weighted down the first girl he killed before dumping her in a river so that she was the “first girl taken, third body found.” Finally unscrambling the chronological sequence of events, Clarice takes off to Belvedere, Ohio, the hometown of Fredrica Bimmel—said first girl—and tracks Gumb down from there.

Gumb’s narrative voice takes on a passive tone that belies the violence of the story it tells. When he talks to Catherine Martin, he does not address her, instead informing her famously that “It puts the lotion on its skin. It does this whenever it’s told.” This indirect, non-confrontational mandate works on multiple levels to convey Gumb’s convoluted personality: first, it dehumanizes Catherine, making her captivity and suffering less psychologically taxing for him. Second, it displays a kind of postgender political correctness, as the neutral pronoun does not assume anything about Catherine’s gender identification. Third, it elucidates his authorial vision for himself; instead of telling her explicitly what to do, he narrates with a

desperate sort of optimism the version of events that he wants to transpire as if it were already happening. Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, he refrains from using “you” because it implies an “I,” and he cannot bear to recognize his current condition as his identity. He avoids the second person pronoun with his dog, Precious, as well, using only her name and avoiding gendered terms as well. Gumb employs the second person only when his performance is disrupted by distress, for example when Catherine pulls the poodle down into the well and, most agonizingly, when he shouts “You don’t know what pain is!” at the senator’s daughter. Significantly, this scene is the only one in which Gumb appears upset; even when Starling points her gun at him in his kitchen, he merely gives a gleeful little wiggle and flounces away to go play hunter. Like his fellow orphan, he abhors the thought of an innocent animal suffering, and the film cements this parallel by accessorizing him with a breed of dog that strongly resembles a lamb.

Befitting of Buffalo Bill’s complicated narrative, Halberstam’s essay demands a nuanced reading of the film that transcends his individual misogyny and violence—not ignoring or excusing them, but situating them as apart of much larger, more insidious systems. Halberstam goes on to assert that serial killings “stand in need of interpretation and interpreters,” and this story has plenty of both, which are essential to achieving a productive reading of these systems (580). One of the latter, the *National Inquisitor* tabloid posted on the wall of Jack Crawford’s office, not only screams “BILL SKINS FIFTH,” but also features smaller headlines offering romantic advice and suggestions, demonstrating a strong societal link between sex and violence. Through the sensationalistic tabloid, the film also elucidates the common homophobic view that Buffalo Bill’s real problem (and a common anti-gay refrain) may be that he simply has not yet found the right woman—one headline advertises the tale of someone who was a “Wild Man Until [He] Met the Girl of [His] Dreams.”

Curiously, the tiny text under the serial killer's billing reveals itself on close inspection to be a story about Dr. Lecter (his name is legible, but the rest is too small to decipher), who has not yet been associated with Buffalo Bill or even mentioned as a character. This incongruence reinforces the film's warning against underreading and constitutes a reversal of Hannibal's position as a source of knowledge about Gumb, reasserting the volatility of identities and locations of power. The tabloid article appears here very early in the film and once more towards the end, this time on a bulletin board in Gumb's house directly after his death, and the print comes into slightly sharper focus here, revealing that the text below Buffalo Bill's headline is a report of Hannibal Lecter's indictment along with a brief biography of the doctor, who will soon be making his own headlines. Gumb has also clipped out, kept, and posted the "Wild Man" feature, demonstrating his belief that the completed woman suit would calm the savage demands of his unrealized identity.

Just as Bill's headline implies one story but tells another, Jame Gumb's popular nickname immediately establishes society's skewed perception of him. Starling tells Dr. Lecter that the moniker "started as a bad joke in Kansas City homicide. They said, 'This one likes to skin his humps.'" Clearly, however, these policemen have discarded even their own local history in favor of a popular, sensationalized misreading—according to the *Buffalo Bill Historical Center*, aside from hunting down bison, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody acted as "an early advocate of women's suffrage and the just treatment of American Indians" (*BBHC*). The historical Bill was more than a frenzied killing machine, as is the cinematic version, and if a nickname is to be worn like clothing, as Halberstam contends, "no one size fits all" (580).

Halberstam refers to Gumb's project as a "gender suit," but Judith Butler would more precisely argue that it is rather a *sex* suit, as gender consists of a performance that does not

necessarily (but sometimes seems to) bear any innate correspondence to anatomy (Halberstam 581). As Butler explains in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” signifiers of gender and sexuality depend upon performance: one must *act* masculine to be considered masculine; one must rely on a continued series of behaviors and actions that match the particular category’s criteria, and there always exists an insuperable “instability” to those classifications (Butler 308). Ted Levine’s performance of Jame Gumb’s multiple performances serves to deconstruct the fallacy of concrete, homogeneous identity categories, and Gumb’s choices of when to wear which identity speak volumes about the American “regulatory regime” that seeks so determinedly to fit its subjects into neat little boxes (308).

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler examines Foucault’s “politics of truth,” challenging the notion of the “knowability of the human” and questioning the social norms that “gover[n] its recognizability” (58). She brings up the same issues exposed by Jame Gumb’s existence in *Silence*, as there is no legitimated room for him “within the given regime of truth” (58). In Demme’s film, that regime consists of the FBI, the surgical clinics that have rejected Gumb, the tabloid society that reviles non-normative sexualities, and exegetically, the critics, reviewers, and real audiences who pigeonhole him as a freak, a monster, a sicko, or, just as inaccurately, a homosexual. Jame Gumb was denied sex reassignment surgery because, as Dr. Lecter advises Clarice in the novel, he would have failed the personality inventory tests in which “real” transsexuals consistently draw pleasantly domestic “rosy-future” homes complete with baby carriage, curtains, and flowers in the yard (Harris 165). This association presumptively links female anatomy inextricably and speciously to femininity and maternity, flattening all who self-report as transsexuals together as people who identify as *feminine* women and denying transsexuals the possibility of difference within their category—if one is going to alter one’s

anatomy, apparently, one must assume a gender identity that aligns with its prescribed social norms, a silly but sinister mandate that assumes all normal born females will enjoy the color pink, aspire to be mothers, and eschew pants in favor of aprons.

Evincing the mutability of Buffalo Bill's perceived gender, Demme first shows the be-goggled serial killer as a gazer at female objects (here Catherine Martin)—an indication of male heterosexuality. His costume befits an unremarkable man, working-class, definitively masculinized with a baseball cap, athletic jacket, and ubiquitous Converse sneakers. A desire for invisibility makes the killer's attire practical, and filling the masculine role may boost his sense of dominance on a mission that relies on his physical power to knock a sizable woman unconscious. Upon seeing his cast, which ironically serves as his weapon against her, Catherine comments that he "look[s] kinda handicapped," intimating that otherwise he would not need a woman's help. Buffalo Bill banks on her tendency to perform femininity—and her singalong to Tom Petty's "American Girl" has already established her normativity in that regard—accurately predicting a nurturing impulsion to assist the disadvantaged where she most likely would have hesitated to approach a fully capacitated man alone at night.

In a further testament to the slipperiness of gender signifiers, the film leaves Jame Gumb's sexual orientation perplexingly yet purposefully ambiguous throughout. The first indication of his erotic partnership is the late Benjamin Raspail, whose heavily made-up head Starling finds preserved in the aptly named Your Self Storage unit along with a mannequin in feminine clothing. Dr. Lecter informs Starling that Raspail's "romantic attachments ran to . . . the exotic," but to assume that he and Gumb were lovers would, as Crawford so smarmily puts it in the novel, "make an *ass* out of *u* and *me* both" (Harris 41).

Even if the two were romantically involved, it is impossible to know whether the make-up was applied before or after his death, whether Gumb applied it, as Dr. Lecter alleges, and whether the coitus that may or may not have preceded the mortis demonstrates in Gumb a desire for men or women. In fact, taken as evidence, Gumb's selection of a transvestite partner could not fairly be said to fit anywhere in the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy—in fact, it stands as a strong indicator of the speciousness and futility of such a binary. If Jame Gumb identifies as female, then having male partners would indicate heterosexuality and female partners would categorize her as a lesbian. On the other hand, if Gumb's body does not match Gumb's identified gender, how can one classify the sexuality therein? Ignorant of or apparently unwilling to employ any other discourse, critics and movie reviewers resort to invective—because Gumb's identity cannot be reduced to a socially condoned moniker (whereas recognition as a transsexual would occasion some degree of political correctness), apparently any slur becomes fair game. David Denby calls Gumb a “lunatic” with “bizarre sexual compulsions,” Rita Kempley regards him as a “sicko,” and J. Hoberman dramatically casts him as “the personification of evil” (Denby 61; Kempley 2; Hoberman 61). In “Right On, Girlfriend!”, Douglas Crimp remarks insightfully that Gumb's murder of Raspail, whose non-normative sexuality Dr. Lecter has already insinuated, actually indicates Gumb's own homophobia (a proposition that does not necessarily preclude the possibility of gayness, but makes it less probable), and in the novel an FBI agent explicitly refers to him as a documented “fag-basher” (Crimp 310; Harris 322). Intriguingly, both Ted Tally's screenplay and Harris's novel refer multiple times to Jame Gumb as *Mr.* Gumb, demonstrating an external imposition of a masculine title upon what would otherwise be a gender-indeterminate name.

Deprived of the medical means to self-actuate, Gumb takes the matter into his own sartorially adept hands. He sits naked at a sewing machine as the camera tracks from behind, but instead of seizing this vulnerable moment to examine him candidly, it veers off into the darker recesses of the house. Like the tabloids, the film anticipates that the audience will find his monstrous deeds infinitely more interesting than the reason behind them, his enactment of the process of identity being literally stitched together. Gumb's nudity attests to his self-conception: here in private he wears what for him represents the clothing, the costume—his male body. The room's décor also exposes the slipperiness of his identity; clippings on the wall include a pin-up calendar that features a scantily clad woman preening next to a motorcycle. While such an item would typically signify the subjection of women to the male gaze, the appearance of another poster with a female model, his one in Fredrica Bimmel's room, posits another possible complication: does Gumb want to have sex with that woman or, like Fredrica with her jewelry and glitter, to *be* her? This dual possibility reflects the conflicting desires at play throughout the film and highlights precisely the ambivalence and nuance that defy facile categorizations.

The mise-en-scène of Gumb's room at home—his closet, so to speak, fails to elucidate anything but more ambiguity. His nipples are shaved to appear more female, yet he has declined to depilate his armpits; we might thus see Gumb as a feminist who objects to that particular patriarchal demand on the female body. The tattoo of bloody incisions below his right pectoral serves as a reminder of the denied surgeries that could have given him the breasts he so covets, but the necklace that sits between them features a relatively masculine design, contrasting the wistfulness expressed by the body art with a chosen signifier of manliness—his social and institutional rejection has muddled his self-perception to the point of turning him into the transgendered monster who embodies a phobic society's sexual anxieties.

Gumb's room features several female mannequins (is it accurate to call such anatomically vague bodies female?) wearing glamorous dresses, frozen in struck poses in front of mirrors. Although Gumb himself is never shown looking into a mirror, the cinematic use of extreme close-up reproduces the effect of a reflective surface, a sensation that positions the implied spectator as his reflection and invites the spectator to identify with Gumb even when he himself does not—we are constructed as his reflection, but while we can see him, he does not register us. He has set up a video camera to record his sashaying dance, a decision that reveals the duality of his desires. Instead of looking into a mirror, which would entail self-acknowledgement and self-recognition, he films himself dressed in feminine garb, vamping lustily for the audience (he—or perhaps she—is his own intended audience), then tucking back his genitals and striking a lepidopterous pose in an exaggerated demonstration of gender's performativity: he wants *to be gazed at*. Mere exhibitionism will not satisfy him, however, and he will presumably watch the footage later, because he also wants *to gaze*. This paradoxical predilection is confirmed by the words he speaks while dabbing on lipstick: "I'd fuck me. I'd fuck me hard." With him/herself as his/her unattainable object choice, Gumb's difference from sex and gender norms performs its own violence upon him, and this devastation becomes externalized through his grotesque, murderous acts.

When Dr. Lecter alludes to Buffalo Bill's transsexual motive, Starling draws on her book-learning to refute that possibility, protesting that "there's no correlation in the literature about transsexualism and violence. Transsexuals are very passive." In relying so heavily on the educational canon she would have studied in the psychology department of the University of Virginia—founded by Thomas Jefferson, a quintessential icon of rich, white, male, America—she blinds herself temporarily by neglecting to question such studied but manifestly problematic

categorizations, although when replaced with another less pathologized identity category, minority or not, the statement reads like an absurdly obsolete and racist textbook<sup>1</sup> classifying indigenous peoples as savage and uncivilized.

Ultimately, the key to the killer's identity (his location, for Starling's purposes) lies precisely where Butler would have proposed looking—in his *actions*, not his ontology. It is Starling's realization, fittingly made when she looks into a closet, that marginalized space of deviance and queerness, that Buffalo Bill *sews*—a typically feminine activity—which provides the final clue and leads her to the deceased Mrs. Lippman's address. As Dr. Lecter points out, Buffalo Bill's acts of murder are incidental; he kills women for their skins, piecing together “the illusion of a seamless identity” by repeating abductions, flayings, and stitchings (Butler 315).

A character of Jeffersonian privilege, Jack Crawford attempts to find Buffalo Bill through his perceived sexuality and turns up a name but little more than a false lead. By examining Gumb's institutionally-determined “failed” transsexualism, by essentially outing him, Crawford only gains access to a “different region of opacity” (Butler 309). He now believes that he knows how to categorize Gumb or what to call him, but he plainly still does not “know what that means,” following a fruitless clue to an empty house (309). From Fredrica Bimmel's home in Ohio, Starling tells him excitedly that “he's making a suit of women,” but Crawford ignores the significance of Buffalo Bill's actions, preferring instead to rely on institutional information and, as a result of his incomplete reading, leaving Starling to confront the killer alone.

When Starling arrives at the late Mrs. Lippman's house, Gumb answers the door in men's clothing, interrupting the repetition of his identity in order to pass himself off as a typical heterosexual male. This slippage exemplifies what Butler calls an “interval between the acts” constitutive of the serial killer/would-be transsexual's identity, and it in turn produces a “risk and

excess” to that identity, so when Starling glimpses the moth and the spools of thread—which stand out simultaneously as inconsistencies to this man’s self-presentation and reminders of Buffalo Bill’s *actions*—she realizes who he is in the same instant that he realizes his attempt at playing it straight, as it were, has failed (317).

### **Clarice Starling: One Bright Bird**

On a larger scale in which Gumb’s mutable identity slips from author/narrator to character/performer, the film constructs a narratological hierarchy that features Crawford as the narrator of the hegemonic FBI’s implied authorship. As a representative of the regulatory body, he echoes Halberstam’s hypothesis of serial killing’s “literary quality,” and he works to solve the case by installing none other than Clarice Starling as his narrative audience.<sup>2</sup> The lower-class woman’s marginalized social status enhances the scope of her sight; located simultaneously within and outside of the discursive center (as embodied by the FBI) and having grown up in the nation’s ignored periphery, she possesses an insider’s view as well as the wisdom not to discard facts that appear negligible. Helped along by Dr. Chilton’s insinuations and Crawford’s subsequent admission of his agenda, she also becomes aware of her exploited position, an apprehension that allows her view to encompass Crawford’s as well, further widening the scope of her perception and leading her to a method of seeing that ultimately permits her sufficiently thorough, if not complete, reading of Jame Gumb’s actions. By presenting so many polarizations, (rich/poor, masculine/feminine, oppressor/oppressed, ruthless/compassionate), the film suggests that Starling’s willingness to admit complication within these dichotomies—inhabiting the space between opposed terms locates her in a more mobile position with a more inclusive field of vision than either of the two extremes would afford her, as abstraction yields more knowledge than concretion.

From the opening scene, the film establishes FBI trainee Starling as a sexual minority in a man's world. Her first interaction, a brief summons from an older male FBI agent, shows her in a bowed position, bent over with exhaustion from her training; from the outset, the film confirms her subjugation to males as she immediately alters her schedule at their behest. When she meets with Jack Crawford, their conversation reveals her long-term obligation to pleasing him for the sake of her career:

CRAWFORD. It says here once you graduate you want to come work for me in Behavioral Science.

STARLING. Yes, very much, sir. Very much.

The film leaves an ambiguity as to whether the document he is referring to says specifically that she wants to work for *him*, rather than simply in the department he happens to head. Regardless, he interprets the situation to his advantage, narcissistically presuming that his presence is key to her desire to work there. Saying no more on the subject, he merely nods and moves on to the task at hand, but he has strategically and tacitly established the constrictive impression that she really ought to accept this mission so as not to displease a potential boss and jeopardize her occupational future.

But other than his knowledge of what boils down to her inability to say no to him, what motivates Crawford to choose this particular trainee? Her main distinguishing factor thus far in the movie, as established by the horde of men dwarfing her in the elevator, is her sex and its rarity within the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Impressive résumés must be fairly common at such an elite institution, and Crawford's memory lapse about the grade he gave her makes it hard to believe that her academic prowess stands foremost in his mind. His rhetoric certainly reveals a strong reluctance to include her in such a high profile case—he first tells her that “a job's come

up,” but quickly diminishes her mission to “more of an interesting errand.” This verbal diminution linguistically downgrades her position, and it suggests a demotion of her even as he gives her an opportunity for advancement, as does his “misremembrance” of her grade, which forces her to acknowledge that he has apparently found fault with her in the past. This debasing “promotion” reveals his strategy—that is, enacting a Beauty and the Beast-type story in the hope that her female allure will manage to extract some information that Crawford’s other agents cannot.

Indeed, the film establishes Starling’s sexual desirability in the same frames that emphasize her sexual *difference* from the male norm. As she and Ardelia jog along the training course, they cross paths with a group of male trainees who leer at them from behind, establishing the women as outnumbered minorities and subjects of the male gaze and locating them in a vulnerable, objectified position even (or especially) within the “justice”-seeking FBI. Having undertaken Crawford’s charge, Starling travels alone to the Baltimore State Forensic Hospital, standing in front of the unequivocally sleazy Dr. Frederick Chilton to explain her assignment while he sits and ogles her. Chilton remarks on her good looks, smirking that “Crawford’s clever, isn’t he? Using . . . a pretty young woman to turn [Hannibal] on.” Stung by his interpretation of her superior’s strategy, Starling icily refutes the insinuation, but it clearly strikes a nerve. Later, her sarcastically flirtatious jab at the already bruised masculinity of Chilton’s ego reveals her self-conscious refusal to conform to her prescribed gender role.

The next affront targets her biological sexuality as the prisoner Miggs hisses, “I can smell your cunt.” His casual use of such an abrasive term indicates the film’s eagerness to discomfit the implied spectator, and violations of linguistic etiquette are among the tamest issues that it addresses. The crude anatomical epithet, though it does not particularly daunt her, emphatically

separates Starling's sex from her gender by affirming her female physiology so soon after her self-parodic charade of coquettish femininity for Chilton. Although Hannibal himself claims that he cannot detect the odor, he invokes the heteronormative flavor of high school socialization and recognizes her dissatisfaction with "all those tedious sticky fumblings" that posed a simultaneous obstruction and vehicle for her "dream[s] of getting out." To avoid all such interactions might provoke allegations of homosexuality or other "otherness" leading to ostracism. On the other hand, the risk of a pregnancy would almost certainly obliterate her occupational ambitions, not to mention the encroachment it would impose upon her personal desires. The dilemma of acceptable feminine sexual behavior requires maintaining a balance between perceived virginal frigidity and sluttish promiscuity, establishing Starling's aptitude for finding middle ground.

Crawford continues to wield Starling's sexuality—or more aptly Starling's perceived gender and its appeal to the sexuality of other men—throughout the film. When the two travel to West Virginia to examine one of Buffalo Bill's victims, the local sheriff's terse demeanor reveals his resentment at the elite outside presence of the FBI on his jurisdiction, and Crawford does not hesitate to sacrifice his female counterpart in order to bridge the class gap with him, murmuring that "this type of sex crime has certain aspects I'd just as soon discuss in private, you know what I mean?" He indicates Starling with a jerk of his head, tacitly excluding her in deference to the sheriff's expectations of gender roles (a chauvinism that here passes itself off as Southern courtesy), regardless of the fact that Starling's rural West Virginia roots would most likely make her better able to relate to the local authorities, as Crawford has little more in common with them than his anatomy. Like Starling, the implied spectator is denied access to the big boys' conversation, left to share in her fidgeting discomfort among openly staring male deputies.

Starling, though subtler than Gumb, also understands that identity is a performance that tends to be reduced and reified by those in power. Once inside the examining room, she takes a leaf from Crawford's book in order to communicate with the locals, performing her Southern country identity by letting her accent thicken and invoking the nurturing feminine side they expect of women. She subverts his assertion of male privilege to her advantage by playing up the role to which he subjugates her and managing to silence and clear the room with little more than a "Go on now, y'all," while he struggles to hear the telephone operator over the din. Starling's subsequent analysis of the corpse's adornments—thrice-pierced ears and glittery nail polish—attest to her heightened awareness of city/town differences, and the film further highlights Crawford's ignorance of rural life when he misidentifies the moth cocoon as a seed pod.

The car ride back reflects Starling's lingering sense of wrongful displacement, as she remains in the backseat while Crawford and the driver—another incidental male like the sheriff—occupy the privileged positions. The former makes a weak effort to appease her anger, blowing the blatant discrimination off as "just smoke," but she refuses to buy it, citing his position as a highly visible example of behavior to his subordinates. He mutters "Point taken," and goes to sleep as Starling continues to work, making it hard to believe that he has in fact taken her words to heart. Starling recognizes the validity of Laura Mulvey's assertion that the male "bearer of the look" (in this instance the look of the West Virginia deputies) is the figure with whom they identify, while his display of power "as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look" (Mulvey 204). This film, however, also presents the power of the *other* side of the look, giving the implied spectator both views as the camera first follows the sheriff's eyeline to Starling before switching to her panning point-of-view and enduring the stare of the deputies. The camera lingers close to her face, conveying the evolution of this initial unease into

calm resolve, and as her thoughts turn inward to her memories, displaying her ability to disregard and function under the male gaze while tolerating it—she becomes more than just a passive subject.

Despite—or because of—the repeated allusions to and invocations of her sexuality, Starling deliberately maintains an air of opacity around her romantic inclinations, and her successfully obfuscating efforts render any attempts at bracketing her sexuality as presumptuous and invalid as trying to classify Gumb. When Dr. Lecter first intimates that she and Crawford share an erotic affinity for each other, she claims that she “never thought about it.” Given her general perspicacity and self-consciousness about her sex, this denial rings hollow both to the implied spectator and the psychiatrist, who bluntly asks if Crawford “wants [her] sexually” or “visualizes . . . fucking [her].” She replies, “That doesn’t interest me, Doctor,” and her strategic ambiguity of the pronoun’s antecedent manages to obscure exactly *what* doesn’t interest her—Crawford? Fucking men? Fucking in general? If nothing else, the deliberate vagueness communicates both her unwillingness to gratify Dr. Lecter with a discussion of her personal life and her refusal to be reduced to her sexuality.

Later, the entomologist Pilcher raises such questions as well, though much more tactfully than other characters. Starling is friendly and courteous to him but shows no more inclination to share “cheeseburgers and beer” with him than human liver, fava beans, and Chianti with her other would-be suitor. In fact, the spectator never sees her partake of any food in the movie, not even the FBI-themed cake (Crawford’s symbolic culinary offering) at her graduation ceremony, and her sexual orientation remains as unresolved—and, moreover, irrelevant—as her preferred dietary regimen. Indeed, her abstention from the cake and her final exchange with Crawford demonstrate that she has subverted and overcome his exploitation of her sex, a decentering of his

hegemonic power that occurs, significantly, long before the film's end. Where he once used his superior position to steer her sexuality as a vehicle to Hannibal, she takes control by driving to Belvedere. After crossing this literal and figurative bridge, she remains at the wheel as he becomes a shrinking reflection in the rearview mirror and finally disappears through a side exit at her graduation ceremony.

### **Hannibalism: The Art of Brutality**

While Dr. Hannibal Lecter also leaves Crawford far behind, his method of transit is much flashier than Starling's, but every bit as characteristic of his identity as her humble Ford Pinto is of hers. The film constructs Dr. Lecter as a paragon of insight, knowledge, and wisdom, a figure who achieves near omniscience in spite of his maximum-security imprisonment, or at least as someone who knows how to perform an effective illusion thereof. The first time Starling—or “Clarice,” as he prefers to drawl—goes to visit him in the Baltimore hospital, she comes only with hearsay knowledge of his gory reputation, which Chilton gleefully enhances by showing her a photograph of a nurse mutilated by Lecter—to our knowledge his only female victim. The camera tracks Starling's face as she walks down the hall to the final cell, when it cuts over to her point of view. Unsettlingly to Starling as well as to the spectator, Hannibal is already looking straight into the camera as it approaches, suggesting not only that he heard Clarice's steps but that he is also somehow aware of the recording apparatus—and indeed he is, as he undoubtedly understands on a diegetic level that he is under perpetual video surveillance.

By preempting the camera's gaze, he disrupts what Mulvey refers to as the scopophilic spectator's “illusion of looking on in a private world” (Mulvey 201). If Hannibal can gaze back at us, the audience, can he cannibalize us as well, at least symbolically? Despite the inmate's amoral character, the implied spectator finds identification with him less unpleasant than the risk

of being eaten by him that a distancing from him would seem to entail, and his violation of the audience's "voyeuristic separation" thus makes him all the more threatening (201). By forcing identification with a convicted serial killer initially introduced to us as a "monster," the film compels the implied spectator to read him more thoroughly instead of merely discarding him as a savagely savvy sadist.

Dr. Lecter's cell also distinguishes him from the other prisoners—a clear barrier keeps him locked up, but the transparent wall does not carry the visual reassurance of traditional iron bars, making his incarceration appear less secure than that of the other prisoners. Indeed, he displays an agency within the prison that suggests it hardly constitutes a constraint for him—he coerces Miggs into suicide just by "whispering to him all afternoon," managing vicarious homicide in a location of supposed order and disempowerment. The motive behind this crime perversely endears him to the viewer; he murders Miggs as revenge for his discourtesy (to put it mildly) to Starling.

However, Hannibal's wrath may have been provoked by more than simple manners and benevolent concern for Starling's well-being; by splattering her with his seminal fluid, Miggs makes an encroachment upon a woman whom Dr. Lecter masculinely considers "his"—his patient, his reading material, and the eventual object of his twisted respect and affection. In fact, even as Starling deceives Hannibal with a fabricated offer from Senator Martin, he gains access to deeper truths about her, penetrating her psyche until the camera ceases to separate the two: his translucent reflection appears in the glass barrier overlapping her—the implied spectator is now sharing Hannibal's view from within the cell, and he has gotten inside her head so that the film links the two visually through his reflected image even when the camera turns away from Lecter.

All his insight and ingenuity notwithstanding, Hannibal is no innovator, and his tendency to imitate shows through from his first appearance to the closing scene of the movie. He decorates his cell with a drawing of the Duomo in Florence, the recreation of a sight he has already seen and a tribute to the classicism of the Renaissance. He possesses an unknown amount of prior knowledge of Jame Gumb only because he happened to treat Benjamin Raspail, who associated with and was ultimately murdered by Gumb. Dr. Lecter also draws a Madonna-esque portrait of Clarice clutching a lamb, tapping into her painful story as a source of inspiration for art. His most stunning feat, escape from the heavy guard of the Memphis prison, is yet another adaptation, this one a bloody perversion of Buffalo Bill's tendency to flay his victims. With the *Goldberg Variations*—funeral music—playing in the background, he kills the two police officers and peels off Sergeant Pembry's face to use as a disguise for himself. Having butchered his way to freedom with a scheme inspired by the now late Jame Gumb, he flees to the Bahamas (in the novel he undergoes cosmetic surgery to mask his identity, an irony whose injustice would have infuriated the rejected candidate for reassignment), donning a wig whose uncharacteristic gaudiness would be surprising if not for its resemblance to Gumb's long blond locks.

Hannibal's imitative tendencies indicate his calculated performance toward an aesthetic standard; the identity he strives for is that of a cultural connoisseur, paying artistic homage to the classics, courteously downplaying Clarice's embarrassment at Miggs's crassness, and, stuck in a cell devoid of books, feeding greedily on the literature of her mind. This "brutal dandyism," as Adrienne Donald writes in "Working for Oneself," entails the "deliberate cultivation of a sense of self," in Dr. Lecter's case a gentlemanly, sophisticated intellectual forced to endure the tacky Gothicism of the Baltimore hospital and the "petty torments" of its crude warden (Donald 69). Dr. Lecter plays the urbane aesthete to Clarice's ambitious redneck, painfully but purposefully

reminding her of her humble roots and indirectly establishing their indispensability—her understanding of the lower half of the rich/poor binary (specifically Gumb and the Bimmel family) becomes central, and it is no coincidence that the trailer-park bleakness of Belvedere, Ohio, bears a strong resemblance to the West Virginia setting of her flashbacks.

Dr. Chilton explicitly calls Hannibal a monster, and the squalid premises of his confinement affirm his diagnosis of insanity. The cerebral criminal obliges these classifications, playing splendidly to such expectations all while maintaining his own chilling air of gentility. His utter competence enchants the implied spectator, making his bloody escape from Memphis all the more jolting and terrifying. He attacks the policemen with a shocking savagery, pulling away from Boyle's face with blood smeared on his own like spaghetti sauce. He proceeds to club the downed Pembry with the sergeant's own weapon, aiming his methodical blows directly toward the camera and evoking further pained cringes from the implied audience.

After incapacitating both policemen, he takes a moment to compose himself, making a bloodstained show of savoring the strains of Bach and leaving the viewer appalled yet somehow sympathetic, as if having witnessed a guest at a highbrow dinner party eat his salad with the wrong fork. That implied spectator's previous identification with Dr. Lecter is violated by the rudeness (a trait he claims to loathe) of the murder of the affable would-be enforcers and the disruption of identity constituted by that deviation from habit. The visual corroboration of his storied ferocity also attests to the depth of Starling's fortitude, as she has already seen and known all along its results in Chilton's photograph of the mutilated nurse.

The last face-to-face exchange between Dr. Lecter and Clarice, just before his departure, fulfills Crawford's intent, as Starling's desire to find Buffalo Bill and save Catherine and herself compels her to play the sacrificial role, and Hannibal obliges with relish. Acquiescing to the part

that Crawford has constructed for him, he laps up the sad story of her youth and the ovine nightmares that still haunt her, relishing Starling's psychic wounds as her compulsion to succeed drives her to submit to Hannibal's sadistic violation.

### **Bad Guys or “Bad” Guise?**

For all his undeniable malice, the film refuses to write Dr. Lecter off as an unredeemable beast. In the end, he is the last male with whom Clarice speaks, calling her on the phone with the assurance that he intends her no harm, and, indirectly, disclosing his plans to eat the despicable (though partially redeemed, as discussed later) Dr. Chilton. His audacious confidence in telephoning her at the Academy and his manifest respect are endearing, but more importantly, in displaying his regard for her he supplants whatever remaining affection she holds for the uninterested Crawford, who ducks out of the reception after offering her no more than a terse felicitation.

As unflatteringly as the film depicts Starling's ruthlessly manipulative boss, it positions him incontrovertibly as an integral, if robotic, component in the pursuit of justice—a problematized justice, but a necessary one nonetheless. In a subtle defense of him that few actual viewers probably note, Gumb's location in Belvedere, Ohio, reveals that Crawford has in fact been asking the right questions from the beginning. In their first conversation, he tells Starling to pay attention to what Hannibal has been sketching, and the drawing she inquires about turns out to be “the Duomo, seen from the Belvedere.” The Belvedere is a 500-year-old fort in Florence, and in architectural terms, a belvedere is a structure sited strategically so as to “command a fine view” (*Britannica*). Whether or not all of Crawford's methods are ethical, he employs them in service of the proverbial American people, a characterization that includes the implied audience and therefore expects that audience to accord him a certain respect. However, even with all the

information Starling gives him—the Belvedere’s “fine view” included—he ultimately still fails to read that information correctly.

Once more repudiating the notion of one-dimensional personalities and offering the implied spectator a new perspective at literally the last minute, the film makes an argument even in Chilton’s defense despite his apparent lack of any redeeming qualities except for one: precisely his redeemability. The implied audience enjoys detesting him from his first sleazy pass at Starling to his officious mandate that she remove herself from Lecter’s room in Memphis, but regardless of his pomp and bombast, the fact remains that he is a human being, and in many senses a better one than either Hannibal or Buffalo Bill—he has never murdered anyone, after all, and the last moments of the movie betray his pitiable fear as he lands in the Bahamas and asks whether the security system is in place. Answered in the affirmative, he fervently thanks the black official where earlier he would have snapped at Barney, conveying a mortified realization that his deeds may catch up to him. Up to this point, Chilton has stood out as the blatant heel, but in keeping with its refusal to pigeonhole identities, the film supports the notion that even the most ostensibly obnoxious identities are complicated.

### **Audience as Performer**

*The Silence of the Lambs* does not permit even the implied spectator’s identity performance to escape uninterrupted or uncomplicated. Generally positioned to identify with Starling and often following her point-of-view, it deviates at key points to emphasize the volatile performativity and instability of the audience’s identity. The film’s opening shot tracks along the training course with Starling, gazing at her from various angles that encourage the implied spectator to subjectify her: in this movie, she is to be the primary focus of our attention, though we soon come to identify with her as well and even, on occasion, see from her perspective. The

film also distances the implied spectator from Starling during her first flashback, in which the camera pans away from her and bounces up into the cloudy sky, denying us complete knowledge of her character and warning us away from overanalyzing her psyche—that is Dr. Lecter’s prerogative.

One other instance of distancing from Starling not only violates the implied spectator’s expectations of identification but also throws the identity of the film itself into question. Many elements of *Silence* correspond with Carol Clover’s slasher movie criteria: Clarice possesses the “smartness, gravity, [and] competence” of the Final Girl; Buffalo Bill is the killer whose “masculinity is severely qualified,” and his basement serves as the “Terrible Place” that houses evidence of the “human crimes and perversions that have transpired there” (31-47). However, Demme’s film inverts Clover’s analysis of the climactic scene, in which the implied spectator’s “closeness” to the killer typically decreases as proximity to the Final Girl increases and the proffered “point of view is hers” (45).

In Jame Gumb’s lair, on the other hand, we return to the predatory sensation of the spectator’s persistent gaze in the opening shot as the camera stalks her through Buffalo Bill’s infrared goggles. The film has made us care for Clarice Starling, and now it is making us threaten her; we feel the terrifying pain of being arbitrarily forced into an identity we abhor—our cinematographic body does not fit and *we want out*. After one hundred eternal seconds of such agony, our would-be prey liberates us from this tortured performance, and the implied audience returns to the comfortably constitutive act of watching, but we have been made aware of the universal instability of identity, from the movie’s defiance of generic expectations to our intense figurative unseating as spectators.

**“Straight”jackets: Heterosexual Imposition and Homophobic Interpretation**

The film's problematized genre plays on its awareness of the implied audience's tendency to impose its own beliefs and assumptions upon movies, and Demme's exposure of the fallacy of generic classification parallels his illumination of the audience's heterosexual presumption. Although many scenes thrum with sexual tension, the film is devoid of overtly sexual contact or interaction. The one exception is the byproduct of Miggs's masturbation, but even that signifies an act of violence more than of eroticism or communion. Indeed, sexuality manifests itself primarily in the forms of insinuation, negation, denial, and unfulfillment rather than unified categories. Much of this erotic phantasmagoria stems from Dr. Lecter, who whispers smirking intimations about "tedious sticky fumbings," Crawford's carnality, and the possibility of the rancher sodomizing Clarice. Crawford, too, purports to locate eroticism where it is not, referring to Fredrica Bimmel's death as a "sex crime" in order to establish an exclusive intimacy with the sheriff, despite no hint of sexual violation in any of Buffalo Bill's victims. Heterosexuality in the film originates in between the text and its reception, fostered by the movie's anticipation of the implied audience's heteronormatizing presumption, another example of hegemonic misreading—as Dr. Lecter so perceptively tells Starling, "People will say we're in love."

While *The Silence of the Lambs* has provoked in actual audiences both allegations and manifestations of homophobia, the film exhibits an acute awareness of society's aversion to non-normative sexuality on real, narrative, and implied levels of spectatorship. Crimp quotes gay rights activist Larry Kramer's sarcastic complaint: "There's going to be [an AIDS] benefit screening of a movie called *Silence of the Lambs* [sic]. The villain is a gay man who mass murders people. Thanks a lot . . ." (301). Crimp describes his observations of queer aversion in actual audiences as well, asserting that the tension of the Buffalo Bill/Starling hunt is frequently

broken “not by Clarice’s gunshots, but by an often-remarked male spectator’s shout in the dark: ‘Shoot the fucking faggot!’” (310). Sedgwick’s anecdote about AIDS firings suggests that Kramer’s misgivings are not unfounded, yet he wrongly assumes that his own glib plot description is sufficient (indeed, “gay man” is hardly an apt label for Gumb). *Silence* positions Hannibal Lecter as an effete foil to Gumb, but viewers consistently and curiously overlook the former’s stereotypically gay mannerisms. During Hannibal’s conference with Senator Martin, he names “Louis Friend” as the killer, adding the expository detail that Friend and Raspail “were lovers, you see,” anticipating the credibility such an allegation would lend in the face of the narrative audience’s homophobia. Hannibal terminates the conversation with a flamboyant, “Love your suit,” a remark that Crimp points out no “straight man would get off” (310). As the implied audience understands, however, Dr. Lecter is a skilled mimic, and his use of the stereotypical utterance directly after his brutal display of sadism satirizes the link he knows the senator and her entourage (as well as much of the real audience) have already forged: homosexuality is not only a pathology but a malignance. The real spectators may not perceive Hannibal’s tongue-in-cheek commentary on their homophobia, as the same reviewers that find Gumb disgusting are quick to admire, or at least acknowledge, the “brilliant,” “urbane,” and “cultured,” (if “sociopathic”) psychiatrist’s “quicksilver cunning” and “wicked skill” (Denby, Hoberman, Howe, Kempsey).

As the critical slurs against Dr. Lecter’s criminal counterpart corroborate, many real spectators find the thought of identification with Gumb and the commonality insinuated therein repugnant, but the camera imposes it on the implied audience nevertheless. In his cross-dressing scene, the camera shows him donning his femininity and acts as a mirror rather than a lens with extreme close-ups of Gumb painstakingly applying makeup to his eyes even as flayed, frayed

flesh from his scalped wig dangles grotesquely over his eyebrow. This grimly humorous moment encapsulates the fearful unease with which the actual homophobic society regards queer people—as much as one tries to cast queers as laughably “mincing,” effeminate cupcakes, there remains some deadly threat to masculinity (Kempley 2). Indeed, this duality is exactly what makes the idea of a fully realized Jame Gumb a more potentially menacing conception than the merely psychopathic Buffalo Bill; as the serial killer he would still be a white, home-owning, physically-able male exerting psychological and bodily dominance over women, his victims, but Jame Gumb as Jame Gumb strives to be would terrify any privileged male: an ambitiously female person who matches up not only in race, religion (hinted at by a crucifix on the wall of his house), and economic standing, but also in physical strength.

The movie’s climactic scene ends in Gumb’s death at the trembling hands of Starling, her gunshots flooding the basement with light. Her triumph over the murderer brings an immediate sense of rightful closure, but Gumb’s death also constitutes a loss of potential knowledge that his testimony could have provided—and, therein, a critique of psychological diagnostics. Though his identity is revealed, the film leaves his self-conception unresolved, showing his corpse rigid on the floor with blood splattered on, but not completely covering, his mouth like lipstick, a testament to the presence and paradox of this feminizing biological make-up. The diegetic closure of Jame Gumb’s death and Clarice’s triumphant ascent into the FBI notwithstanding, the penultimate scene raises many more questions than it answers, reiterating the perpetual elusiveness of black and white truths, with an uncertainty further reinforced by Hannibal Lecter’s freedom. This profound ambivalence manifests itself through virtually every character. Catherine Martin is physically safe, but surely scarred by her traumatic experience. Pilcher (whose unflattering surname denotes “a person considered worthless, contemptible, or insignificant”)

reappears at Starling's celebration, but does he exemplify the underdog's victory, or is the ambiguous nature of his presence just another trap for the audience's heteronormative presumption—is he still pursuing Clarice? (*OED*). Ardelia, who has aided Starling on the case, remains caught in the double bind of black womanhood, still taking Clarice's phone calls at the end.<sup>3</sup> Certainly Clarice herself is left with no small dilemma: Hannibal calls to ask whether the lambs have stopped screaming, as well as to inform her that he will not hunt her down. He requests the same courtesy from her, leaving the FBI agent torn between her legal duty and the killer's politics of politeness. The film presents no resolution but trauma and death for those who, like Gumb, fail to meet hegemonic standards of identity, yet as an FBI agent, Starling has been afforded the opportunity to heal her own psychic wounds through her position of authority. These imbalances and ambivalences underscore the film's implicit insistence—that to reify identity is to limit oneself and others; there are no concretions, only acts, performances, and interpretations and complications. Ultimately, *The Silence of the Lambs* does precisely that at which Sedgwick has excelled: it catches audiences in their own prejudices and warned against the practice of assumption, it reveals blind spots—willful and otherwise—and upsets the conventional good/evil opposition of the horror story through Sedgwick's own reconsideration of the relationship between knowledge and ignorance. Arriving as it did alongside a heightened scrutiny of homosexuality during the AIDS crisis and concurrently with newly emerging theories of gender and sexuality, the film offers and affirms an assiduous queer reading practice that allows for and even demands difference, ambiguity, and the dissolution of normative assumptions

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> To a parallel point, Sandy Stone first presented *The "Empire" Strikes back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto* in 1988, three years before the release of *Silence*. Her essay refutes 1970s conception of transsexuality, particularly the abrasive view of Janice Raymond, who had declared that "all transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves" (from *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, qtd. in Stone). The film also predates Leslie Feinberg's 1992 designation of the term "transgender" as, in Susan Stryker's words, an adjective to describe "all individuals who were marginalized or oppressed due to their difference from social norms of gendered embodiment" (Stryker 4). The screenwriters, then, would not have been able to slip this adjective, which certainly applies to Gumb, into the characters' vocabulary.

<sup>2</sup> In *Truth and Fiction*, Peter Rabinowitz defines a narrator as "generally an imitation of an author. He writes for an imitation audience [the narrative audience] which also possesses particular knowledge" (214). Here, Starling's social position provides her that "particular knowledge," which the film makes key to solving the case.

<sup>3</sup> Starling's roommate first receives the telephone call about Dr. Lecter's escape from Memphis, and the film shows her sprinting down the hall to inform its intended recipient. At the graduation ceremony, it is again Ardelia who tells Starling that a phone call awaits her.

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**West Eats East: Revolting Consumption  
in *301/302* and *The Orphan Master's Son***



**Annette Cozzi**

While reading Adam Johnson's brilliant and audacious novel, *The Orphan Master's Son*, I became curious about the author. Who was Johnson, and what were his ties to North Korea? He looked like a North American, but I knew better than to judge a book by its back jacket flap. The requisite Google search revealed that Johnson was indeed North American, a Stanford creative writing professor who became interested in North Korea while writing a satirical short story that eventually developed into *Son*.<sup>1</sup> His only ties were purely academic; as he himself said, he "became fascinated just as a general reader" (*Newshour* 1/30/2012). Johnson spent not only six years doing research, reading, for example, the few available accounts from North Korean defectors (by definition the most extreme of dissatisfied citizens) such as Kang Chol-hwan's *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* (*Newshour* 1/30/2012), but also "about six days" in North Korea on a highly "minded" and monitored propaganda tour (Church, n.p.).<sup>2</sup> I was troubled by this: who was Johnson, who must mediate such extreme perspectives and elaborate such scanty material, to write about North Korea? I had been contemplating a

paper about food and repulsive consumption in Park Chul-soo's 1995 film *301/302* for years, but had been gun shy for several reasons, not least of which is the fact that I have never visited Korea, North or South, and barely speak a word of the language. I was reluctant to be perceived as an academic imperialist. I realized, however, that academic imperialism is not only inescapable, but as such demanded analysis. Consequently, I became interested in how the West consumes and incorporates the East: not just corporeally, but also through the stories we tell in film, on paper, and academically.

Both *The Orphan Master's Son* and *301/302* are concerned with family, hunger, starvation, and revolting and repulsive consumption, and both examine these issues in terms of consumer capitalism, whether it is the dominant economic system or systematically rejected.<sup>3</sup> For both texts, these issues are also inextricably entangled with the consumption of stories.<sup>4</sup> Ideologies thrive because the people living them, willingly or unwittingly, swallow a good story. Although both texts explore hunger and starvation, in the end, for these characters who engage in what I will describe as “terrible feeding,” stories may be more filling, more satiating, more sustaining, than actual food. Both Johnson and Park fracture and refract narrative form to examine ideological storytelling and its consumption. The stories they tell, and, in particular, the innovative and unsettling ways in which they tell them, are a way to reflect and understand alien words; they defamiliarize their westernized audiences, which as a result, and as I discuss in more detail later, simultaneously dis-orient and re-“Orientalizes” us.

Both terrible feeding and revolting consumption—of food and words—are the legacies of “bad” parents: mothers who, whether indifferent or idealized, lost or stolen, are simultaneously absent and looming; and fathers who are monstrous distortions of the

paternal. Both texts examine Confucian familial relationships and the ways in which “the ruler-subject relationship has been mapped onto the parent-child relationship in the discursive portrayals of [the Kim regime]” (Kim 490). In both texts, personal and familial relationships must be rebuilt in the wake of the Kim regime’s manipulation of Confucianism, which has destroyed the traditional family, and capitalism, which has birthed a monstrous Oedipal family.<sup>5</sup> The archetypes of the nurturing mother and the father who provides are grotesquely inverted: mothers are dangerously disengaged or disastrously unavailable and fathers deprive and rape their children. Yet these parents are also victims of the patriarchal systems that have formed and failed them: the brutal tyranny of North Korean totalitarianism and the brute indifference of rampant consumer capitalism. Ultimately, both Johnson and Park suggest that the only solution to extreme appetites and terrible feeding is the rapprochement of these two competing and antithetical ideologies, whether that reconciliation takes the form of incorporation and reunification, as in *301/302*, or merely the possible opening of genuine communication and understanding, as in *The Orphan Master’s Son*. Yet in both texts, not only is this uneasy marriage figured in terms of terrible feeding, but also the proposition privileges the West. The Orient, once again, is rendered the subaltern female, whose only recourse is submission to, and even erasure by, the dominant West—an obliteration that’s achieved through a final, and most revolting of all, consumption of self.

According to Edward Said, “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its

contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (2). It is also, as Timothy Brennan reminds us, a “passive fund for good writing material” (62). Writers have long envisioned “the Orient” as a deep, dark well—albeit one brimming with brilliant colors and spicy scents—gurgling with exotic stories of feminine seduction, cursed jewels, and bloodthirsty adventure. We imagine the “Orient” as inscrutable, other, mysterious, and both *The Orphan Master’s Son* and *301/302* use a detective as a narrative device to solve the mystery of North Korea. These detectives, both of whom are unnamed, are trying to figure out the secret to a main character’s disappearance—and the secret of their identities. Above all, the detectives want to *know* these characters, to learn their stories. But as the “suspects” begin to “confess,” we are further mystified. In “(Dis)Orienting North Korea,” Suzy Kim points out that the image of North Korea

reflected by the Western mirror is a decidedly distorted one. Of course, all mirrors distort to some degree, but the bigger problem is that the Orientalist mirror is often the only one used or even acknowledged to exist. The prime effect is the perennial creation of an Other and the consequence is occlusion rather than clarity. The difficult task is to encompass multiple angles to allow for a diversity of perspectives that combined may provide a fuller picture. (481)

My intent in examining both a contemporary American novel and a South Korean film is not only to allow for a diversity of perspectives, but also to show how “(dis)orientation” is the means by which both author and auteur attempt to express alien ontologies, which they do so by warping and shattering not only the mirror of Othering, but also audience expectations and conventional narrative forms.

As Blaine Harden points out, “In stories of concentration camp survival, there is a conventional narrative arc. Security forces steal the protagonist away from a loving family and a comfortable home. To survive, he abandons moral principles, suppresses feelings for others and ceases to be a civilized human being” (3). The narrative arc of the *Orphan Master’s Son*, which is, in its most basic form, the story of concentration camp survival, does not follow any neat trajectories. Instead, genres shift and slide, characters become other people, and multiple endings collapse into each other. Not only is the content literally dis-oriented, but so is the reader as well. Park has a similar disorienting style, where genres, such as horror and satire, are mixed into a stew as unsavory as the one consumed at the end of the film; where narratives turn inside out and devour themselves; and where conventional standards like beginning, middle, and end are similarly disordered. And yet—although both Johnson and Park deliberately shatter the Western mirror, in the end even their attempts at dis-orientation become subsumed by the sheer rapacity of capitalist consumption. Rampant, repulsive consumption is, after all, the *modus operandi* of the West.

The first issue that concerned me was one of *authority*. The very word entails not just knowledge, but authorship and authenticity, the originator of an “essence” of “reality,” the teller of the story. In a sense, she who writes, authenticates. In *The Orphan Master’s Son*, one of the characters, Dr. Song, claims, “Where we are from . . . stories are factual” (121); he then goes on to spin a whopper of a lie that will be swallowed as fact, even if it is never actually believed. This, according to Johnson, reflects the fabrication of the national narratives of North Korea, where Kim Jong Il was “the sole scriptwriter for an entire nation” (*Newshour* 1/30/2012). In a *PBS Newshour* interview with Jeffrey

Brown, Johnson explains that in North Korea, there's "one story. It's written by the Kim regime. And 23 million people are conscripted to be secondary characters." Yet in many ways, Johnson is also writing a national narrative, and he is certainly speaking for an entire people. Like the disembodied directives from the omnipresent loudspeakers that narrate the daily lives of the "citizens" like fourth-wall voiceovers, Johnson himself has become the voice of authority, and one of the few voices some of us will ever hear regarding North Korea. Somewhat troublingly, Johnson claims, "We have a duty to tell the stories of others. Even if we have to invent them" (Haven, n.p.).<sup>6</sup> Further, "It was the people I saw all over Pyongyang that I wanted to individuate and to bring to life. And I had to use imagination to do it, because they're not allowed to tell their own stories" (*NewsHour* 1/30/2012). Although in interviews Johnson is obviously sensitive to his privileged position, not to mention potential criticism, as a de facto Orientalist, this still strikes me as a bold act of Western cultural imperialism—not only to tell the story of the other, but also to westernize their narratives, to "individuate" them.<sup>7</sup>

One way that Johnson attempts to express and negotiate this culture clash is by playing with form: he may be individuating a narrative, but he fractures the narrative itself into a multiplicity of genres, defamiliarizing the experience of reading, de-orientalizing, or "Easternizing" the novel itself, if you will. Yet, ultimately, Johnson, in both his message and his techniques, undermines Eastern perspectives. After all, North Korean isolationism is bolstered by Juche philosophy, with its emphasis on self-sacrifice for the good of the community.<sup>8</sup> By lampooning Kim, individualizing the indivisible mass, and profaning national purpose—in an inorganic exploded whole—Johnson is undermining Juche itself. Although Johnson is alert to the ways that the East is treated as

“good material,” there is no doubt where Johnson’s political sympathies lie. All storytelling is ideological. In 1973, Kim Jung Il published *On the Art of Cinema*, in which he claims “revolutionary art and literature are extremely effective means for inspiring people to work for the tasks of the revolution” (Demick, *Nothing to Envy* 15). Even though the art and literature of the West may not have a “revolutionary” intent, it is still in service of capitalist ideology. It is particularly telling that the “happy” ending of the novel is the main character’s ideological disillusionment and the escape of his “family” from a regime that is depicted as heartless and absurd—especially since it is to the United States that the family defects.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the only “evidence” that the escape succeeded is two photos that mysteriously appear on a confiscated cell phone: one of Ingrid Bergman’s star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and one of the children wearing Mickey Mouse ears at Disneyworld. While the irony does not escape Johnson, who pointedly winks at Western cults of fame and the ideal of happily ever after, the fact remains that this is still presented as the only “happy” ending in a novel with multiple endings (especially compared to the other endings, which include a violent arrest and a multiple murder suicide).

Although Johnson is sympathetic to the people of North Korea, he is ruthless in his denunciation of the Kim regime. Barbara Demick reminds us, “The truth is that North Koreans who fall foul of this heartless regime die slow, prosaic deaths of starvation or diseases caused by chronic malnutrition” (“Review” n.p.). Ultimately, it is this “heartless” starvation—and the lengths characters go to appease their hunger—that concerns me in these pages. There is a difference between *repellant* consumption, *revolting* consumption, and *repulsive* consumption.<sup>10</sup> I define repellant consumption as

consumption that we might find unsavory or disgusting as a matter of taste, but it is still *necessary* consumption, consumption that occurs to ensure, or at least maintain, survival (in the novel, the most visceral example of this is when the emaciated main character masturbates an ox and drinks its semen in order to stay alive). Revolting consumption is, as the name implies, an act of rebellion: a denial of authority, a resistance to oppression, and, in fact, often entails the refusal to eat what others consider “wholesome” food. Repulsive consumption, on the other hand, is consumption based on wants and desires that can never be satiated or appeased. One feeds the body; one fortifies the spirit; but the third satiates nothing: it merely stuffs the empty “self” until it gorges on its own unquenchable desires. In North Korea, the consumption of food, for most characters, is generally repellant; it is a way to survive. Yet for those few who are awakening from their ideological dark nights, consumption becomes revolting.

All governments understand the connection between *pane et circenses*. Hunger, consumption, storytelling, and ideology are inextricably linked; they feed off each other in myriad ways. Hunger can be harnessed for brainwashing, just as overfeeding can deter action. In *Escape from Camp 14*, Shin Dong-hyuk, the only known man to have escaped from a prison camp in which he was born, recalls how his political education by a fellow inmate, Park Yong Chul, was a by-product of hunger:

Shin wasn't especially interested in how the world worked. What delighted him—what he kept begging Park for—were stories about food and eating, particularly when the main course was grilled meat. These were the stories that kept Shin up at night fantasizing about a better life. . . . (Harden 14)

In the past, another “aging cell mate had inflamed his imagination with tales of hearty meals. Uncle had dared Shin to dream about one day getting out of the camp and eating whatever he wanted. Freedom, in Shin’s mind, was just another word for grilled meat. . .” (Harden 14). Hunger, imagination, and stories of food all work together in a way that would forever change Shin’s life . . . [Park] described the enchantments of

chicken, pork, and beef in China, Hong Kong, Germany, England, and the former Soviet Union. The more Shin listened to these stories, the more he wanted out of the camp. He ached for a world where an insignificant person like himself could walk into a restaurant and fill his stomach with rice and meat. He fantasized about escaping with Park because he wanted to eat like Park. (Harden 98-99)

It is significant that as a member of the “hostile class,” Shin wasn’t subjected to the same ideological inculcation as other North Koreans, in effect creating the space for escape.

According to Demick, hunger is the defining characteristic of North Korea, a country where it is estimated that up to 10% of the country starved to death as a result of the famine.<sup>11</sup> In Demick’s article, “The Good Cook,” in *New Yorker*, “Mrs. Song,” a woman who defected at the age of fifty-seven at the urging of her daughter, provides harrowing details of the conditions of famine from which people suffered: making “flour” out of pine bark—and extending it with sawdust; picking corn out of animal excrement; pounding grass into porridge. The regime turned the famine into an ideological game: “Let’s Eat Two Meals a Day!” (although many were eating no meals at all). Citizens were told that food was being stored to feed starving South Koreans on the glorious day of reunification. Mrs. Song’s husband, who had once been told to take up smoking to lose

weight, died from starvation, consumed with visions of food: the tofu soup his mother made him when he was little; the fish porridge his wife made when they were newlyweds.

Mr. Song reminds us that food is never just sustenance; it is memory, family, and desire. When we eat, we consume story, identity, and meaning; and we hunger for more than food: we hunger for communication, family, belonging, and power. In response to Brown's *Newshour* interview question "What did you see [in North Korea]?" the first thing Johnson answers is, "I saw a country hungry for food, hungry for power, hungry for money, certainly." [Here Brown gives a knowing, condescending, and inappropriate chuckle.] Johnson continues, "I saw a family in a park stealing chestnuts from a public tree, which is quite a transgression there and could get them in great trouble." Ultimately, we only have Johnson's word for what he saw, and his observations are complicated by the fact that they are fictionalized and stylized, a literary riff on technical virtuosity, generic shifts, tonal disruptions, inventive plot twists, and narrative play. And, although his reviewers might not always recognize it, Johnson reminds us at every turn that what we are reading is very much a novel. But does the novel help to unveil a "citizen-eating dynasty" (Mitchell qtd. on book jacket) for a mystified audience, or does it, by virtue of the fact that it is a surprisingly entertaining work of fiction, merely render the horrors of North Korea palatable? As voracious consumers of stories, do we become, in our own insatiable way, citizen eaters? Finally, does Johnson's slanted political point of view (after all, the entire plot revolves around the defection of the novel's individualized, and sympathetic characters, from a heartless regime to, of all unlikely places, the United States) occlude and preclude other possible pictures of North Korea?

The structure of *The Orphan Master's Son* is in two parts. In its barest skeleton, the first part, the "Biography of Jun Do," depicts the picaresque adventures of Pak Jun Do, model North Korean citizen, who grows up in an orphanage, and then works as a tunnel soldier, a Party kidnapper, English translator and an unwitting intelligence officer stationed on a fishing boat. After the ship transits North Korean waters, they are boarded by Americans who not only give them a fire extinguisher and a life raft, but also humiliate—and condemn them—by stealing the ubiquitous framed portraits of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung.<sup>13</sup> The fishermen concoct an elaborate scheme to save face by telling a "story of naked imperial aggression," a story that includes taking "on the entire platoon of American pigs" (Johnson 64). The more outrageous the story, it seems, the more likely it is to be accepted by "them" who dictate this strange universe; the Captain explains, "People don't mean anything to them, anything at all. . . . They only care about the story we're going to tell, and that story will be useful to them or it won't" (63). When he submits to a shark bite in a further elaboration of the increasingly preposterous fish story in order to cover up a crewmate's defection (Jun Do says to the Captain, "Sharks and guns and revenge . . . I know I thought it up, but this isn't a story that anyone could really believe." "You're right," the Captain [answers]. "But it's a story they can use") (84). Jun Do becomes a Hero of the Eternal Revolution. As an English-speaking witness to the American platoon's supposed atrocities, Jun Do is sent on a bizarre ambassadorial mission to the home of a Texas senator. This outlandish trip, which serves as a bridge to the second section, is not a glorious triumph, and the team concocts yet another story to save their skins. Unfortunately, this story is not swallowed and Jun Do is sent to a prison

camp, “and from this point forward nothing further is known of the citizen Pak Jun Do” (175).

In the second half of the novel, the “Confessions of Commander Ga,” in a very American act of reinvention, Jun Do steals a Party leader’s identity and escapes from prison camp. Despite the fact that he is clearly *not* Ga, he usurps the Commander’s life—and wife—a story that is authenticated by the Dear Leader himself, who need only proclaim “And here is the real Commander Ga” for it to be fact (Johnson 258). Ga is in love with the wife, the actress and national treasure Sun Moon, and the second half of the novel concerns his attempts to not only assume his predecessor’s family, but also plot their escape from North Korea. Ga’s story is interspersed with the story of his interrogator and “biographer,” who functions as a particularly hapless and mystified detective and whose job it is to capture and record Ga’s “confessions,” which, like countless other such stories, is intended to languish in a dusty vault, forgotten and unread. The novel is framed and interrupted by the inescapable voices of the omnipresent loudspeakers, which narrate not only daily life, but also, at some points, their skewed version of Ga’s reclaimed “biography,” which is told in daily installments.

Stories intertwine and overlap; they parallel and diverge; they refute and revise. They are told from multiple unstable narrators, distorted by conflicting points of view. Characters disappear; plot lines hit dead ends. But this fun house technique is not the methodology of modernism; rather, it reflects the *modus operandi* of a dangerous country, one Johnson calls “the most mysterious place in the world” (*Newshour* 1/30/2012), a country so isolated—and so alien—as to be absurd. Because the West is consumed with the construction of the self, which we insist is subjective, distinct, and

individual, our master narrative is the bildungsroman, in which the narration of the self parallels the construction of Western nationalism. Above all, our stories construct, individuate, define, and—in our own way—glorify subjective identities in which the average Joe is made heroic by virtue of eponymy, and in which the trajectory of a life follows a fairly straight line of birth, maturation, marriage; beginning, middle, end. But the East favors the collective, and the stories they consume are not about individualized and cohesive subjects, particularized citizens who are distinguished by first and last names and who “make good” in the world; instead, they are about unnamed, interchangeable “soldiers” who sacrifice for the good of the group.<sup>14</sup> At the end of the novel, we are left with our nameless, powerless, clueless “detective,” who gathers the suspects (which includes, he realizes, himself) in a locked room, not to “solve” any mysteries of identity, but to make them disappear forever—ultimate freedom through a very final solution, the absolute dissolution of selfhood.

The very title, *The Orphan Master's Son*, alerts us to the very Western questions of selfhood and identity that Johnson will explore in the novel. This is not a typical Western narrative about a subject with a first and last name, a Jane Eyre or David Copperfield or Tom Sawyer, whose story of growth and narrative trajectory parallels the development of their nations. All we know coming in is that this story is about an orphan master's son—or is it? Not only has the character of Jun Do (a play on John Doe) revealed himself to be a master storyteller and extraordinarily unreliable and unstable narrator (after all, he literally becomes a different person halfway through the novel), but also Jun himself only assumes he is the Orphan Master's son, taking for dubious evidence the fact that the Orphan Master shows him no favoritism: “If someone wanted to figure it

out, it was pretty obvious—Jun Do had been there before all of them, and the reason he had never been adopted was because his father would never let someone take his only son” (Johnson 7). From the first, we are alerted to Jun Do’s capacity for self-delusion, for believing the stories he tells himself. The first clue that Jun is, in actuality an orphan, besides the fact that he lives in an orphanage, is his name: all orphans are named for one of the 114 Grand Martyrs of the Revolution, although he tells himself that his father couldn’t give him his name “or everyone would see the shame of how he was forced to raise his son” (25).

In some respects, it is beside the point: in a land where “replacement” spouses and parents are the norm, in which three generations of entire families disappear overnight, Jun, like every North Korean, has only one true father, his Dear Leader, Kim Jong Il. Kim, who scripts every movie and writes all the news, understands “the universal power of storytelling” (Johnson 207-208). But in this “motherless fatherland” (the title of one of Sun Moon’s movies), it is his *mother* for whom Jun Do actually longs. He convinces himself that a beautiful woman in a photograph is his mother and that “[s]ince beautiful women in the provinces get shipped to Pyongyang, that’s certainly what happened to his mother.” But the “surest evidence that the woman in the photo was Jun Do’s mother was the unrelenting way the Orphan Master singled him out for punishment. It could only mean that in Jun Do’s face, the Orphan Master saw the woman in the picture, a daily reminder of the eternal hurt he felt from losing her. Only a father in that kind of pain could take a boy’s shoes in winter. Only a true father, flesh and bone, could burn a son with the smoking end of a coal shovel” (7-8). These are the lies Jun Do tells himself, the lies he needs to believe in order to make sense of his absurd world. Jun Do has consumed

and internalized these stories, which allow him to construct and define himself as “the Orphan Master’s son,” and which condition him to accept the other stories he is continuously told by “them” in Pyongyang.

Because there is very little food in famine-plagued North Korea, what are consumed instead are stories, which serve as comfort, as nourishment, as currency, and as commodity. “When Commander Ga was young, sometimes all the orphans had to fill themselves with at the dinner table were stories” (Johnson 367). Jun is so hungry, starvation is so familiar, so naturalized, that he is suspicious of food, particularly abundance. If you are what you eat, Jun is made of stories and lies, and he cannot afford uncertainty and doubt. On a kidnapping mission in Japan, the “trees were filled with plums, so ripe the skins broke and juice ran in their hands. It seemed impossible, a thing not to be trusted” (22). This bounty threatens to shake his precariously constructed world of false words and contrived fictions. Jun Do has heard that in South Korea, “televisions were huge and there was all the rice you could eat. Yet he wanted no part of it—he was scared that if he saw it with his own eyes, his entire life would mean nothing. Stealing turnips from an old man who’d gone blind from hunger? That would have been for nothing.” In defiance, and to preserve his carefully-constructed beliefs, “Jun Do [throws] away his half-eaten plum. ‘I’ve had better,’ he [says]” (22). These echo the lies that the populace credit, stories such as the day “on the golf course . . . [when] Kim Jong Il had shot eleven holes in one. News of all the poverty in South Korea had [the people] depressed. The loudspeaker had broadcast a big story about starvation down there. *The Dear Leader is sending them aid. . . . I hope they can hang on until reunification.*” (272).

Yet, despite these farcical lies fed to the populace, in *301/302*, the South does indeed hunger for reunification.<sup>15</sup> According to Hyangjin Lee, Koreans have “conflicting ideas of . . . their self-identity as a divided nation” and “Koreans are still strongly committed to their common cultural tradition despite the partition into two states and the resultant political conflicts between them” (*Contemporary Korean Cinema*, 1). Elsewhere Lee asserts, “Park’s representations of transitional identity in contemporary Korea express the dynamics of a society experiencing chaos due to the violent encounter between long-standing cultural traditions and radical social transformations under foreign influences” (“Representing Sex,” 22). But in Park’s film, this chaos is not only due to the representations of transitional identity within South Korea, but also because of the relationship and divide between North and South Korea, which is represented by terrible eating and revolting consumption.<sup>16</sup> In the end the only solution to their ideological impasses, the isolation and emptiness of both, is reunification. Reunification, however, occurs through incorporation—an incorporation that is the result of the most repulsive consumption of all: cannibalism.

The relationship between East and West is more complicated in *301/302*, for in the film not only is the West represented by South Korea, a land that is usually considered “East” to those of us in the United States, and which has to contend with a complicated discursive formation of nationalism that reconciles “Confucianism” with “nationalism,” “community consciousness” with “Western individualism,” and antiquity with modernity, but also this identity is represented by women, which further complicates matters as “the Korean nation is ultimately the community of men, created by an extraordinary man, in which women exist only as its precondition.”<sup>17</sup> Park is alert to these

nuances, but in the film he initially reduces both women and ideological identities to their simplest binaries, in which the apartment 301 represents capitalism and the modern woman, while 302 represents the traditional female under the privations of the Kim regime.

*301/302* is a particularly unappetizing food movie. Released in 1995, it appeared during the throes of the Arduous March, which peaked between 1994 and 1998.<sup>18</sup> It is also a difficult movie to watch; nearly every scene involves the buying, preparing, eating, or vomiting of food, and seldom is that food appealing. In particular, Park is fond of close up of mouths slurping and chewing, chomping and smacking, emphasizing the voracity—and, in the explosive sounds of crunching, the sheer “me-ness”—of these “repulsive” consumers. Even when a dish looks tempting, more often than not it goes uneaten or in to the garbage can. When it is eaten, it is shoveled down with little regard for taste. Not only is one of the main characters, Song-Hee (Bang Eun-jin), overweight through much of the film, but the few times we see other Koreans (invariably while Song-Hee is shopping in a market), they tend to be plump. Song-Hee refers to herself as a “pig” on several occasions (and her husband agrees); the overtones of capitalist pig are unmistakable. One can’t help but imagine what a North Korean would feel, had he or she the opportunity to view the movie. Shock, certainly, and then, I would imagine, rage—not only for the lies their regime has fed them, but also for the waste of the Western world.

*301/302* is framed by the same narrative device as *The Orphan Master’s Son*: a clueless detective, who, according to Gretchen Papazian, “stands in for the film viewer” (158), or who, according to Lee, represents “the director’s other self” (“Representing Sex,” 11), attempts to piece together the mystery of 302’s disappearance. I, on the other

hand, see the detective as a function of the West's relentless drive to *know*—and our failures to understand. As does Johnson, Park raises questions of authority and narrative reliability. Joan Kee claims that although “relevant to Korean contemporaneity, *301/302* is a narrative that originates from the Westernized environment in which they live (451). Yet Park offers a more diverse and holistic perspective of Korea and is well aware of the divide that separates West and East, North and South. Papazian claims that Park gives us strangely high and strangely low camera angles, leaving the viewer feeling disoriented . . . In short, Park very carefully and purposefully manipulates and plays with the viewer's usual way of seeing and perceiving, creating a sense of confusion not dissimilar to that experienced by the anorexic . . . (157)

Although I agree that the extreme camera angles—and narrative discontinuity—are disorienting, I argue that this also gives us the experience of the conflicted relationship between East and West, North and South. Rather than rejecting North Korea out of hand, as Johnson does, as an evil empire that must be escaped, Park offers a vision of reunification—even if that reunification depends upon the inevitability of cannibalism, which is now, and perhaps always was, a symptom and manifestation of Western anxieties rather than Eastern tastes. We are witnessing a Westernized Easterner's perspective on the “Orient,” and with westernization comes social and perceptual disease.

We must disentangle nested stories: scenes within scenes and flashbacks merge together, disorienting the viewer, until a terrible order is restored at the end when finally we—the viewers, if not the detective—learn the horrible truth, and the solution to both women's loneliness. According to Diane Carson, the film

employs a disjointed narrative, which requires the viewer, like the investigating detective who serves as a catalyst for unraveling the story, to piece together the causes and effects of the central characters' behavior. In so doing, *301/302* involves the viewer in deeply disturbing ways, making it difficult, if not impossible, to watch casually. (266)

It is also significant that the detective never discovers *any* secrets, except for those Song-Hee chooses to disclose: the representative of patriarchy is as clueless at the end as he is in the beginning.<sup>19</sup>

Like *The Orphan Master's Son*, the text is extremely reflexive. The narrative form is the traditional teleological story metastasized, in which plot lines spiral and split, genres slip, and characters fade into other people. Perhaps because, as Carson maintains, the film is difficult to watch casually, Hangsoon Yi claims that the film forces the viewer to distance him or herself: "All fictions are reflexive to a degree. Although less explicit than in later works, Park's interest in reflexivity can be glimpsed in *301/302*. . . . The use of the intertitle, 'Could that be the end of the two women's loneliness?' at the end of *301/302* suggests a temporal ellipsis, implicitly acknowledges the viewers' perplexity at the improbable turn of the plot, and forces viewers to distance themselves from the bizarre story presented, to shift their attention to the storytelling method itself" (143).

While the storytelling is insistently complicated, the story is straightforward: recently divorced Song-Hee moves into apartment 301 and attempts to make friends with the inhabitant of 302, Yun-Hee (Hwang Sin-hye), by plying her with food. (While the patriarchal detective—and most critics—dehumanize the women by referring to them by their apartment numbers, I choose to address them by name, although, to be most

apropos, 301 should probably be referred to by name and 302 by number.) Yun-Hee, however, cannot eat, as she associates food with not only the rapes by her stepfather, but also with the accidental death and subsequent butchering of a neighbor child. As Yun-Hee refuses Song-Hee's increasingly aggressive force feedings, the neighbors grow increasingly hostile to—and obsessed with—each other. It is only when Yun-Hee begins to tell Song-Hee her story that the latter begins to understand her neighbor. It is not the detective, then, who can comprehend the victim; rather it is her murderer/savior who truly knows her for she has listened to her story. (And, in fact, the detective shows himself to be a particularly bad listener, assuming knowledge and jumping to conclusions.) In the end, Yun-Hee asks Song-Hee to cook and eat her, raising the possibility that this is indeed also the end to both of their loneliness.

According to Papazian, the

film's conceit involves a detective (Chu-Ryun Kim) trying to uncover what happened to 302 (the anorexic), who has seemingly disappeared. In this, the film places 'what happened to 302?' at its center, not only suggesting a concern with where she is but also foregrounding the puzzle of the anorexic itself: what happened to make her anorexic? Why can't she—or won't she—eat? (155)

This, to me, is a rather shallow reading of the film. While I agree that 302's inability to eat is central to the film, the characters' relationship to food is about much more than just their relationship to food. The trauma of what happened to Yun-Hee is much bigger than one little girl's tragic rape by her stepfather; it is the trauma of an entire nation that has been raped and abused by its Dear Leader. But "bad parenting" is not the purview of just

Yun-Hee and the North. Both Yun-Hee and Song-Hee are victims of dysfunctional families and long for genuine communion, a longing that takes form as dysfunctional relationships with food. In a rather depressing “blame the victim” maneuver, Lee claims the two women “isolate themselves from their own families and societies. Ultimately, they destroy their lives through their bizarre and excessive obsession with food and cooking.”<sup>20</sup> Lee also claims that the “destructive lives of the heroines . . . are ascribed to their rejection of ‘motherhood’” (10) rather than the fact that they are, for all intents and purposes, destroyed *by* their mothers’ rejection.

The film begins with a voiceover over the opening credits: the first words we hear are “In our refrigerator we have a lot of food.”<sup>21</sup> We see Song-Hee as a child, crouched on the floor before a stuffed refrigerator, waiting for her mother to come home and cook her a hot meal, and then, forced to fend for herself when her mother doesn’t come home, we see her cutting—symbolically castrating—a cucumber in thick, if even, slices. We understand that in the breakdown of traditional family roles, cooking has become her way to care for herself. It is not surprising that when her cooking—her very sense of self—is denied, she begins to go mad. Similarly Yun-Hee’s first words are “Our refrigerator is very big. We always have red meat. My mommy knows how to cut the meat off the bone very well. But I think I would prefer to have orange juice or green apples in the refrigerator.” We know that her mother is doing the job of a butcher, compromising (at least in traditional Confucian terms) both her gender and class, and we learn that meat is the price for which her mother has, in effect, sold her daughter.

While *The Orphan Master’s Son* has multiple narrative endings, *301/302* has multiple beginnings. Over the opening credits, we glimpse several scenes from the

middle of the film: food being cooked that will be eaten (or not) later, the “murdered” cactus, blood dripping, a gory knife. The next “beginning” is after the credits roll, when Song-Hee is interviewed by the detective, who says to her, “I’d like to ask you a few questions regarding your neighbor in 302.” This, we will discover, is actually the ending of the story. The detective is clueless, asking the wrong questions, wondering if 302 had a lot of men to her apartment, rejecting the “right” answers with a dismissive wave when Song-Hee hysterically denies (and simultaneously informs him) that she hasn’t hidden her neighbor.

Song-Hee begins to tell the story of her neighbor, and inadvertently uses the past tense. “Of course we were close. After all, we’re neighbors.” This, however, isn’t necessarily the case; like Jun Do, Song-Hee exists in a network of lies. It is here that we are first introduced to Yun-Hee, and we get admission into both of their apartments. We see Song-Hee’s arrival at her new empty apartment and hear her plans to renovate it in the latest styles of sleek chrome and new tile, even though the landlord assures her the floor is brand new. Her pantry emphasizes her Westernization: it contains Hills Bros coffee, Hunt’s Tomato Sauce, Planters Peanuts, and that Korean national delicacy, Spam. She listens to Western music, pop and classical. Later she tells us, “My ideas of happiness were trivial. Clean silverware and crystal glasses grazing are music to my ears. The music of Chopin, wearing dark red lipstick . . . I thought I could enjoy this happiness.” But her ex-husband complains, “Her only capabilities are eating, cooking, and thinking about sex.” She has gained weight in her marriage and is determined to go on a diet where she forgoes the luxuries of the West, butter, cream, and chocolate (until

she realizes that now “life’s no fun”). For inspiration, she has hung a life-sized poster of her thinner self on her door, and she is wearing denim cutoffs.

While Song-Hee is overstuffed with the spoils of consumer capitalism, Yun-Hee is starving. Yun-Hee’s apartment is made of natural materials, simple, plain, and traditional. She dresses in the drab Vinalon colors of a typical North Korean. When Song-Hee first sees her apartment, she says it “reminds her of a school library.” Her shelves are neatly ordered with rows of books. A writer who “can’t really write about what [she wants],” she consumes words and stories rather than food. When Song-Hee begins telling her story to the detective, one of the first things she says is “I have something to tell you. Yun-Hee never stopped writing. . . . She’s going to be a great author some day.” That day is now: Yun-Hee is now a part of Song-Hee, and thus she too is telling their story. Yun-Hee, “who likes to be alone,” represents the hunger, bodily distress, and isolationism of the North Korean. When the two women first see each other, they are initially hostile to each other:

She’s like a mannequin.

How revolting.

She’s like a skeleton.

She’s probably a major slut.

I must feed her some meat.

Although both women misunderstand each other, and misread each other according to their own cultural imperatives that see the North/East as starving and the South/ West as corrupt, both women actually hunger for closeness and understanding, for something to fill their emptiness: Song-Hee attempts to stuff herself with food and is a victim of her

uncontrollable desires, which are at odds with Confucian ideals; while Yun-Hee subsists on words and is a victim of a patriarchy that has perverted those same Confucian values and has brutalized and dehumanized her. When Song-Hee attempts to introduce herself, Yun-Hee slams the door. Yun-Hee attempts to keep her distance, but Song-Hee, as West and South, is relentlessly pushy, aggressive and invasive. When Song-Hee first moves in, she says, “I’d like for us to be close, neighbor.” The first invasion seems literal: Yun-Hee’s wall comes tumbling down. As the West invades, the books fall from the shelves, and this violation triggers painful memories of her stepfather raping her as a child.

As Yun-Hee’s small world is collapsing, Song-Hee is knocking out walls in order to make room for all her “stuff.” She carefully displays her dishes, having strongly identified with these vessels of domesticity. Her husband complains, “The only things that matter to you are dishes and cooking,” but this shouldn’t be a surprise as she has been raised in a culture, Confucian and capitalist, that values women as subservient receptacles. That this culture actually ideologically mirrors the North is emphasized by the book Song-Hee is reading: *The Mind Control Diet*. The West is brainwashed in its own way; we buy into a different ideology, one that promotes image and the individual in service of capitalist consumption, and which sees emaciation not as a tragic result of famine, but as a cultural ideal. This is reinforced by the unusual soundtrack in this scene. Beneath the music, almost subliminally but not quite, you can hear the propaganda-like strains of an oration. We too are constructed of words, and the stories and lies we tell ourselves are not necessarily our own.

Song-Hee, jealous of Yun-Hee’s thinness, becomes increasingly intrusive. She visits again, this time with a plate of sausages. Yun-Hee tells her that she has to refuse,

especially sausage. Song-Hee, obnoxious as ever, says, “You must not enjoy sex. Why? Were you raped?” Although unquestionably impolite, it also happens to be true, but Yun-Hee’s revulsion at the sight of sausage is more than just distaste for the phallic; later we will learn that she was forced to butcher the neighbor child, and we can assume that her rapacious family would not waste the meat, an echo of the rumors of cannibalism, a particular fear of the *kochebi*, the wandering swallows, the lost and orphaned children in famine-stricken North Korea.<sup>22</sup> (We are also uncomfortably reminded of the dubious refrain of the butcher to his customers, “This is good meat.”) Song-Hee, on the other hand, is controlled by her bodily desires: “Sex is just like cooking. I can’t control my desire for them.” Yun-Hee once again implores, “Please, I beg you, just leave me alone!” But Song-Hee misunderstands her and rages, “How dare she treat me like a dirty whore!”

Song-Hee goes on a reign of food terror. She cooks the most repellant, difficult, disturbing and indigestible foods she can find—humongous clams, greasy soup with mammoth bones, slimy noodles with raw vegetables, spiky nettles—vowing “I’ll make you weigh 155 pounds even if I have to force feed you!”<sup>23</sup> Demonstrating how little she understands the real issues of her neighbor, she imagines Yun-Hee stuffing her self with her food and fantasizes that she is growing fat. But just as North Korea continually refuses food aid, and squanders it when it is accepted, dish after dish goes into the garbage.<sup>24</sup> Just as Jun Do vomited meat when he finally got his fill in Texas, Yun-Hee literally can’t eat. When they meet in their hallway, their own personal little DMZ, Song-Hee catches Yun-Hee with her garbage bag. Yun-Hee apologizes, explaining, “I couldn’t eat it,” but Song-Hee doesn’t understand that she means it literally. Song-Hee goes berserk and sweeps aside Yun-Hee’s papers and books, demanding that she eat her

garbage: “You have to eat everything. It’s my cooking. I cooked them myself!” Never has food replated from the trash looked less appetizing, but Song-Hee is hysterical, screaming, “I even got a divorce because of my cooking!” She sees the rejection of her food as the rejection of her self: “Who do you think you are, throwing away my food?” She screams, “Die, fat pig. Chew and eat up,” and we understand that her rage and revulsion are actually directed toward herself, and that she too is a victim of her culture.

Although Song-Hee identifies with her food and her dishes, Yun-Hee identifies with her cactus. It is the only living thing in her apartment and an obvious symbol of the toughness and hardiness of North Koreans who have managed to survive on so little. When Song-Hee invites Yun-Hee over and says “I made this specially for you. I think you’ll be able to eat this,” the audience is apprehensive, for films have trained us to fear the cloche, and we’ve already been informed that Song-Hee served her husband Fluffy, his pet dog. Sure enough, it’s Yun-Hee’s mutilated cactus, with a side of blood red sauce. As she watches Song-Hee vindictively eat her metonymic other, Yun-Hee has flashbacks of butchering the child. She repeatedly tells Song-Hee, “I wish I could just disappear,” and after finally listening to—and really hearing—Yun-Hee’s story, Song-Hee begins to understand her. She tries to mother Yun-Hee in a different way, caring rather than nagging, telling her, “From now on, I’ll only make you food that is soothing and comforting.” She cooks her creamy rice and pureed veggies. But it’s too late for Yun-Hee to be nurtured.<sup>25</sup> At this point, the narrative frame collapses once again, and Song-Hee tells Yun-Hee her story, what led to her divorce, and why she cooked the dog. She admits, “If we had stayed together I would have thought about killing him. How would he taste? Probably not that good.” Yun-Hee wonders, “But...How did you come up with

the idea of cooking Fluffy?” Song-Hee explains, “You always want to try new ingredients when cooking.”

The capitalist appetite is insatiable, voracious—repulsive. As Song-Hee wanders through the market, she realizes she’s tried everything and concludes, “There is absolutely no dish for Yun-Hee to eat. Not even something new.” She licks her lips and looks into the camera, incriminating us. Yun-Hee disrobes and asks, “What do you think? Look at me, I’m still alive. Why? Don’t I look tasty to you?” In a moment that my students *always* think is going to turn sexual, Song-Hee drops to her knees before the naked Yun-Hee—and kills her. In the background we hear the beeping of a heartbeat monitor, as though, through death and communion, they are reborn, becoming one. Whether it is endo- or exo-cannibalism, eating another human being is never without meaning. For Song-Hee and Yun-Hee, it is clearly incorporation, a way for the two to finally grow close. Park emphasizes the ritual of the moment. Song-Hee lights a candle, pours a glass of wine, and spears a bite of stew. She eats reverently for once, savoring it, rather than her usual mindless shoveling. She sees Yun-Hee across the table, able to eat at last. They are finally unified over this gruesome bowl of stew. Song-Hee’s fork clatters to her plate; she has lost her appetite: repulsive capitalist consumption, it seems, has finally reached its limit. So, *does* this mean the end to their loneliness? Song-Hee, her hair cut short, begins to transform into Yun-Hee. But now she is haunted by Yun-Hee. At the end, we see the ghost of Yun-Hee assure her neighbor, “I will start a cooking journal for you, Song-Hee. I guarantee you’ll enjoy eating.” The two women no longer mirror each other; they *are* their mirrors.

Like Papazian, Lee sees the film's cannibalism as the "emancipation of the female body from the patriarch [which] is the symbol of her new sexual identity, but is only achieved through the invitation of death" ("Representing Sex," 10). But the film's cannibalism helps to explain how the Kim regime has managed to maintain control for so long, why the philosophy of Juche has such seductive power. The desire for the self to be subsumed by the other is profound. It is denied in the West, where instead the self merges with material objects, such as Song-Hee's identification with her dishes. Juche,

often translated as subjectivity or mastery of self, brings out the duality of the very idea of subject. While we often take for granted the idea of subject as autonomous individual, paradoxically 'subject' has two opposing meanings denoting, on the one hand, placed under authority or control, determined by forces greater than itself, and, on the other hand, synonymous with the idea of the autonomous individual person, that is, the self, an agent of conscious action, determining one's own fate. (Kim 494)

This duality of the subject is literally and visually rendered in the film, in which the two women are doubled and re-split; their struggle between autonomy and determination, and their attempts to master their own stories, is not reconciled, merely reversed: as one consumes, the other subsumes.

In the West, according to Kim, "the process of delineating a strong subject (analogous to the creation of strict territorial borders and boundaries) results in the construction of the Other, the foreign and the alien by which one's one identity is defined. So, is there a way out of this continuous cycle of Othering or is it inevitable?"

(495). Park shows us a way out. As the other merges, the self dissolves. In that reading, the end is less gruesome than potentially liberating. Lee claims, “Cannibalism for them [Song-Hee and Yun-Hee] is the symbolic expression of denying men’s proprietorship over a woman’s body even after her death. Through the ritual of death, the two women set themselves free from male-dominated society and restore their identity in ultimate terms” (“Representing Sex,” 15). But the two women do not restore their identity at all; at best, they exchange it; at worst, they obliterate it. However, there is potential in this obliteration. Kim explains,

If we let go of the idea of a coherent stable sense of subject, which separates ‘us’ from ‘them,’ then subjects can be thought of as momentary, a process of doing rather than being, playing in a funhouse full of mirrors of various shapes and sizes, where one’s image and that of others constantly shifts and changes. Needless to say, this kind of ‘playfulness’ would be difficult to accept for those under threat or in a position of weakness, when one feels insecure about one’s identity or very survival.

(495)

In the end, it is because of this “position of weakness” that both Johnson’s and Park’s dis-Orientalism ends up being yet another strategy of Orientalism. Song-Hee has to kill Yun-Hee to incorporate her, and the absorption of Yun-Hee fundamentally changes both of them. Otherness dissolves, but only temporarily. While initially we think the voracious appetites of Song-Hee, the South/West, have finally been tamed, at the very end, we see that Yun-Hee has not been absorbed so much as transformed into the dominant partner. The mirror has not been broken after all, just reversed. Presumably this will be the fate of

North Korea: it will be consumed by the South, for the capitalist repulsive appetite is unstoppable. And its consumption will awaken its own dormant appetites; it will see through the other's looking class; it will regurgitate the other's stories and think them new.

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned Mrs. Song, whose husband died of starvation, his last words, after not having eaten for three days, "Come darling. Let's go to a good restaurant and buy a nice meal" (Demick, "The Good Cook" n.p.). Despite the fact that the regime in effect killed her husband, her mother-in-law, and her twenty-five-year old son, Mrs. Song still "professed a certain nostalgia for the idealism that used to propel her out of bed early to dust the portrait of Kim Il-sung" (Demick, "The Good Cook" n.p.). Mrs. Song offers us a possible explanation about "why there are those who are 'true believers' and those who are not"; why some of us are full, but hungry; why others starve for their beliefs (Kim 493). We tend to think that there are only three basic necessities: food, clothing, and shelter. Mrs. Song reminds us that a good story might be the most powerful need of all. In the end, we all yearn for communion; we all hunger for happily-ever-after.

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### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Christopher R. Beha, "Johnson has said that his latest book began in a similarly farcical spirit, as a short story called 'The Best North Korean Short Story of 2005,' inspired by the 'loonier' elements of Kim Jong-il's regime. But after some research, which included a trip to Pyongyang, Johnson realized that the 'gravity' of his

subject matter instilled ‘a sense of duty.’” (Christopher R. Beha, “Kim Jong-il’s Romantic Rival,” *New York Times Book Review*, January 13, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/15/books/review/the-orphan-masters-son-by-adam-johnson-book-review.html?\\_r=3](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/15/books/review/the-orphan-masters-son-by-adam-johnson-book-review.html?_r=3).) It is interesting to note that *The New York Times* hyphenates the name of Kim Jong-il. According to Blaine Harden in *Escape from Camp 14* (New York: Viking, 2012), this is a South, rather than North, Korean convention (1).

<sup>2</sup> According to Johnson, “I was shown everything they wanted me to see. And I was minded very closely. But I think there are ways to see through the propaganda.” (Brown, “Author Adam Johnson.”)

<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to classify the North Korean government, which is a totalitarian dynasty that merges elements of Confucianism and Stalinism with an (un)healthy dose of Maoist cultishness. The founder and “Great Leader,” Kim Il Sung, espoused (and often claimed credit for) the philosophy of Juche, which, among other ideals, promotes the sacrifice of the individual for the good of the community. For the purposes of this paper, I generally refer to it as the Kim regime. For an in-depth discussion of North Korean politics, please see, for example, Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> This essay is part of a larger project, *Repulsive Consumption: Food, Family & Fictions in Film and Literature*, which examines the relationships among food, family, and narratives in consumer capitalist societies.

<sup>5</sup> In *Nothing to Envy* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009), Barbara Demick explains that Kim Il Sung “wanted love. Murals in vivid poster colors showed him surrounded by pink-cheeked children looking on with adoration as he bestowed on them a pearly-toothed, ear-to-ear grin. Toys and bicycles clutter the background of these images—Kim Il-sung didn’t want to be Joseph Stalin; he wanted to be Santa Claus. His dimpled cheeks made him appear more cuddly than other dictators. He was to be regarded as a father, in the Confucian sense of commanding respect and love. He wanted to ingratiate himself into North Korean families as their own flesh and blood” (45).

<sup>6</sup> Certainly the *New York Times Book Review* takes him to task, claiming that Johnson’s novel “offers the reader a tremendous amount of fun. This isn’t entirely a compliment. Should ‘fun’ really be the first word to describe a novel about one of the worst places on earth? Questions of the moral responsibility attendant on certain artistic subjects can be vexing and frankly tiresome, resurrected with the appearance of every summer blockbuster about the Holocaust or some other historical horror. They would seem to be only more vexing in the case of North Korea, where the horror is still going on and so little is revealed to the outside world, even as the country passes from the ‘Dear Leader’ to his untested son. But this matter of responsibility is largely beside the point in the case of Johnson’s novel, since he clearly intends to do his material justice. The better question is why such a talented writer has failed to make good on that intention. . . . Ultimately,

the one rule of art is that you're permitted anything you can get away with. I raise the question of responsibility with respect to 'The Orphan Master's Son' because the book itself seems to raise it, and because Johnson's prodigious talent and inventiveness aren't enough to silence it. Johnson's very sense of duty may have been what led him astray." (Beha, "Romantic Rival.")

<sup>7</sup> Johnson recognizes that this impulse toward individuation is "American": "In America, the stories we tell ourselves and we tell each other in fiction have to do with individualism. Every person here is the center of his or her own story. And our job as people and as characters is to find our own motivations and desires, to overcome conflicts and obstacles toward defining ourselves so that we grow and change. But, in North Korea, it's just the opposite." (Brown, "Author Adam Johnson.")

<sup>8</sup> According to Demick in *Nothing to Envy*, *juche* "is commonly translated as 'self-reliance.' *Juche* drew on Marx's and Lenin's ideas about the struggle between landlord and peasant, between rich and poor. It similarly declared that man, not God, shaped his own fate. But Kim Il-sung rejected traditional Communist teachings about universalism and internationalism. He was a Korean nationalist in the extreme. . . . 'Establishing *juche* means, in a nutshell, being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one's own country. This means holding fast to an independent position, rejecting dependence on others, using one's own brains, believing in one's own strength, displaying the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance,' [Kim Il-sung] expounded in one of his many treatises" (44). Yet *juche* differs from Western individualism in that ultimately the self is empowered for the sake of the community: the "one" is subsumed by, and for the good of, the "we."

<sup>9</sup> In reality, the majority of North Koreans defect to China and South Korea; according to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, a total of 8,661 North Korean defectors arrived between 1990 and 2006, although other sources estimate numbers as high as 23,000 North Koreans living in South Korea. Estimates range from 30,000 to 300,000 North Koreans living in China. In comparison, "Since the passage of the [North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004], the [United States] has resettled 37 North Korean refugees (<http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=668>). Kim, in "(Dis)Orienting," questions whether it is even correct to consider all of these expatriates "defectors": "In a 2004 survey of 100 defectors. . . 69 percent said they preferred to leave South Korea and fully 33 percent said they would return to North Korea if they could. In fact, the figures for the number of defectors rose sharply only after 2001 as a result of the devastating famines of the mid 1990s as people left to escape starvation: 'In a 2004 survey of 4000 defectors, 55 percent said they had left North Korea due to economic difficulties, whereas only 9 percent cited political oppression.' Such statistics call into question whether it is even appropriate to refer to North Koreans in the South as defectors, as many do . . ." (Oh and Hassig qtd. in Kim, 485).

<sup>10</sup> These distinctions are examined in more detail in my work-in-progress, *Repulsive Consumption: Food, Family & Fictions in Film and Literature*.

<sup>11</sup> Demick points out that “[e]xact figures are impossible to tally, since North Korean hospitals were prohibited from reporting starvation as a cause of death.” (“The Good Cook,” *New Yorker*, November 2, 2009, Vol. 85, Issue 35.)

<sup>12</sup> Most reviewers seem to lose sight of the fact that the novel is an act of the imagination. Johnson never claims to be representing one reality, one truth, but critics certainly review it that way. David Ignatius of the *Washington Post*, touts *Son* almost as a primary source: “When English readers want to understand what it [Kim’s North Korea] was about—how people lived and died inside a cult of personality that committed unspeakable crimes against its citizens—I hope they will turn to this carefully documented story.” David Ignatius, “‘The Orphan Master’s Son’ an audacious, believable tale,” *The Washington Post*, January 9, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/book-review-the-orphan-masters-son-by-david-ignatius/2012/01/02/gIQAIZWZmP\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/book-review-the-orphan-masters-son-by-david-ignatius/2012/01/02/gIQAIZWZmP_story.html). (Considering the novel contains not a single citation—and why should it?—I’m not sure how it can be considered “carefully documented.”) *Publisher’s Weekly* goes further: “Johnson’s novel accomplishes the seemingly impossible: an American writer has masterfully rendered the mysterious world of North Korea with the soul and savvy of a native, from its orphanages and its fishing boats to the kitchens of its high-ranking commanders.” Starred review from January 2012, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-8129-9279-3>. This of course begs the question: how in the world would *Publisher’s Weekly* know what constitutes the “soul and savvy of a native” North Korean? Probably the greatest validation of the novel comes from the journalist Barbara Demick. Demick writes, “When I stumbled across a story last year in *Granta* magazine, about a North Korean intelligence officer on a fishing ship, I assumed it had to be part of a memoir by a North Korean, so accurate were the details. . . . Johnson has made just one trip in his life to North Korea, but he’s managed to capture the atmosphere of this hermit kingdom better than any writer I’ve read.” Demick, however, recognizes that the novel is a work of fiction: “As a journalist who has reported extensively on the country, I fear that some readers might have a hard time figuring out where fact leaves off and fiction begins. . . . Even so, *The Orphan Master’s Son* deserves a place up there with dystopian classics such as *Nineteen Eighty-four* and *Brave New World*, but readers need to be reminded: it is a novel. . . .” Barbara Demick, “The Orphan Master’s Son by Adam Johnson—a review,” *The Guardian*, 17 February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/feb/17/orphan-masters-son-adam-johnson-review>.

<sup>13</sup> According to Demick in *Nothing to Envy*, in every home, “a framed portrait of Kim Il-sung hung on an otherwise bare wall. People were not permitted to put anything else on that wall, not even pictures of their blood relatives. Kim Il-sung was all the family you needed—at least until the 1980s, when portraits of Kim Jong-il . . . were hung alongside those of his father. Later came a third portrait, of the father and son together. The North Korean newspapers liked to run ‘human interest stories’ about heroic citizens who lost their lives rescuing the portraits from fire or flood. The Workers’ Party distributed the pictures free of charge along with a white cloth to be stored in a box beneath them. It could be used only to clean the portraits. . . . About once a month, inspectors from the Public Standards Police would drop by to check on the cleanliness of the portraits” (46).

<sup>14</sup> This is portrayed in Sun Moon's films, such as *A True Daughter of the Country*, in which she is "just a fishing-village girl from Cheju, but after swimming through the corpses of patriots in blood-red waters, [she emerges] a different person . . . a woman soldier . . ." (215); or the aptly named *Motherless Fatherland* in which "Sun Moon, clad only in bloodied gauze, emerges from the battlefield having saved the national flag, while behind her the American Army is in ruins, foundering and aflame" (219).

<sup>15</sup> Most critics, such as Gretchen Papazian, in "Anorexia Envisioned" in *Reel Food*, Ed. by Anne L. Bower (New York: Routledge, 2004), view *301/302* in terms of the anorexic female and the male gaze and ultimately see the cannibalism of the ending as a comment upon "the dilemma of contemporary Western womanhood" (155). Papazian claims that the film "implies, as one woman ingests the other, that social norms inhibit the possibility of a self-assured, independent woman. Only by breaking those norms, by breaking taboos, can a woman come into her own" (155). See also Joan Kee's "Claiming Sites of Independence: Articulating Hysteria in Pak Ch'l-su's *301/302* in *positions: east asia cultures critique*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Fall 2001, pp. 449-466, which argues that "the independence exhibited by both women is more plausible and resilient because it depicts women who can dislodge themselves from their dependence on men. By developing a language of hysteria from symptoms ordinarily classified as hysterical, the female protagonists evade patriarchally defined scripts, and this allows them to negotiate a space that is separate from the patriarchy" (450).

<sup>16</sup> In "Transgressing Boundaries: From Sexual Abuse to Eating Disorders in *301/302*," Diane Carson agrees that the film is as "resonant with overarching metaphoric content and tropes of nationalism as it is closely focused on personal worlds gone awry" and that it "extracts and explores a rich, revealing spectacle of gender resistance and collapse without sacrificing more far-reaching implications of a national identity in crisis" (265). While Carson focuses on the "spectacle of gender resistance and collapse," my focus is the more "far-reaching implications of a national identity in crisis." Carson sees this national identity crisis in terms of South Korea, whereas I am interested in this crisis in terms of both North and South.

<sup>17</sup> Although I go into more detail regarding this issue in my book chapter, this subject is too complex for the constraints of this article. For a deeper examination of the role of women and the discursive formation of Korean national identity, see, for example, Seungsook Moon's "Begetting the Nation" in Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, eds., *Dangerous Women: Gender & Korean Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 42.

<sup>18</sup> For details regarding North Korea's famine, see, for example, Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland's *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> In "Representing Sex and Sexuality," Lee performs a significant misreading of the film, claiming, "In the end, the detective is informed of the secret of the woman who disappeared by the one left" (12), fundamentally altering the meaning of the film and

ascribing omniscience to patriarchy that Park denies. In actuality, “the one left” asks the detective to leave.

<sup>20</sup> In “Representing Sex,” Lee points out that we are seeing “women’s sexuality and role conflicts represented from [a] male subjective point of view. . . . Especially, the motifs of food combined with the codes and conventions of sexuality are used to express the absurdity of the colonial and post-colonial experiences of the two peoples who seek to cope with the changes” (8).

<sup>21</sup> In *Nothing to Envy*, Demick informs us that refrigerators are “a rarity in [North Korea] where hardly anybody had enough fresh food to keep cold” (33).

<sup>22</sup> In *Nothing to Envy*, Demick claims, “There were strange stories going around about adults who preyed on children. Not just for sex, but for food. Hyuck was told about people who would drug children, kill them, and butcher them for meat. . . . Whether urban legend or not, tales of cannibalism swept through the markets” (168).

<sup>23</sup> In “Articulating Hysteria,” Kee informs us that the “clam (*chogye*) [is] slang for vagina” (458).

<sup>24</sup> See “North Korea Refuses Food Aid,” *BBC News*, 18 March 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7949785.stm>.

<sup>25</sup> That Yun-Hee is permanently damaged by her trauma is not surprising. Martin Fackler, in “Young North Korean Defectors Struggle in the South,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 2012, tells the story of Kim Seong-cheol, a young student who dropped out of college after one semester, explaining, “I just couldn’t shake the memory of hunger from my mind.” [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/13/world/asia/young-north-korean-defectors-struggle-in-the-south.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/13/world/asia/young-north-korean-defectors-struggle-in-the-south.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)

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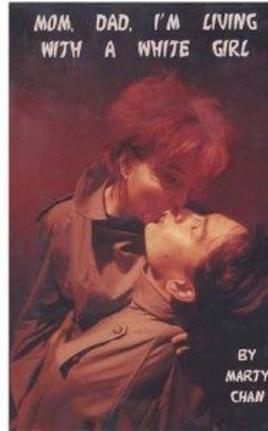
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## Out of the Shadows: Three Asian-Canadian Playwrights Confront Film Noir



**Karen L. Gygli**

Both theatre and film have reflected the troubled history of race and gender relations in North America, often through the most popular genres, as they have competed for audiences since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In *Performing Asian America*, Josephine Lee speaks of “shared strategies by which plays and playwrights make . . . dramatic form . . . inseparable from the meaning of race and ethnicity” (1). One strategy might be the use of past cinematic conventions in contemporary live performance. Through re-creating and parodying popular cinematic characters, genres and styles, live theatre can highlight and interrogate film’s ability to capture, as if in amber, frames of reference from the past that still influence perceptions of race, ethnicity and gender in the present.

The cinematic conventions of *film noir* have particularly rich potential for readings of how gender and ethnicity are presented on the stage. In three recent Asian Canadian stage and radio plays, the frame of *film noir* becomes a means to subvert expectations and complicate stereotypical stage portrayals of Asian Canadian women. Since the plots of classic *film noir* traditionally centered upon white males, often through their rueful voice-overs, Asian women

were mostly confined to the periphery of the story, through stark contrasts of the dark *femme fatale* (such as the infamous “Dragon Lady”) with her blonder, less sexually-threatening counterpart, and through personifying the dangers of ethnic haunts such as “Chinatowns.” However, in these three plays—*The Tale of a Mask* by Terry Watada, *Mom, Dad, I’m Living with a White Girl* by Marty Chan, and *Nancy Chew Enters the Dragon: An Impenetrable Oriental Mystery*, a radio play by Betty Quan—the playwrights question these *film noir* conventions by allowing their complicated and multidimensional Asian- and Asian-Canadian characters to come out of the shadows in order to claim center stage. In so doing, these three playwrights highlight and challenge, in very similar ways, one of classic *film noir*’s most troubling legacies: namely, the use of race, ethnicity and gender in many of the original films to establish physical and psychological danger zones “beyond the pale” for the white male normative protagonists.

Eric Lott, in his essay “The Whiteness of *Film Noir*,” argues that the establishment of clear racial and ethnic boundaries was central to its audience appeal. He calls *film noir* “a sort of whiteface dream of social anxieties with explicitly racial sources, resolved on film to the criminal undertakings of abjected whites.” (90) He notes that *film noir* of the classic period coincided with racial and ethnic tensions exacerbated by World War II, exemplified by the notorious Executive Order 9066 which interned Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans who refused to sign a loyalty oath (see Lott, 88-90). He argues that the films define the zones of transgression (where the protagonist finds himself) in terms of race through the use of seemingly marginal presence of ethnic objects and minor characters, such as the African-American janitor cleaning up after the insurance office has closed in *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) and Beijing Opera actors in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1948). Even if these “exotic” characters seem

to inhabit the margins of the story and thus seem insignificant, he argues, they are nonetheless creating a space for “stained” white characters. It is telling that in *Double Indemnity*, for example, we see Walter Neff, alone in the insurance office except for the African-American janitors, seemingly turning blacker and blacker in the black and white cinematography, with an ever-widening bloodstain on his white shirt, as he narrates his story into the Dictaphone (Lott, 85-87).

Of course, *film noir* is famous for its use of gendered transgression as well. Most *film noir* films have a female character who starkly contrasts with another female character, or even with her own representation. Women are thus objectified and simplified through a process of duplication and high contrast. Sometimes the male protagonist is obsessed with a *femme fatale* or sexually destructive, socially marginal woman, while also being emotionally attached to a virginal, asexual woman who is an upstanding member of society. Janey Place has argued that the coupling of the *femme fatale* who has access to the power of her sexuality, with the good woman who “redeems” the protagonist, upholds the reactionary male-centered stance of noirs because the *femme fatale* is punished at the end and sexuality is returned to the realm of marriage and home. Yet it is the bad girl who is most memorable and dynamic, Place argues, as such ambitious, sexy, powerful female characters had never before been seen in American cinema (Place, in Kaplan, *Women in Film noir*, 47-68). Karen Hollinger notes that the *film noir* voice-over narration creates a male frame through which the *femme fatale* can be viewed, yet this narration can “also open up, within the films, points of resistance to this ideological conservatism” because the *femme fatale* is given “freedom of movement and visual dominance . . . an extremely powerful visual presence” (245-6).

The danger of crossing boundaries which are associated with gender and race, is signaled

to the audience not only explicitly by characters in their lines, but also implicitly through the use of lighting, set dressing and costume. E. Ann Kaplan, in her article, “The Dark Continent of *Film noir*: Race, Displacement and Metaphor in Tourneur’s *Cat People* (1942) and Welles’ *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948),” argues that “the visual style of *film noir* refers to western culture’s unconscious linking of the ‘darkness’ of the psyche (especially the female psyche) not only with the literal darkness of racial others, but also with unconscious fear/attraction for the racial others that the ‘Imaginary’ of dominant white culture represses, both literally and symbolically. . . Discourses in both [films] reveal white culture’s fears of what might happen if gender and racial boundaries were not managed and kept in place” (185-6). Thus, race/ethnicity can be and is often equated with a *femme fatale* “bad girl” in *film noir*.

In this way also, boundaries into transgression can be presented as spatial locales, as well as linguistic constructs. “Chinatowns,” or city districts predominantly populated by Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans, have signified dangerous, uncivilized zones of seduction and violence, both historically, and in many a *film noir* and detective story in the 1940s and later. Such critics as James S. Moy, Gina Marchetti and Eric Lott note how many white filmmakers (in such films as *Chinatown* [Polanski, 1974] and *Lady from Shanghai*, among others) have “exoticized” Chinatown as a dangerous place of mystery and sensuality, a place that is difficult to escape, a lure of naïve white women, “a dark and corrupt corner of America that can never be part of the mainstream” (Marchetti, 51)—everything but a place to live and work from day to day.

This shorthand use of Chinatown to symbolize exoticism, danger and sexual perversion goes back to the early twentieth century and the images of historical Chinatown neighborhoods presented in newspapers and magazines, as James S. Moy indicates in his study *Marginal Sites*,

where he outlines the role that photographer Arthur Genthe played in peddling this exoticized Chinatown. In his self-portrait within Chinatown, entitled “An Unsuspecting Victim,” Genthe darkens the photo of himself reading what looks like a map, and cuts out all pedestrians except an old man and a child in Chinese dress. These two watch Genthe closely in a sinister way. Moy argues that for the American public, “the Chinese had to be reconstituted as forever foreign, despite their presence in America” (71-80) and that this perception helped make tourist attractions out of Asian neighborhoods in various cities. Moy thus illustrates that the constructed image of an exotic, perverse yet alluring Chinatown was a durable one: “As a touristic geography, its consistency through time is astonishing” (67).

The irony of this, which Peter Kwong argues in *The New Chinatown*, is that Asian North Americans were forced to create these urban neighborhoods after being driven out of small towns after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 (13). Ronald Takaki also notes that there was nothing inevitable or “natural” about Asians establishing small businesses in the Chinatowns of the U.S. or Canada, but that it was a response to very concrete economic and social pressures, which in turn caused Chinatown inhabitants to be marked as “strangers” for creating these enclaves (125). The possibilities of upward mobility out of Chinatown, of assimilation into white North American neighborhoods and suburbs, and of the American Dream being open to Asian immigrants, were countered by plays such as *A Trip to Chinatown* in 1881, and films such as *The Cheat* (DeMille, 1915) and *Broken Blossoms or The Yellow Man and the Girl* (Griffith, 1919), which “confirmed visually to white audiences the subtle and intimate dangers of Chinatown as home to the Yellow Peril in their midst. . . . Even Asians who might appear assimilated . . . were, beneath their surfaces, cruel and brutal. Even the wispy and pure-of-heart Cheng Huan [in *Broken Blossoms*] could transform a white girl into a prostitute” (Robert

G. Lee, 133).

Thus, the use of Chinatown settings as an “exotic” signifier in a newspaper or magazine photograph served to reinforce social and legal isolation of Asian immigrants, yet also promoted tourism and sensationalized a story. The creation of a Chinatown setting in a film or play about exotic and sinister Asian characters, by and for white audiences, served to cordon off Asian characters as forever different and never to be fully trusted, hence reinforcing what was already a fact in much of North America. Asian-Canadian playwrights using Chinatown as a stage setting to confront this historic and artistic “ghettoizing” definitely warrants examination.

Like the use of Genthe’s photographic frame, the use of voice-over narration and its effect on the structure and use of time within the narrative was key to making the white male character the frame through which all other genders and races are perceived. Karen Hollinger contrasts the use of the voice-over in *film noir* with its use in other film genres such as the war film, which used it as a means of creating verisimilitude: “In *film noir*, first person voice-over narrators, in fact, frequently offer their confessions to patriarchal authority figures within the film text or to the film audience itself who seem to be asked to grant a kind of absolution and to act as a curative force” (244). Thus, *film noir* protagonists are noted for transgressing boundaries and getting trapped in the shadowy margins. They are forever separated from “normal,” “wholesome,” middle-class society. Understanding this reading of gender and race/ethnicity in the original *film noir* films to create boundaries “beyond the pale” is essential, I argue, to understanding why the use of *film noir* conventions might be attractive to playwrights exploring race and ethnicity today.

In *The Tale of a Mask*, by Terry Watada, a detective is investigating a murder/suicide in the Chinatown district of Toronto. Aiko Shinde stabbed her husband, Masato, 33 times,

strangled her young son Kentaro, and then hanged herself. As with *Equus*, *Stop Kiss*, and other crime plays, the audience will see the events that led up to the murder in cinematic “flashbacks.” The detective (referred to only as “The Detective” in the play, and described as a “[m]iddle aged white male in a rumpled suit” with a “hint of seediness” in the list of characters provided by the playwright) is puzzled by the events which led up to the crime, revealing the little knowledge he has of the people on his Chinatown beat. He muddles names and jumps to assumptions that drug gangs were involved with this murder, much to the openly expressed scorn of Setsuko Harrison, a Japanese widow of a Canadian husband, and the employer of Masato Shinde. She tells him that Aiko Shinde was increasingly isolated simply because she did not work and knew no English. Aiko was also depressed because Masato was never home, since he spent his days working at the Japanese restaurant and his nights trying to become a karaoke star.

*The Tale of a Mask* borrows the voice-over narration of such films as *Double Indemnity*. However, there are some significant differences in how this play uses the voice-over. In this live stage play, the character called the Detective is not a disembodied voice or a sound effect, as is often the case in these films; on the contrary, he is an actor embodied onstage throughout the play, a white male Canadian, wearing a “rumpled suit” with a “hint of seediness,” an allusion in Watada’s character description to such *film noir* detectives as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. The author makes explicit not just the narrator’s state of mind, but his gender and ethnicity. Indeed, as the action progresses, it becomes clear that his gender and ethnicity “color” his perceptions and make his detective work difficult if not impossible. As the Detective investigates, the middle-class status of the Shinde family reinforces his assumption that drug dealers must have been involved: “[The Shindes are] so successful, you gotta figure, they got no problems” (74). He and Ms. Henry, little Kentaro’s teacher, also can hardly believe that a

woman, even a depressed, delusional woman, would kill her own son; in this way gendered assumptions also contribute to misperceptions.

The Detective's physical presence aside, a seasoned *film noir* viewer would assume that his narration makes him the central storytelling voice; instead, he is rather marginal to the entire story and that marginal state is made repeatedly explicit. Unlike the central protagonist voice-over in *Double Indemnity*, the Detective has not witnessed or participated in these flashback events; he is hearing about them for the first time from Mrs. Harrison, a Japanese-Canadian resident of Chinatown. When the play flashes back to earlier scenes, the audience can see that Mrs. Harrison's hunches are correct and begin to trust her as the authority, not the Detective. This device clearly undermines the usual *film noir* centering of the white male voice-over authority. Also significantly, the Detective is unnamed, unlike Walter Neff and Philip Marlowe, and even more importantly, unlike the Shinde family and Mrs. Harrison, the Japanese and Japanese-Canadian characters in the play. This reverses the state of affairs in *The Lady from Shanghai*, with its anonymous denizens of Chinatown, gazed upon by Michael O'Hara and Elsa Bannister, white characters whose names we know.

The play also uses Noh drama conventions, the ritualistic traditional Japanese theatre form, as a means of foreshadowing and character development. This use of Noh portrays the attraction of traditional Japanese culture to Aiko, who has already, earlier in the play, voiced a disquieting empathy with nationalist writer Yukio Mishima, who committed suicide by *hara kiri*. Both the modern day scenes and the Noh scenes use a Noh stage, which has a bridge called a *hashigakari* that actors use to come on from backstage. There is also a curtain (*noren*) and a traditional rope that separates backstage from onstage. This is used by Aiko to hang herself at the end of the play. We see the actors playing Aiko and Masato being pulled into a bloody Noh tale

which dramatizes Aiko's descent into madness. The actor playing Masato, who doubles as the samurai warrior in the folk tale, first wears the mask. After the Aiko "kills" the samurai onstage, she places the Harumi demon mask on her face and cannot remove it, just as, entrapped by loneliness and madness, she kills her husband and son. Frequently, the stage lights flash on this mask, increasing the mood of foreboding throughout the play. The use of this Japanese classical theatre frame presents the characters not as generically "oriental" but as specifically Japanese, and places the jealousy, rage and isolation of Aiko into a specific cultural context.

Further, some of the Noh conventions are revealed to be structurally parallel to conventions in *film noir*. Like many Noh plays and many *film noir* films, the central events of *The Tale of a Mask* have already taken place and are being acted out after the fact. Like the *waki* or secondary leading character in Noh, the Detective assigned to this case discovers that his Chinatown beat is unknown (to him) territory, and that Mrs. Harrison must introduce the "real" Chinatown to him. At the same time, the Detective uses his narration at the start of the play as *film noir* protagonist, to talk about how he came to investigate the case, but also to confess his confusion about the Chinatown culture. Since this play was first presented to a largely Japanese audience near Toronto's Chinatown neighborhood, one can imagine the mixture of Brechtian alienation and empathy loaded into these audience addresses from a clueless if mostly well-meaning white male detective. Certainly it is worth considering whether a largely white film audience might have felt (and still might feel) a sharply contrasting connection to Walter Neff's narration.

Thus, Noh tradition, *film noir* of a relatively more recent time, and the modern day murders are all onstage together, reinforcing the hybrid realities of the Shindes, Mrs. Harrison and others in Chinatown. The music used in this play goes even further back from 14<sup>th</sup> century

Noh and its use of flute, drums and chorus. *Gagaku*, an eighth-century form of music using an entire orchestra of strings and wind instruments, is associated with the imperial court, and heavily influenced by Chinese and Korean music (Brazell, 6-7). This traditional music is contrasted at the end of the play with a Japanese pop song, again setting up the past and the present in eerie collision.

Like the *gagaku* and modern Japan pop music, *The Tale of a Mask* is also the tale of cultural interplay, and of the blurring boundary between who is sane and who is mad, between modernity and tradition. Yet where, according to such critics as Eric Lott, *film noir* tends to place the world of normalcy and decency in the non-ethnic/white space, this play does something very different. Aiko in Japan is a very different character than Aiko in Canada. The playwright in a sense shows a character split into two. In Japan, Aiko works outside of the home. She is encouraged to do so by her husband, even though her mother criticizes Aiko for neglecting her duties as a wife and mother. In Japan, Aiko has a young friend, Sumiko, with whom she complains about stifling tradition, even Aiko retains a romantic interest in the Japanese Imperial Court. It is not until Aiko arrives in Canada that she becomes a housewife obsessed with cleanliness and, later, suicide and folklore. It is in Canada that she goes mad from depression, isolation and loneliness. In almost direct contrast, Masato seems mad to many in Japan with his obsession with being a karaoke star, which makes him neglect his office job. In Japan, Masato is an unhappy underachiever who flunked the college entrance exam; indeed, Masato in a sense blossoms in Canada in terms of self-confidence, of fleeting popularity with the Japanese Working Holiday Girls, and of winning karaoke prizes in the restaurant at which he works.

Far from “naturally” fitting in to their Toronto Chinatown neighborhood, the Shindes often feel isolated there. The Chinese kids at Kentaro’s school mock him because he is the only

Japanese immigrant and at first doesn't know as much English as they do. Aiko finds the members of the Buddhist Church unfriendly, and since her husband Masato is never home, she is isolated even further. Thus, Chinatown is not the homogenous center of "good food" that the Detective thinks it is. Instead, it is a polyglot of groups with internal tensions and disputes. The audience watches the Detective slowly recognize the complexity of what Aiko faced in Chinatown, even if he never fully comprehends it. The thoroughly modern woman in Japan succumbs to a Noh-inspired murder-suicide in Canada, since she was not given any alternative in the Canadian society which engulfed her. For the audience, there is little mystery in this sad story of a woman's dissolution, especially since the original production was done in a Japanese Cultural Center in Toronto for a Japanese-Canadian audience, many of whom may well have experienced similar crises of identity upon coming to Canada. Japanese and Japanese-Canadians were clearly the intended audience of this play. Watada, the playwright, had a very specific audience and a specific message in mind when he first produced this play: the trials of too much isolation in Canada, of being unwilling to ask for help, and the dangers when the Asian-Canadian community is split against itself (43-46).

In *The Tale of a Mask*, a woman is torn between her old modern self in Japan and her new yet traditional role in Canada. A white male narrator, the Detective, finds himself not in the center but on the margins of the story, and fails to solve the mystery. A complicated Chinatown entraps not a naïve white protagonist, but one of its own Japanese immigrant inhabitants. If read in the context of *film noir* conventions, the play has inverted many assumptions. In Betty Quan's comedy *Nancy Chew Enters the Dragon*, Nancy Drew, that quintessentially white Anglo-Saxon Protestant "girl" detective is the subject of parody. Not only is the original WASP girl detective spoofed, but also the *film noir* role of the *femme fatale*, in this case the "Dragon Lady" as

contrasted with the seemingly wholesome “Chinese slash Canadian slash teen slash detective.” The narrow and confining roles Nancy Chew is pressured to play in her traditional Chinese family and in her modern Canadian society are also parodied.

To all appearances, the Chews are an ideal Chinese-Canadian family: Nancy takes care of the house and cooks dinner for her hardworking father Chu San Chew, the owner of a Chinatown restaurant called The House of Everlasting Chopsticks. Georgie, Nancy’s cousin and a recent immigrant from China, also lives with them, and competes with Nancy for her father’s approval. Georgie speaks more Chinese than Nancy (as her father is always noting) and is the hardworking and dutiful son that Chu always wanted. In contrast, Nancy wants to be a police detective and yearns to investigate the theft of the Emperor’s Tear Diamond from the Sun Yet Sen museum. The detective on the case, Bruce Lee (“a good cop with a bad name” according to Nancy), won’t give Nancy any tips or encouragement and unlike Nancy Drew, with her supportive father, Nancy Chew’s father forbids her from getting involved.

Romantically, Nancy becomes torn between two very different men, much as a *film noir* male protagonist is often split between two different women. Bruce Lee, an Asian-Canadian, is welcomed by Nancy’s father into the Chew household as a possible husband for a not-altogether-alooof Nancy. However, Ned Knickers, Nancy’s “WASP-y goofy boyfriend,” an engineering student who speaks a little “atrocious” Cantonese whom Nancy has been dating, is not welcomed by her father. It is clear that Nancy Chew is the dominant one in her relationship with Ned, who fluctuates between being smug and being insecure about their relationship: “It’s a status thing, too, for the contemporary Asian female. You know, the white boyfriend. After all, white goes with everything. I’m just an object to you, Nance. Handsome, athletic, brilliant . . . You’re using me” (32).

In the best *film noir* tradition, the plot of *Nancy Chew Enters the Dragon* is almost too complex to summarize neatly. As he investigates the theft of the diamond, Bruce becomes suspicious of Nancy, whose car was seen leaving the crime scene, complete with “N-A-N-C-Y” license plates. Nancy scoffs at Bruce’s warnings to stay out of the investigation and vows to find the thief who took the diamond. When Nancy goes to pick up Georgie from her father’s restaurant one day, she notices that the Leader of the Dragon gang and his followers are getting free meals and that Georgie is conspiring with them. She overhears plans for Georgie to meet the Dragons at the Shanghai Club that evening, so she stakes out the place with dimwitted Ned and finds her father there, gambling on mahjong instead of attending his benevolence society meeting. Already being extorted for protection money, Chu Sun Chew is also losing badly. Meanwhile, Nancy discovers Georgie waiting with the Dragons outside to attack the Club and rob it.

When Bruce and his cops raid the Shanghai Club and arrest a Dragon gang member who is in possession of the diamond, the case seems to be closed. However, Bruce is skeptical. He ultimately accuses Nancy of the theft. Nancy admits that she stole the diamond in order to recover it, become famous as a detective and then go to police academy in spite of Bruce’s and her father’s objections. Worried that her father had become a suspect because traces of a white powder—MSG—has been found on Nancy’s car, Nancy confesses to Bruce that she managed to plant the diamond on a Dragon gang member when her father was about to be arrested. She admits that she hid the diamond in the urn containing her dead mother’s ashes. Romantic sparks begin to fly between Bruce and Nancy at long last. Not only does Nancy Chew get away with the crime, with the diamond restored to its proper owner; she now has two love interests and shows no sign of giving either one up.

Nancy is, as said before, a complicated character, a good girl and a *femme fatale* in one. She has two personas, according to the stage directions--Nancy Chew and Nancy "Bogart", a more active detective persona who provides the narration. Since this is a radio play, the audience only hears the voice of one actor and the stage directions state that Nancy Bogart "is both a narrator and an extension" of Nancy Chew: "The nuances between Nancy Chew and Nancy Bogart can often be subtle (depending on who she is interacting with . . .)." She is doubled in other ways as well. As a child she played two roles: cooking and tying ribbons when her father was around, and doing mind-sharpening puzzles and reading whodunits with her mother when they were alone. There are points in the play when she feels "proud to be a Canadian" and other times when she speaks of "her [Chinese] community", to which an astonished Ned retorts "You're whiter than I am." She is also the disappointment of her father, who thinks she is too assimilated, since she is far from a dutiful daughter: she smokes, speaks only a little Cantonese, and forgets to make dinner, offering to buy the family McDonald's hamburgers instead.

The protagonist in this play is ultimately both Nancy Bogart, *femme fatale* who stole the diamond and who framed an innocent Dragon, and Nancy Chew, the good Chinese-Canadian girl who helps get the Dragons off the street and who gets her father and her cousin, both of whom are revealed to be less virtuous than they present themselves, out of trouble. A Chinese-Canadian woman owns her own narration as the center of the drama and freely travels over many boundaries of behavior within Chinatown as her two personas refuse to be reconciled or neatly integrated. As Nancy tells the audience at the end of the play, ". . . [T]he investigation was, well, into me. And I'm marking that file 'Mystery Unsolved.' At least for the time being."

Transgression, or moving through and outside of the boundaries of "normal" law-abiding behavior, is a major part of the action of any *film noir*. Traditionally, in North American plays

concerning race, the boundary between races is firm and fast, and the “tragic mulatto” character is an example of a character that is a part of two worlds but ultimately at home in neither.

Interracial love affairs are also punished in the world of film and plays, often by separation, loss of one’s community, or death.

*Nancy Chew Enters the Dragon* takes these boundaries between gender, race/ethnicity and class, even the boundary between detective and criminal, and subverts them by making them porous, commonplace, and the butt of jokes. To quote Lisa Lowe in a different context, this play illustrates through its variety of characters that “Asian American discussions of ethnicity are far from uniform or consistent; rather, these discussions contain a wide spectrum of articulations that includes, at one end, the desire for an identity represented by a fixed profile of ethnic traits and, at another, challenges to the very notion of identity and singularity which celebrate ethnicity as a fluctuating composition of differences, intersections, and incommensurabilities.”(64). Even this radio play performance, divorced from visuals, constructs a complex and dimensional Asian-Canadian heroine through voice-over, through the use of Chinatown as a boundary, but especially through combining the good girl and the *femme fatale* into one complex woman.

In *Mom, Dad, I’m Living with a White Girl* by Marty Chan, this process is reversed: instead of two characters inhabiting one protagonist, we have two full parallel worlds portrayed onstage: the “real life” of contemporary Canada, where Mark and Sally are negotiating their relationship in the face of Mark’s family’s disapproval, and the world of a B-movie screenplay Sally is editing entitled “Wrath of the Yellow Claw,” a cliché-ridden saga of evil Asian characters battling against an Asian double agent and his patriotic Canadian contact. *Mom, Dad, I’m Living with a White Girl* is both hilarious and insightful in its overlapping of the two worlds, the boundaries between them maintained only through lighting changes and a Beijing Opera

gong sounding whenever the characters travel from one world to the next: “The lines between fact and fiction blur. Nightmares intrude upon reality until one cannot be distinguished from the other. Fear dominates reason. This is the twisted world of Mark Gee” (Chan, 98). This fluidity is carried into the set, where a torture rack doubles as a kitchen and acupuncture table. In effect, everyone in this play has a double in the *film noir*-like screenplay within the play.

Mark, an unemployed Asian-Canadian auto mechanic, is ready to make a commitment to his girlfriend Sally, a Polish-Canadian script reader—or so it seems. In reality, Mark has not yet told his mother, Li Fen, and his father, Kim, that he is dating a white girl, and he is clearly unnerved at the prospect. He is already conscious of being a disappointment to his parents, since he refuses to follow in his family tradition of becoming an acupuncturist. When Mark finally does bring Sally home to meet his family, Kim repeats his wish that Mark start acupuncture training, and Li Fen is open with her dislike of Sally, despite Sally’s proficiency in Cantonese. Sally in turn, despite her desire to be accepted by Mark’s family and her self-proclaimed sensitivity to Asian stereotypes in screenplays, irritates them repeatedly. She turns down a second helping of rice, asks to see how real “authentic Chinese tea” is made (“You pour hot water on tea leaves,” Li Fen acidly replies), and offers to “free up a weekend or two” in order to learn the ancient art of acupuncture. Yet after this disastrous dinner, instead of breaking things off, Mark and Sally move in together—and again, Mark postpones a confrontation with his parents by failing to inform them of his new address. Sally finds out that once again, Mark has not told his parents about their relationship, and she is furious. Finally, Mark, Sally, Li Fen and Kim have it out. Li Fen stands up to her husband and tells Mark that he doesn’t have to be a acupuncture practitioner, while Mark does not reject his family, despite the tensions between Sally and Li Fen. Even when Sally moves out, Mark tells his parents that he will not be moving

home with them, but will instead find a new apartment on his own.

Although Mark is clearly the protagonist, it is most instructive to examine the two female characters in the play: Sally, Mark's girlfriend, and Li Fen, Mark's mother. As a blond, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class woman, Sally plays the "good" girl Agent Snow Princess according to the Yellow Claw screenplay; Li Fen is a "dragon lady" called Yellow Claw, the all-powerful queen of an exotic criminal gang bent upon world domination, inhabiting only ethnic, non-white space and trying to lure the hero, Agent Banana (Mark) back into Chinatown. But the scenes outside the Yellow Claw script in "real life" create a stark contrast and both women are presented as much more complicated.

As Josephine Lee points out in *Performing Asian American: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*, "The 'liveness' or 'presence' of theater suggests an immediate, visceral response to the physicality of race; the embodiedness of theater is experienced or felt, as well as seen and heard. . . . The theater does not let us forget that questions of racial difference concern our most basic gut reactions, experiences and sensations" (7). By interspersing the everyday relationship and family story with the sensationalized Yellow Claw story, Marty Chan can display and even embody construction of race/ethnicity. He can also display how characters are still acting out the Yellow Claw script even when they aren't aware of it. Sally sees herself as an expert on Asian culture, but also expects Mark to ignore his traditional family and their expectations for him in order to move in with her. Thus later, Agent Snow Princess applies white face to Agent Banana (or Mark) and proudly proclaims that "we will sanitize his quaint customs and add them to our multicultural mosaic . . . We'll take egg rolls and fortune cookies. Maybe a dragon dance. But not communism unless it comes with Mao jackets." In both scenes, Sally only wants the parts of Chinese tradition that fit in with her own image or plans. After an unpleasant

encounter with Li Fen, in which Li Fen calls Sally “a white devil” and says that Mark will tire of her, Sally angrily denounces Li Fen’s “reverse discrimination” to Mark, and reveals her obtuseness with the remark, “She just dismissed me because of the colour of my skin. You have no idea how that feels.” For all of her proficiency in Cantonese and her appreciation of Ang Lee films, she is unable to understand a fundamental of Chinese-Canadian life: the importance of family and respect for one’s parents. Sally is unwilling to compromise. In that regard, it becomes clear that, far from being the ideal good girl, she is precisely the wrong woman for Mark, as a Chinese-Canadian man negotiating his own relationship with tradition and modernity.

However, Li Fen is a fascinating character in the play because she is at once Yellow Claw, all-powerful and malevolent, in the screenplay scenes, *and* Li Fen, a shy wife whose limited English makes her afraid to venture out of Chinatown in the “real life” scenes. Only her love of Mark makes her leave Chinatown to find Mark’s new Anglo-Canadian neighborhood, which is portrayed as exotic and frightening to this Chinese-born woman. She becomes lost and frightened, the target of irritable and unhelpful bus drivers. It is after this experience that she insults Sally upon finding her in Mark’s apartment. But even so, Li Fen remains the most thoughtful and flexible character in the play. Although she has her own strong opinions about how Mark should conduct his life, she is able to listen to him, and to make peace between Mark and his father over Mark’s career plans which do not include acupuncture. She accepts the fact that Mark will not be moving back home and offers to help him move. Li Fen and Mark are finally able to ditch the Yellow Claw scripts of behavior and expectation. Although in the Yellow Claw script, Agent Snow Princess tells Agent Banana “the only way to be embraced in the West is to turn your back on the East,” Mark incorporates the Chinatown world into his life in his own way. Agent Snow Princess later laments, “This isn’t supposed to be how it ends. The

West is supposed to defeat the East. The girl is supposed to go off with the boy. The heroes have to win,” to which Agent Banana replies, “Aren’t there any other endings?” Although the racialized borders of *film noir* dominate the Yellow Claw screenplay, Mark and Li Fen are able to negotiate the Chinese and the Canadian, and become whole in a way that Sally (and Kim, who remains angry and disappointed over Mark’s career as a mechanic) cannot. Mark and Li Fen are able to step away from the expectations in the ridiculous Yellow Claw screenplay.

In her essay “Film and Theatre,” Susan Sontag, although skeptical of many commonly held opinions about differences between film and theatre, notes one important contrast germane to this discussion: “. . . this youngest of the arts is also the one most heavily burdened with memory. Cinema is a time machine. Movies preserve the past, while theatres—no matter how devoted to the classics, to old plays—can only ‘modernize.’ . . . Films age (being objects) as no theatre-event does (being always new)” (45). The immediacy of these plays in the present-time of performance can more effectively confront current racial and gender assumptions, especially if examined in the context of *film noir* films out in the past. Whether or not these Asian-Canadian playwrights draw directly from *film noir* style or from a specific *film noir* film, or from a related genre, certainly a familiarity with *film noir* conventions adds to the power of these plays as they confront the past. This is not to argue that theatre is superior to film by any means, but live performance creates space for contemporary reassessment of a film’s genre and milieu. The works by Asian-Canadians here subvert certain conventions of *film noir* by making ethnic, racial and gender boundaries blurry, so much so that complexity is revealed as some mysteries remain unsolved. The lone white male detective’s narration, mourning his exclusion from the normative white middle-class world, is made the subject of parody by a young Chinese female detective/good girl in *Nancy Chew*. The idea of Chinatown as uniformly exotic and inscrutable is

exposed as a barrier to solving a mystery in *The Tale of a Mask*, as the authority of the Detective must give way to the authority of Chinatown resident Mrs. Harrison. Finally, the mirror images of *film noir* good girl/*femme fatale* are either joined into one complicated Chinese-Canadian woman, or exploded into every character in *Mom, Dad, I'm Marrying a White Girl*, whether that character is Anglo- or Chinese-Canadian, male or female. A screenplay laden with Asian stereotypes is contrasted on stage with (relative) real life, making the audience aware of how limiting and unreal these stereotypes are, but also how this script can be rejected. By so doing, through this intersection of film and theatre, these characters lay claim to the center stage and emerge out of the peripheral shadows of *film noir*.

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