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Divining Justice: Dispossessing Form in Asian/American Culture

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In a *New York Times* review of the 1995 documentary film by Christine Choy and Nancy Tong, film critic Stephen Holden wrote, “In the Name of the Emperor’ is too short (at 52 minutes) to accumulate the tragic weight that a more extensive documentary might have allowed.” By linking Japanese military operations in both China and Korea, namely, the 1937 mass slaughter of Chinese in Nanjing Datusha, or the Nanjing Massacre, and the practice of sexual slavery that has come to be known widely as “comfort women,” *In the Name of the Emperor* did more than simply expose these mass atrocities. Instead, it announced (even with its title) the postimperialist perspective by which it meant to make visible not only the social suffering of its subjects but the far-flung geopolitical coordinates of Japanese empire by which such violence proceeded and was made so difficult to remember as such. Given not only the massive scope of the violence being uncovered but the decades-long lapse between that discovery and its public airing (at least in the West), one might reasonably wonder whether a documentary of *any* length would have done justice to the “tragic weight” of that history, or even what such justice would look like.

The confluence of postimperialist and postsocialist perspectives has made attention to colonial-era violence and loss in East Asia increasingly feasible.¹ Scholars have demonstrated how postwar political discourses *and* historiography put the Japanese Empire under erasure, an elision hastened by the exigencies of the Cold War in the United States, in which the USSR and the PRC quickly replaced the Axis powers as the face of the enemy, as well the ascendance of a triumphant nationalist narrative in China, which cast the Guomindang as the primary, and vanquished, foe, thus diminishing the role of Japanese occupation considerably in national memory.² Scholars like Yukiko Koga (2016) and Lisa Yoneyama (2016) have further directed our attention to how the political economy of global capital provides the context and means for the transnational and transborder unearthing and transmission of loss, memory, and struggles for redress over the course of decades.

At the same time, these scholars caution, such efforts are always mediated by present-day contingencies. The “political economy of redemption,” as Koga (2016, 4) calls it, involves “channeling contradictory impulses toward erasing, confronting, or capitalizing on the past into new forms of

production, consumption, and accumulation while at the same time exposing and amplifying new forms of anxiety arising from inherited legacies of colonial modernity.” In formulating the production of and capitalizing on loss as an “inheritance,” Koga also emphasizes how—in contrast to the English concept, which “highlights continuity and possession and implies the unchanging quality of that which is handed down”—the concepts of “*yichan* and *isan* embody a sense of loss and recovery that is articulated in a gift economy” such that “what is being presented is transformed through this process” (20). She concludes by suggesting that the act of inheriting proves to be less about “recovery” than it is about “reincorporation” and is always “accompanied by unexpected disclosure/exposure” (21).

Here I make a case for how diasporic Asian American cultural and intellectual production participates in a geopolitics of memory, in acts of reincorporation across distant time and space (what Yoneyama [2016, 8] emphasizes as the “*long durée* of violence”), and, as importantly, how these efforts necessarily fail in their representations of violence, injury, and loss. Or to put it in more precise terms, I argue that such failure is not only endemic to representational projects in this expressive culture but constitutes the exact character of the contribution that artists and writers make toward social and political justice for those who undergo catastrophic loss. Certain genres of realism (for example, the first-person *testimonio* or documentary films) have been considered germane to exposing the conditions of political violence and social suffering. Much Asian diasporic production, including *In the Name of the Emperor*, enfold a good deal of accurate and realist historical texture into its narrative toward just such an end. Nevertheless, even in the case of aesthetic realism, I contend, the primary function and effect of such representational practice are not to materialize the past in any straightforward or transparent manner.

Filmic and video images in particular have the effect of socializing memory and collapsing past and present. As Anton Kaes observed in 1990, “there is no past tense in film” (114): “history preserved or recreated in filmed images does not fade or yellow, but the sheer mass of historical images transmitted by today’s media weakens the link between public memory and personal experience. . . . History thus returns forever—as film” (121).³ As Kaes then observed regarding the ever-proliferating images of the Shoah, one potently ethical response by filmmakers might be to make films “about the impossibility of representing a past that is unrepresentable” (122). The specific challenge facing *In the Name of the Emperor*, however, is that it calls up an entire history that went largely unrepresented (especially in comparison to the Holocaust), such that it needs to establish for its audience that loss *did* indeed take place, even

as its representation of that loss can never do justice to the loss itself. To this end, the documentary film—as documentation—absorbs into itself other filmed footage and archival photographs, which are themselves material traces from the past and at the same time records of that past. As Roxana Waterson (2007, 56) argues, such incorporation of images as material objects is precisely how

film has become a vehicle for memory of traumatic events, the remembering of which is a political necessity if we are to find ways to make perpetrators accountable for past atrocities, and work to prevent their recurrence. It must be acknowledged that filmmakers have often played significant investigative roles in digging up the evidence necessary to break official silences.

I approach the question of discovery and recovery (as Waterson also does in her work) with a somewhat different, but complementary, purpose. As necessary as forensic accounts are for redress and reparations movements, I emphasize that an aesthetic imagination first and foremost involves the *formal*, *conceptual*, and *performative* staging of human rights politics and that it is this formal method *as an ethical practice* that the film calls forth in the diaspora. In other words, too hastily conflating an artistic or literary project with a realist or practical politics can lead us to judge authorial and artists' decisions—and, in the case of narrative fiction, the actions of characters—as literally “responsible,” or not, as if the aesthetic imagination can actually produce the material results we want. Instead, I argue, we are better served by understanding such efforts as tarrying with loss and the disappeared as such, that is, by understanding how our (in this context, Asian American) present is not only saturated with such losses but made possible by them, and the ongoing responsibility in which this relation involves us.

Asian Americanist critique has especially well developed the conceptual tools by which to read for this particular aesthetic practice in diasporic cultures, fathoming cultural productions simultaneously as material artifacts and ethical pedagogy in what effectively constitutes a transnational archive assembled to re-member originary violences that have been otherwise disappeared in state-sponsored history and official speech. As Lisa Lowe (1996, 6) argued about Asian American culture produced on the shared grounds of exclusion and alienage in the United States, the failures of incorporation and integration generate “an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlike varieties of silence emerge into articulation,” so that the very subject of humanity comes to us in altered

terms. As Kandice Chuh (2003) further elaborated with her now well-known directive to “imagine otherwise,” Asian American culture (primarily literature in her account) constitutes “epistemological projects engaged in a politics of knowledge” (x):

Arguably, the overarching purpose of Asian American Studies has been and continues to be . . . the pursuit of an as yet unrealized state of justice by tracing, arguing, critiquing, and by alternatively imagining the conditions that inscribe its (im)possibility. Justice is understood here not as the achievement of a determinate end, but rather as an endless project of searching out the knowledge and material apparatus that extinguish some (Other) life ways and that hoard economic and social opportunities only for some. (8)

And finally, as Cathy J. Schlund-Vials (2012, 16–18) has observed, diasporic cultural productions “articulate a collected historical truth through narratives involving familial stories of war, genocide, and relocation,” a truth that might in turn “destabilize essentializing narratives of refugee victimhood and engender an alternative mode of politicized selfhood.”

Many observers view human rights and humanitarianism with a fair amount of skepticism, in the face of a virtual absence of any transnational institutions by which to deliver justice to human rights subjects (as well as the rather minimalist or thin conceptions of what constitutes human rights in the first instance for so many jurists). I am, however, inclined to see literature and expressive cultures as the primary space of archiving and imagining the *desires* for a heterotopic politics from which human rights discourse and politics gather much of their ethical force. The poetic justice that art and literature delivers will of course seem vastly inadequate if what we mean by “justice” is judicial modes of redress and reparations commensurate to the injuries that have been borne. But putting different forms of racial and national injury into the shared frame of Asian/American diasporic culture has a more modest but vitally important political function: that of announcing the simultaneous recognition of *and* incommensurability between these injuries.

For one example, we might take a very brief segment from *In the Name of the Emperor* in which the filmmakers interview former Japanese soldiers, now elderly men, as they convey the details of the violence they witnessed and committed, their interviews intertwined with gruesome photographs of numerous corpses and Japanese soldiers as young men:

UEHA FUICHIRO (former soldier): I was drafted into the Japanese Army in 1937. When I first landed in Nanjing, I saw many acts of

cruelty. I was ordered to rob, to rape and to burn. That's when I realized I have to act like this from now on.

NAGATOMI HAKUDO (former intelligence agent): A Japanese officer gave me a rifle and I shot a Chinese . . . who sank into the river and rose to the surface. That was the first time I ever killed a human being. That was the beginning of my crime in China.

AZUMA SHIRO: There was about thirty-seven old men. We captured them and gathered them in a square. There was a woman holding a child on her right arm . . . and another one on her left. We stabbed and killed them, all three—like potatoes in a skewer. I thought then, it's been only one month since I left home. . . . And thirty days later I was killing people without remorse.

NAGATOMI HAKUDO: I want to speak out about this . . . because I want to make up for what I've done. I am seventy-seven years old now and I have reflected upon my guilt. I feel strongly that we should never have fought . . . this war of aggression.

These men seem both quite present to the erstwhile confessions they are making and at the same time quite dispossessed of and by them, as if they are describing the actions of other people. In particular, as Azuma Shiro explains the murder of the mother and her two children, he loops each arm, positioning himself as the woman, cradling a child in each arm, before moving to mimic twice the action of the bayonet that skewers the three victims at once. In offering this embodied performance of memory, the filmmakers conjoin what performance studies scholar Diana Taylor (2003, 20) distinguishes as the “archive” and the “repertoire,” bringing the knowledge produced by embodied presence to bear on the archived documents of an event, even as the individual instance of performance is itself being converted into a documented object. If we are habituated to consider the bodily gestures of the repertoire as ephemeral, arbitrary, and lost to the past, their troubling appearances in the archive as the very act by which history is transmitted might thus undo our sense of that past as safely cordoned from our own present.

Moreover, to deliberately focus here on the embodied performance of *perpetrators* might align us differently to questions of responsibility and justice. We might assign guilt solely to these men, who are after all reckoning with the acts in which they engaged. But while they are at once the agents of that violence, the total war context in which those actions seemed wholly justifiable to them is irretrievably lost. The subjects they have become in the meanwhile—those who are willing to assume

responsibility—both are and are not the same persons who committed those atrocities. Indeed, the very act of confession seems to make them over once again as artifacts, anachronisms, or ghosts, time-traveled to our present, where their appearance is spectral at best. That it has been more than two decades since the film was released further compounds this refractive effect, what Foucault (1984, 6) understood to be the relationship of heterotopias to “heterochronies,” in which the experience of “other spaces” also delivers individuals to “a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.” Against the forms of transitional justice that seek integration of loss without disturbing the domestic institutions and international state order in which redress and reparations are expected to take place, where the past and present are neatly distinguished from one another, the dispossession of self and other—the transfers that take place between the murdered woman and Azuma Shiro, Shiro and the filmmakers, the filmmakers and the audience—compels reckoning with the very conditions by which violence and loss have been made legible or not (Yoneyama 2016, 14–15).

As has become a truism, testimony based on an individual person’s memory is notoriously unreliable for recovering what “really” happened (even as mainstream media repeatedly present such accounts as history). And yet, as scholars in the field of memory studies have been demonstrating for the past two decades, such “failures” in and of memory might be—rather than simply dismissed as inconsistencies and errors in the face of more authoritative and “accurate” historical accounts—considered meaningful in and of themselves.⁴ What, then, might the aesthetic memory work of *In the Name of the Emperor*, the heterogeneous presences and absences it incorporates into itself, also tell us about *our* responsibilities in remembering those who otherwise disappear in the postimperialist archives of socialist nationalism in China, liberal and neoliberal democracy in Japan, postcolonial governance and partition in Korea, and anti-Asian and antiblack racism in the United States, especially when we recall that before *In the Name of the Emperor*, Christine Choy was probably best known for her films *Who Killed Vincent Chin*, which she also directed with Nancy Tong, and *Sa-I-Gu*?

In this critical context, I argue, the memory work of Asian American expressive cultures insists on salvaging the other social *worlds* and political *subjects* that have been made impossible in our present. We can, of course, never return them or return to them as if the injuries were not borne in the first place. But we might allow the other that speaks in and through the self, a self whom she dispossesses in the present, to redirect our attention to what has gone missing and what might be reassembled

to make her a viable political subject in the present. In this case, as the providential character of the imperial order gave way to the contemporary international system of sovereign states, an international order organized according to the mandates of the global Cold War, those at empire's edges were compelled to assimilate to the modern national state and its animation of liberal personhood (however imperfect its historical instantiation) or be cast into a reactionary cleaving to the past.

Besides insisting that loss has taken place, the film grapples with what, by the end of the twentieth century, being a “responsible human” has come to mean, requiring individual “confessions” of responsibility, clearly assigning perpetrators, victims, and saviors to their national times and places, certainties that the *performance* of testimony in the archive also necessarily unsettles. *In the Name of the Emperor* thus stages how Asian American memory work in diasporic culture might be vital in shaping shared political futures and communities if we want to forgo reifying others as passive victims while also refusing to see the past as an obstacle to transcend and discard, once and for all. Before we can imagine otherwise, we must give ourselves over to the other's desire, a dispossession that will possibly always feel like failure but that we might rethink as a method of justice in itself.

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■ NOTES

1. See, e.g., Jager and Mitter (2007).
2. The question of reparations for Japanese violations of international law and war crimes was to have been resolved by the San Francisco Peace Treaty (or the “Treaty of Peace with Japan”) in 1951, as well as other bilateral agreements signed by Japan with individual nations.
3. Film as a medium of course also had an infamously crucial role in the history of fascism and empire. Cinema's function in the rise of the Third Reich has been exhaustively documented, and in the United States, Frank Capra's *Know Your Enemy* propaganda documentary series delivered a patently racist image of the Japanese to Americans around which to

rally. Meanwhile, in Japan, the development of prewar cinema—replete with monumental style and epic themes—proved, as Darrell William Davis (1996, 38) contends, “an important milestone” insofar as it demonstrated “how the Japanese completely mastered a Western technology—talking pictures—in service to a national cause undertaken against that same Western adversary.”

4. See, e.g., Young (1997).

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