Introduction

*Parts/Parturition*

Part to Whole

Cut your arm. Cut.
See. You feel no pain
'cause you already so-wa inside

spread the cut you just made
before the blood get hard . . .
Then we write her name . . .
— Lois Ann Yamanaka, *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theater*, 1993

With respect to the human parts, organs, fetuses and embryos you are viewing, Premier . . . cannot independently verify that they do not belong to persons executed while incarcerated in Chinese prisons.
— language to be posted by “Body Worlds” exhibitor,
Premier Entertainments, by order of the New York State Attorney General’s Office, 2008

Lois Ann Yamanaka’s poem series, “Parts,” included in *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theater*, launches a bitter complaint against women’s work of cleaning, cooking, and raising children. Written in the blazon tradition—but one that *declines* to sanctify a female subject through praising a single body part¹—interior poems of the series titled “The Brain,” “The Face,” “The Nostril,” and “The Foot” highlight its speaker’s
own corporeal burdens—her “splitting headache”—and the bodily harm she will visit upon others if they delay their domestic chores: “Want me / to punch / your face in? / . . . Now get / your ass / in your room / and fold / all the laundry. / Then iron / your father’s shirts” (“The Face,” 66). Section 3, “Girl in Parts,” relays the speaker’s hostile response to her daughter’s divulgence of being raped: “Why you had to tell me this? / . . . Don’t you ever talk / about this again” (73). In the crudely titled “The Crack,” the speaker commands the girl—her daughter, presumably—to shut her mouth and seal her other lips, the labia: “you going think / you popular / but all they thinking / is you spread fast” (71). The focalized body parts shift from those of the mother to those of the daughter, with both of these female subjects lacking ownership of their bodies.

While these stanzas directly conjure parental disapproval as key to carving up the “girl in[to] parts,” the divisive social structuring of Hawai’i’s plantation economy implicitly contributes to this state of affairs. After overthrowing Hawai’i’s Queen Lili’uokalani in 1893, American missionaries and businessmen turned these Pacific Islands into an archipelago of fruit and sugar plantations. Pursuing a strategy of divide and conquer, plantation owners recruited workers from different nations, counting on linguistic and ethnic differences to prevent collective labor organizing. At the same time, plantation overseers needed a language to command their multilingual workforce. Local pidgin English—assembled from Japanese, Native Hawaiian, Portuguese, Tagalog, and Chinese elements—grew out of these conditions. Written in this local dialect, Yamanaka’s poetic apostrophe (i.e., direct address to a person or thing, often absent) brings into being the female body through this historically specific “language of command.” Providing its own theorization of writing in relation to embodiment and the biological body, the poem’s discourse—its series of imperatives—performatively instantiate this daughter or “you” as a divisible corporeality.

While the conjured person or thing (“girl in parts”) addressed in this poem stays consistent, the speaker in the final poem of this series, which includes the excerpt quoted in the epigraph, switches from a mother to a teenage peer—a “14-year-old friend” who details an act of self-cutting. This action also places the apostrophed subject in the domain of clinical health. Even though this final poem, titled “What the
Hands Do about All of these Parts / Advice from a 14-Year-Old Friend,” shifts its speaker from adult parent to adolescent pal, there is no lessening of the logic of fragmentation. The hospital, rather than the household, now provides the lexicon for processing this divisibility:

Take the needle. Take it. . .
Push um deep, the needle,
till you see the white part
of your meat. Spread um—

Kind of gray, yeah the feeling?
Going away, the pain inside,
‘cause you getting numb.
Your whole body not throbbing yet?
I remember the first time
I did this. Felt so good . . .
[when] the blood started dripping

. . . Tasted like rust.

My father took me emergency that day.
That was the first time
I seen him cry.
No. No need towel.
Lie down. Let the blood
drip on the sidewalk.
Then we write her name
with the blood
and when dry,

. . . she going know
How much you love her.

In relation to continuing debates in Asian Americanist criticism on whether representational fullness constitutes the ideological goal of the field, Yamanaka’s poem teases with the promise of self-enacted expression (what the hands can decisively do), but in the end neither reveals
the hidden essence of the addressed girl (the confessional testimony is only of her “friend”) nor allows for a reading that affirms writing as the fulfillment of agency or autonomy. The addressee of the blazon is still commanded by another to physical action—to “cut,” “push,” and “spread” rather than to “fold all the laundry”—but these actions incorporate a notion of surgical opening up, body modification, and bioavailability as the avatars of agency. So too, a clinical intervention—the trip to the emergency room—provides the vehicle of parental recognition, such that the techniques of the hospital mediate the wounding and the eliciting of caring and affection.

To assign an ultimately defiant logic to the poem seems especially difficult to do, making it an uneasy fit with the relishing of “resistance” and “justice” in U.S. minoritarian critical contexts (see Nguyen; Chuh). The writing of “her name” at the poem’s conclusion does not liberate the daughter from the anatomical carving up of the first three parts, and only partially points to the criminal agent who should be brought to justice—e.g., the first-person speaker doling out “pain in parts”: the mother figure is fingered, so to speak, but the plantation economy is not. The writing—constituted by the repurposing of bodily fluids as ink—merely expedites the circulation of several sensations and sentiments, the primary one nominated as “love.” Furthermore, the main significance of the poem may lie not in the closed loop between two putative whole (humanist) “Asian American” subjects—the parent and daughter—but in the distribution of affects and effects that the cutting generates, which brings me to my final point, for now, in relation to this work.

Even though the poetic series enumerates body parts, it does not profile them racially as much as instrumentally, sensually, and affectively. In the scalar shift from anatomical catalogue—brain, face, feet, nostril—to a more molecular circulation of bodily sensations and affects—the taste of “rust,” the proprioceptive imbalance of feeling “trippy . . . your whole body . . . throbbing” (75), the stark visuality of “the white part / of your meat,” and the crossed sensations of the “icy” numbness and “gray, yeah the feeling” (75)—we seem to have lost a body conventionally identifiable as an Asian American, racialized one. To impute an Asian American quality to this poem’s contents, aesthetics, or importance in literary criticism would seem both audaciously unfounded
and absolutely necessary for Asian Americanist critique, a necessary first step to explore the limits—as well as continuing salience—of racial analysis at a time when being biological means something not altogether recognizably humanist (with humanism’s assumptions of the human subject defined by his or her organismal form, enlightened rationality, self-possession, and capacity of liberal consent and choice). To clarify this claim, let me turn to another instance where body fragments and assertions of Asian American political significance have become intertwined.³

* * *

If Yamanaka’s poem offers one literary instance that theorizes the act of writing in relation to the cutting, tearing, and disassembling of the human body, the court-ordered language, generated with respect to the contemporary cadaver exhibits popularly known as Body Worlds, provides another.⁴ Since 1998, these entertainments have drawn over thirty-five million visitors worldwide,⁵ to science museums and other tourist sites, to view plastinated cadavers, posed in striking arrangements of partial dissection and intactness. These anatomical displays have spawned court cases, legal settlements, and congressional legislation in New York, California, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. The intense feelings conjured by these corpses arguably derive from their violating notions of the human: their breaching of somatic integrity—exemplified in a flayed specimen’s holding his “coat” of skin in his hand—and their flagrant use of human tissues in profitable displays. Significantly, one means of recomposing a wholeness from these alienable parts has been to disclose a speculated relation between the carved-up tissues and a certain life narrative connected to Chinese—i.e., ethnonational—personhood. The court-mandated language (quoted in the epigraph) serves judicial ends, by bringing these profitable entertainments under government regulation via the discursive “return” of plastinated parts to the prior(ity of) persons—the human source materials for these exhibits. In this case, writing—as informational publicity about the hidden identities of these bodies as executed Chinese prisoners—acts as an interdiction, designed to outrage potential visitors and
thereby obstruct the flow of profits to the exhibitors. (The purported aim behind the strategy of embroiling the entertainment companies in lawsuits, however, is to stop the routine cutting of unidentified corpses in Dailan’s “mummification factories.”)⁶

Significantly, the legal furor over Body Worlds in the case of California did not begin as a cadaver-trafficking scandal but as a health scare when visitors noticed liquid droplets pooling on these anatomical specimens (in the majority of the exhibits no barriers exist between visitors and the displays). While later dismissed as liquid silicone, the leaking fluid first caused concern because of what the larger public generally knew about biological processes (e.g., that of postmortem bacterial feeding on human tissue that manifests as cadaver putrefaction). Skepticism, in short, initially greeted the promise of the new technology—plastination—to debiologize, so to speak, that is, halt the bacterially assisted processes of decay. Only later did attention turn to the specific dodgy quality of Chinese manufacture in the production of these shows. These educational displays, purportedly “[m]aking anatomy fun,” underscore the intimacy of the leisure classes’ entertainments with “cheap” transnational labor and more gruesomely the military-imprisonment complex that repurposes the “waste” of capital punishment into an educational resource.

An Asian American assemblywoman, Fiona Ma, from San Francisco, played a key role in drafting legislation to scrutinize these entertainments’ procurement practices. Her sleuthing relied on racial profiling—the discernment that these bodies were of Asian descent, combined with the discovery of their assembly in Dailan—and a self-proclaimed insider knowledge regarding Chinese beliefs: “Chinese people are very superstitious about death. . . . They believe in full-body burials. They don’t believe in organ donations, and some people don’t even believe in giving blood. So, automatically, I thought that something was wrong with the show.”⁷ Here, a well-intentioned postmortem defense of the racial subject—indeed, the very defense helps conjure the racial dimensions of the cadavers—also plays upon processes of ethnicization that impute an insufficient, lesser modernity onto a “foreign” population, to recall Rey Chow’s argument in The Protestant Ethnic. In this case, the “superstitious” Chinese fail to adopt a laissez-faire attitude toward their postmortem fates, an attitude crucial to supporting modern miracles
in medicine that rely upon a cosmopolitan biosociality (circulation) of cadaver parts.

Both Yamanaka’s “Parts” and the Body Worlds exhibits confront their audiences with the human body as fragment, and, relatedly, with the idea of corporeality as divisible and biology as plastic and manipulable. In what follows, I argue that Asian Americanist critique and certain strains of bioethics have made ethical, political, and moral claims vis-à-vis these body parts; and they have done so through a distinctive rhetorical move that putatively returns the extracted body part to the violated racialized whole—a move that naturalizes a prior state of organic intactness and individuality to that racialized body. (As this chapter proceeds, I clarify that what is at stake in racial analysis and what might be valuably embraced in these same studies is not so much the cohering of fragments into a singular whole, but the conceptual and discursive tool of a qualified personification.)

Here, I inquire whether literary criticism and performance studies can still remain humanist if they think in terms of distributed parts rather than organic structures, or, more exactly, turn fragment and substance into patterns—circulations of energy, affects, atoms, and liquidity in its accounting of the soma. Is the primary technique and value of Asian Americanist literary and cultural criticism that of conserving the boundary between a liberal humanist subject (qua coherent, complex, interiorized self—e.g., character of depth) and an alienating world of economically and biologically exploitative parasites? The nonconsilience of the critical paradigms offered by scholarship in a posthuman, biotechnical vein, and in an Asian Americanist critical vein, can reveal much about the limits of each.

One of the stories I will tell has to do with the types of writing we characterize as Asian Americanist critique. It has traditionally been associated with claims like the one forwarded by Fiona Ma wherein writing exposes an injustice or breach in ethics, thereby seeming to correct the injurious act (in Ma’s case, the Body Worlds exhibit’s over-reliance on Chinese corpses). The mandated written supplement to be posted by Premier Entertainment—the mea culpa, as it were—becomes the performative agent of justice. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the field finds itself flirting with and embracing the position of the Yamanaka poem: rather than moving toward projecting a whole onto these operable fragments, it relishes the affects circulating—the ballistic
force—from these tactile cuts, tears from context, and plastic transformations. The field has yet to square its relishing of the fragment with its anxiety about it, and remains worried over theoretical incoherence.

A caveat: I do not claim that Yamanaka’s poem is the theoretical, political, or aesthetic advancement over the discursive presumptions and practice of the legal settlement vis-à-vis Body Worlds. Rather, my aim here is more modest. It is to establish that the mining of a preoccupation with human fragments and posthuman ecologies in the context of Asian American cultural production and theory is a particularly useful endeavor at this moment; and that its particular usefulness emerges, paradoxically, due to the amplified sense of the designation “Asian American” as a fictional (discursive) construct—only ambivalently, incoherently, or “problematically” linked to the biological body.

Relishing the Fragment

What Asian American works of imagination manifest in full is a plethora of seemingly separate threads. . . . [Their] literary studies . . . [have] no single unifying grand narrative . . . no single linguistic Other . . . on which to hinge a counter-tradition of stylistics. (Lim, et al. ii, i)

The concern over the fragmentation of the Asian American body politic as well as the jockeying over the scholarly methods and ideological approaches of Asian Americanist study have been consistent preoccupations since the field’s inception.9 Whether tilted negatively—as a lament over incoherence—or positively—as a celebration of heterogeneity and invented ethnicity—the unanchored quality to Asian America’s constituent parts has been a prima facie tenet of the field. Take for instance these words by Frank Chin, published in the 1970s, as compared with two pronouncements in the 1990s that, respectively, upbraid and applaud the nonessence at the core of this racial identification:

Unlike the blacks, we have neither an articulated, organic sense of our American identity nor the verbal confidence and self-esteem to talk one up from our experience. . . . We have no street tongue to flaunt and strut the way the blacks and Chicanos do. . . . (Chin 1976, 557)
All the time hungry, [our] every sense [has been] out whiffing for something rightly ours, chameleons looking for color, trying on tongues and clothes and hairdos, taking everyone else’s, with none of our own. (Chin 1972, 59)

Asian-Americans couple fear of nullity with an awareness of perpetually inauthentic, heterogeneous role playing: of having too many identities. (Buell 187)

[Asian America] inhabits the highly unstable temporality of the “about-to-be” . . . [T]here is no literal referent for the rubric “Asian American.” (Koshy 1996, 315, 342)

The final quotation from Susan Koshy’s “The Fiction of Asian American Literature” (1996) emphasizes the “artificiality” of this ethnic rubric in order to draw attention to the field’s theoretical weakness, while the penultimate quotation, from Frederick Buell just two years earlier, casts Asian Americans’ “weak ethnicity”—defined by a self-consciousness of both the fractious plurality troubling this pan-ethnic identity, and the imitative stylings of other, stronger racial and ethnic formations—as its unique innovation. For Buell, Asian American ethnics deconstructively cite and perform primordial ethnic ties, proleptically instantiating the poststructuralist approach to race and ethnicity as outlined, for instance, in Henry Louis Gates’s Signifying Monkey.10 As suggested by the quotation in the epigraph from a 2004 issue of Studies in the Literary Imagination, the sentiment that Asian Americanist literary studies consists of fragmented, separate “threads” still reverberates in the early years of the twenty-first century.11

A more recent variation on this thesis suggests that without a solid historical periodization or formalist singularity at its core, Asian Americanist critical practice becomes stabilized by an implicit recourse to a biological rationale. For instance, in a 2007 special issue of Representations, Colleen Lye writes,

If in the early days of legitimation “Asian American literature” had to confront a skepticism that there might be too few justifying texts, today
the field’s integrity is perhaps even more challenged by the vertigo of too many possibilities. . . . [In this] embracing [of] pluralism and cosmopolitanism . . . how can we guard against an ever-greater dependency on biological notions of identity to help us order our epistemological projects. Maximal inclusiveness can mean that we fall back upon a minimal definition of “Asian American” that we might not want to have[, namely,] the delineation of [the Asian American] archive by a biologically based definition of authorial identity.  

While Lye’s bid for a more rigorously historicist, formalist, or aesthetic rationale to guide Asian Americanists’ grouping of texts is commendable, what gives one pause is the additional worry voiced here concerning the field’s commission of a foundational theoretical error tied to its implicit selective principle: its anchoring in a problematic biology (as distinct from cultural or national background) of the authors. To put it more polemically, if in the past racial significance was assigned by way of profiling the body of the author, then what is needed in the twenty-first century is something more like an anonymous or pseudonymous approach in which the “immanent” qualities defining the object(s) of analysis, themselves, regardless of authorship, would recognizably contour them as Asian American. Voiced here, in other words, is the hope for a more discursive or artifactual location of Asian American/ist technique or encounter.  

Indeed, the reigning modus operandi of race studies has been to emphasize the social construction rather than biological essence of race, figuring the former as historically variable in contrast to the supposed inert contours of the latter (presuming biology as fixed immanence rather than also a fluid historical process). Precisely this context presented as a curiosity the very cultural texts that form the bulk of this book’s inquiry: given that race has been acknowledged not as biological but as a discursive (legal-juridical) construction and as an outgrowth of historically variable political-economic formations, how is it then that Asian American artists, authors, and performers keep scrutinizing their body parts? Were Asian American artists simply not as intellectually sophisticated as the Asian Americanist critics, the latter already aware that race was not biological? Dimissing this hypothesis as too simplistic, I initiated this book in part to take seriously these artists’ concern
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with embodiment, body parts, and perspectives that see and feel multiple scales of biology simultaneously.

The dismissal of an always problematic “biological” framing of race is one reason the field of Asian Americanist Studies has, for the most part, avoided an engagement with the developing interdisciplines of biocultures, medical humanities, and posthuman studies. These studies neither accept the wholesale reduction of biological materiality (whether in petri dishes or in normate contours of the sentient organism) to mere discourse or code; nor do they ignore that biological processes and structures remain phenomenologically apprehended and functionally altered through human inventions, including language, medical technology, kinship networks, family dynamics, the economy, and various appurtenances of governmentality. So if the evocation of the biological is not about research in biology or biocultures today, what exactly might be its rhetorical utility for Asian Americanist Studies? One answer already intimated is that the biological has become a shorthand for something like fixity, lending a contrastive fluidity (and historical specificity) to the field’s meta-narrations of either its perpetual incoherence or its evolving complexity. Another answer is suggested by Arun Saldhana: he places the overemphasis on power relations such as race as discursive formations, rather than ontological and phenomenological ones, in the wider context of a modern epistemology that has dichotomized nature and culture. He notes that while postcolonial, race, and feminist studies have gone down a discursive (social constructionist) route, biotech “mocks that effort” to dichotomize the two—nature is always already culturally altered; culture is always already composed of material nature.

The field of Asian Americanist literary and cultural criticism has not been immune from the move to an increasingly more discursive (and arguably disembodied), metacritical reflection on “Asian American-ness,” one that destabilizes historical or live bodies as the field’s relevant referent to emphasize the textual composition—in law, ethnography, historical archives, film, and the like—of the Asiatic racial form. For instance, taking seriously poststructuralism’s emphasis on the arbitrariness of signs and the failure of representation to capture some prior reality (an anterior, prediscursive subject), Kandice Chuh advocates a “subjectless Asian Americanist critique” in which the critic, “rather than looking to complete the category ‘Asian American,’ to actualize it by such methods...
as enumerating various components of difference (gender, class, sexuality, religion, and so on) . . . [might instead] critique the effects of the various configurations of power and knowledge through which the term comes to have meaning” (10–11). Chuh demands an alternative view to the field's equation of justice and liberation with the fullness of subjectivity, and questions the tacit endorsement of cultural pluralism as the driving logic of Asian Americanist cultural critique. The discursive turn (away from human referents) has also become articulated as a “new” critical attention to form and aesthetics—e.g., studies such as those offered by Christopher Lee, Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, Josephine Park, Timothy Yu, Rocio Davis, and Sue Im Lee. Asian Americanists are in search of the properly discursive grounds of the field's coherence: e.g., in form and aesthetics, in ideology, in structural position vis-à-vis political economy, and so forth, that would provide a less “essentialist” approach to Asian American literature, artifacts, and practices. The relishing of these fractured approaches is directly in proportion to the disaffection from the stolidity of the biological. (But is anyone really doing a biological reading of Asian American texts, and if so, what would that look like?)

To be sure, my project is not arguing for literature and performance's reflection of the “reality” of Asian American human referents; nor is it eschewing formal analyses; nor is it a call to arms for more Asian Americanists to enter the field of biology—though it is responsive to calls within the field of biocultures for humanists to familiarize themselves with critical studies of science, and it is also informed by a particular feminist-inflected branch of Science and Technology Studies (STS) regarding tissue culturing, assisted reproductive technology, metabolism, the neuroenteric system, immunology, transplantation surgery, and the origin of species, as they each ruminate over the traffic in and plasticity of body parts. Moreover, lest my brief overview above be mistaken as a critical dismissal, this tilt of the field toward a more discursive reflection on Asian Americanness very much informs the ground of my thinking. I want to know, or at least pose the question for collective exploration, whether the anxiety regarding Asian Americanness as a biological category is, to put it somewhat crudely, an anxiety about a fixed embeddedness to race or an anxiety about the shifting (posthuman) meanings of being biological.
The Political Economy of Asiatic Biologies

One example of recent scholarship that connects the thinking about the Asiatic body and its biology (aka its nutritive requirements) to wider critiques of modernity and postmodernity is Eric Hayot’s “Chinese Bodies, Chinese Futures.” Hayot notes the way a particular abject figure in the late nineteenth century—the coolie—prefigures the ideal type of laborer for modernity (i.e., Fordist capitalist production), one who can subsist only on rice, rather than meat, and is resented for this culturally specific lowering of the threshold of labor’s cost. The spare nutritive requirements of this biological body are thus resented not only for the future deprivation they imply to eaters of meat but also because of the seeming “indifference [to suffering]” (122) that the coolie also represents—which is to say, the surprising resilience of this biology to withstand harsh conditions:

The coolie’s ability to endure small levels of pain or consume only the most meager food and lodging represented an almost inhuman adaptation to contemporary forms of modern labor. . . . An “absence of nerves,” remarkable “staying qualities,” and a “capacity to wait without complaint and to bear with calm endurance” were all features of Chinese people in general described by Arthur Smith in his 1894 *Chinese Characteristics*, the most widely read American work on Chinese in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. . . . The coolie’s biologically impossible body was the displaced ground for an awareness of the transformation of the laboring body into a machine. . . . [H]is ability to endure (in work and in life) permitted him [to write all day, or stand from morning until dusk] without succumbing to exhaustion or boredom.23

Hayot’s analysis underscores the “impossible biology” of the coolie’s body—and its alignments with both “past and future, animal and superhuman” capacities—as that which makes “the suffering of [industrial] modernity” as well as the “possible end to suffering via indifference” palpable in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.24 Similarly, in Donna Haraway’s analysis of late-twentieth-century information capital—“cyborg” technology shadowed by its original military aims—the update to the coolie is the so-called nimble-fingered Asian
female, the “Southeast Asian village women workers in Japanese and U.S. electronics firms” who likewise make intelligible the contradictory disequilibriums of post-Fordist, transnational capital and its flexible modes of production. One speculative question that this book pursues is the genealogical links between these resented and racialized biologies (qua “nature-cultures”) preferred by Fordist and post-Fordist production and the similarly impossible biologies of cellular matter—tissue culture able to survive in vitro, that is, without the nutrition or “lodging” provided in vivo by the organism—whose very displacement facilitates the extraction of surplus values on behalf of contemporary biotech and for-profit medicine.

Toward the conclusion of his analysis, Hayot imagines the sophisticated Asian Americanist challenge to his own somatic focus and its “anthropomorphic aperture”:

Work in Asian American studies has consistently thought of race as located most fundamentally in a set of human minds and human bodies. [Colleen] Lye argues, to the contrary, that the structures that make the Asiatic a figure for (and index of) globalizing labor markets suggests that race is not a human concept but an economic one, that the “form” governing its representation and even its phenomenological experience owes more to the movements of capital than to the white perception of otherness.

“De-anthropomorphization” becomes the neologic mouthful Hayot coins to refer to Lye’s approach:

Lye’s forceful de-anthropomorphization of the concept of race . . . thus leads us to a broader theory of the disappointments of what one might call anthropomorphic desire, that is, of the disappointments produced by the awareness that an originary fantasy of the body’s personal and human simplicity can only be thought in relation to such larger and more inhuman concepts as transnationalism, diaspora, globalization or the history of the means of production.

Clearly, Hayot desires that the “animal and superhuman” biology of the coolie, rather than being reduced to a mere menacing fiction con-
structured by whites (like Arthur Smith), be understood as a material effect of capitalist production—of capitalism’s search for endless surplus and the consequent lowering to the utmost limits the costs of labor. But by the same token, it is also striking how political economy and historical materialist critique in the tradition of Marx are very much wedded to an anthropomorphic aperture and to human (labor)’s centrality to wealth production (Cooper 2008, 6–7). Thus, even when speaking of a context where human fragments produce surplus value in tissue economies, as is the case with cellular and metabolic processes, Eugene Thacker—drawing on Marx—relies on an anthropomorphic aperture, if for nothing else than to limn distortions and displacements of the organismal form as the (scale of) biology now capitalized in our contemporary biopolitical moment. My dwelling at some length on Hayot’s qualifications to his own illuminating reading of how “Chinese bodies” functioned as central racialized symbols of the tiered biologies capitalized in industrial, Fordist production offers a concrete example of the way in which the rhetorical pose pitting Asian Americanist theory against the biological—here, evoked as the “anthropomorphic aperture”—has led to, if not a total avoidance, then much hesitation in thinking precisely about how research on the biological and biosociality might richly inform the field.

Fragmented Biologies

To recapitulate, one story repeatedly gestured toward in current accounts of Asian Americanist cultural criticism argues for the exciting possibilities of discursive and formal analyses, ostensibly to keep the field from the twin evils of, first, getting scattered in its “too many possibilities” and, second, falling back upon a naïve biological or strategic essentialism as the grounds of its coherence. In my redubbing of that same story, the bugaboo of biological essentialism is pushed aside for a different biological anxiety, one emphasizing biological personhood not as fixed or singular but as multiform and distributed across time spans and spatial ecologies. To tell that story, let me turn to the way fragmentation has become a more literal concern for scholars dealing with tissue culturing, immortal cell lines, and transplantation. For these scholars, a complex dance between personification and pluriform,
distributed manifestations of a singular organism (that can live multiple lives and exceed the temporality of the mortal human life span) is being mapped.

Tissue culturing—the capacity to grow and combine cells outside the body—was first accomplished with nonhuman biologies (amphibian nerve fiber, avian cardiac tissue) in the first decade of the twentieth century. It was not until the late 1940s that “living human tissue was for the first time drawn into biomedical research on a large scale” and in relation to the search for a polio vaccine:

Although taken for granted today, it is not at all inevitable that human cells should be perceived as factories whose productive and reproductive capacities could be harnessed to make large volumes of cells and biological molecules. In the course of this fundamental shift in the role of living human tissues in biomedical research . . . the living human as research subject was fundamentally reorganized—distributed in space and time in previously unimaginable ways.

Science and technology scholar Hannah Landecker traces the story, or more precisely stories, of the standard human cell line HeLa and its racialization. In 1951, HeLa was dubbed “immortal,” meaning having the capacity to “continue growing and dividing unperturbed by [its] artificial environment.” This immortality of the cell line contrasted the curtailed life span of Henrietta Lacks, after whom HeLa took its name, the historical person who died of cervical cancer eight months after undergoing a tissue biopsy at John Hopkins University Hospital—the source of this still widely used mo cell line. (Without Lacks’s knowledge or consent, the biopsied tissue was sent to the research laboratory of George and Margaret Gey.)

In terms of the specific racialization of HeLa, Landecker deconstructs geneticist Stanley Gartler’s pronouncement at a cell tissue and organ culture conference in 1967 (a decade and a half after HeLa’s initial distribution as a stable “immortal” or mo cell line) that HeLa had contaminated the supposedly distinct eighteen cell lines in use at various labs. Prior to Gartler’s lecture—that is, in mid-1950s popular science articles—the press spoke of the HeLa cells as originating from “a young Baltimore housewife,” an “unsung heroine of medicine named
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Helen L.,” with race absent as a qualifier. Gartler mounted an argument that linked eighteen distributed and supposedly differentiated cell lines in various labs to a single donor specified as an African American woman—the cells promiscuously infiltrating other cell lines and thus appealing to the “worst fears” of miscegenation in Gartler’s audience. As Landecker’s careful review of his research protocols demonstrates, Gartler unnecessarily evoked Negro ancestry, and implicit rhetorics of the one-drop rule, to make his point. In the 1990s and 2010s, the story of HeLa again features the anchoring figure of the African American subject, Henrietta Lacks, but this time figured primarily as an economic persona, with “Lacks’s family [unable to] collect, because nobody ever patented the cells and thus it is difficult to pin down either past or present profit. . . .” In 2010, journalist Rebecca Skloot renewed interest in HeLa by publishing to significant acclaim the trade book The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks; while literary scholar Priscilla Wald, in her 2012 presidential address to the American Studies Association, most recently evoked HeLa to contour the difficulty in naming “the specific malfeasance” with regard to Henrietta Lacks.

Landecker’s tracing of HeLa’s discursive circulation as at times angelic housewife, at other times aggressive black woman, and then as dispossessed financial stakeholder, underscores three important points about the conjuring of the anthropomorphic dimensions of these biological tissues. The first is a reiteration and spin of Landecker’s own assertion that personification, as a discursive strategy, isn’t surprising given that these cell lines are proxies for humans:

Cell lines are made to stand in for persons . . . functioning in the laboratory as proxy theaters of experimentation for intact living bodies . . . . Their identification as “living” and “human” entities cannot fall from them, because it is this origin that gives them commercial and scientific value as producers of biological substances for use by humans and their validity as research sites of human biology.

And yet, their fragmented form, or radical exteriorization of heretofore invisible biological (life) processes, is at the core of their being preferred in laboratory practice: tissue culture provides a more palatable practice than vivisection as conventional means to view and
experiment on living biological processes. While we might assume that personification works to dignify the human by returning the part to the whole, personifications can also be used to extend racism, as Gartler's example makes clear—not only by returning the part to the whole but also by placing that whole within an agonistic (threatening) dialectic, or placing that whole within a classification system: the superhuman, aggressively invasive and prolific survivor rendering the regular (unmarked aka white) human as radically dependent, frail, and under assault. Reviewing journalistic coverage of both the HeLa cell line and a UCLA patent filed in 1981 on a cell line using biopsied tissue from John Moore's spleen, Wald likewise notes that the anthropomorphizing of cell lines fuses persons “with the characteristics of [their] cells” to denigrate or sanctify those persons. The point to be registered is that personifications are neither necessarily politically progressive nor theoretically regressive; and the same could be said of depersonifications or deanthropomorphizations.

The second is that in none of these personifications is human personhood imagined as self-directed or self-determining in ways that can resist the biosociality and biomaterial circulation into which the person's body parts are ushered. Thus, even in Landecker's own analysis, Lacks is contoured as a kind of silent subaltern: “at the establishment of this cell line exists a moment of irredeemable silence. Lacks's illness and treatment in 1951 at John Hopkins took place in an institutional, cultural and scientific setting that had no room in it for heroic agency or any other expression of personal will on [Lacks's] part, even the simple act of donation.” In other words, this sort of qualified personification—one arguably at the core of racial studies (and studies of alienated labor)—is one emphasizing an always already suspended agency, a social and historical condition of alienated distance from any primordial humanness prior to a corporeal estrangement in society.

Third, personification becomes part of a narrative of public scandal when particular circulations (and the integrity of their conduits, the logic of their channels) are called into question. When Gartler spoke at the Conference on Cell Tissue and Organ Culture, he was calling into question the integrity of the differentiated cell lines whose specific properties—as proxies for “breast cancer or colon cancer or amnion
cells” rather than HeLa cervical epithelial tissue—were crucial to their research use and proprietary value. Likewise, when news stories emphasized that Lacks’s surviving family members had not been informed of the wide use of her female relative’s biopsied tissue, the circuits of capital formation into which scientific research had been translated were similarly called into question. This tripping up of a taken-for-granted circulation (i.e., traffic in biomaterials), I would hypothesize, needs the conjuring of a person to be wounded (a victim); or, put another way, scandal needs the scale of “the person” to be scandalous.

At the same time, personification as a discursive strategy doesn’t necessarily have to work in conjunction with a scandalous, public exposure leading to a cessation or hiccup in circulation. That is, it can be used to contour as temporally receding but also fundamentally still relevant certain anthropocentric humanist values. Here’s where Eugene Thacker’s work in *The Global Genome* is useful. Thacker coins the term “biomaterial labor” to name the living entities—such as the HeLa cell line, but also nonhuman, mammalian bioreactors and model organisms—generating surplus value in labs and bio-distribution centers: biology itself is conceived of as a factory where “labor power is cellular, enzymatic, and genetic” (45). The uniqueness of this labor, however, lies for Thacker not in its microscopic scale or its merging of the technological (culture) and the biological (nature), but in its seeming to elude—and thus force the limits of—a Marxist analysis with its anthropomorphic personification of the alienated laborer: “[though] biology is ceaselessly made to work, and biological life activity is constantly producing, yet the seller of labor power is absent from the production formula” (46; italics added). Thacker’s intervention into biotech is precisely to gauge these estrangements of biology—these “estranged biologies” that cannot “sell” temporal slices of themselves (36)—in relation to the alienated worker of Marxist theory (the “human reproaches” to the system of capitalism), rather than as categorically more similar to inorganic matter (raw materials).

In its own tale of partial persons qua biomaterials inserted into biological exchanges or value production, science and technology studies (STS) conjures up fictitious and real persons and organismic scales that help us to understand comparatively, even as a form of inverted...
synecdoche, the industrial enrollment of biological living materials (such as mo cell lines or an extracted, lymphokine-producing spleen). These latter distributed, temporally uncontained morphologies may prove the form and scale upon which present and future biopolitical strategies as well as their critiques are mounted. STS of tissue economies stress biology’s already substantial nonpersonified forms, with biotech literally profiting from a view that distinguishes human biological materials from persons (thereby allowing the former to qualify as patentable inventions). If there is a common critical purpose to this scholarship in STS, it is to adopt a view not commensurate with biotech itself (its progress narrative that prizes first and foremost profitable biovalue) (Landecker 2000; Thacker; Squier 2000; Cooper 2008; Rajan; Reardon and Tallbear). In doing so, they perform the scale of the anthropomorphic organism as a still crucial heuristic and ethical tool—and one would be hard pressed to call this a strategically essentialist tactic.

In light of the above research on tissue economies, we might nuance then the traditional strengths of Asian Americanist criticism, framing its earnest attempts to personify alienated labor power or to endow technologies of living matter—going under the name “coolie” or “immigrant”—with personhood, not as theoretically naïve, but as precisely what makes the field resonant and useful at this current moment. Taking the human organism, thus far, as its preferred scale, Asian Americanist scholarship also concerns itself with a form of traffic, interestingly, in the legal-political (and social, civil) category of the not-quite-human: immigrant, coolie, neocolonial, transnational laborer, sex worker, call center operator, etc. Scholarship within the field looks to culture not only as that which facilitates this traffic—the exchanges of these biologies into surplus value—but as that which also registers disruptions and contradictions in these lives of the not-quite-human, suborganismal, and trafficked (upon which I will elaborate shortly). To be clear, I’m not arguing that humanism—if understood as a recentering of the normative, bourgeois subject of rights—is the answer, but that we cannot begin to understand the focus on form, aesthetics, affect, theme, autonomy (and all those other things supposedly lending the field coherence outside of “biology”) without understanding the cultural anxieties around being biological in an era that is reconceptualizing the body in informational, molecular, and posthuman terms.
Affect and Agency’s Avatars

Not only for scholarship in STS but also in the overlapping field of the anthropology of medicine, humanist methods of thick description and textured readings still provide valuable avenues for attending to the lifeways glossed over by tissue economies. For researchers like Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Lawrence Cohen who study the effects of transplantation technologies on the Third World/Global South (Brazil and India, respectively), an anthropomorphic aperture—one centering human organismal life—is crucial to hearing the point of view of those aggressively recruited into giving up their organs and thus counterbalancing the dominance of the views espoused by the biotech, pharmaceutical, and for-profit medical industries. Calling attention to how transplantation recipients are scrupulously followed by their doctors, who know little about the providers of these spare parts, Scheper-Hughes lambasts the construction of two unequal populations: “[Organ givers] are an invisible and discredited collection of anonymous suppliers of spare parts; [organ receivers] are cherished patients, treated as moral subjects and as suffering individuals [whose] names . . . biographies and medical histories are known.” For these ethnographers of poor populations of the global South capitalized by kidney brokers, a humanist attention to “local ethical dialects” of those aggressively recruited into giving up their organs provides a methodological alternative to top-down formulations of professional bioethicist panels that construct “abstract normative principles—autonomy, beneficence, and distributive justice”—and by doing so, rule out or divert attention to the less codified dissent of vernacular voices.

These ethical dialects are constituted, as Lawrence Cohen shows in his careful research on the perpetual debt economies of Chennai slums, by a verbal emphasis on sacrifice for the family—to get a spouse out of debt being the overwhelming rationale, among Cohen’s largely female subjects, for selling a kidney. In addition, kidney sellers make recourse to a gestural technique of flashing one’s nephrectomy scar “where it hurts”—also described as the place “where he [the husband] hits me. There. When I don’t have any more money.” Taking aim at arguments rationalizing kidney selling as a “win-win” situation (my life saved from kidney failure, your life saved from mounting debt), Cohen challenges
the truncated scenario upon which such “ethical” arguments rely. He urges a capacious listening to what kidney sellers say when asked if they would donate again: “[T]he question is not whether the statement ‘I would do it again’ is coerced . . . speech [to the ethnographer] but rather what happens if one keeps listening: ‘I would have to.’”

This phrase, “if one keeps listening” is repeated: “If one keeps listening, beyond the desire that sets the market in motion, one regains the temporal specificity lost in these transactional analyses: ‘I would have to. That money is gone and we are in debt.’ . . . Operable women are vehicles for debt collateral—and bear the scar.”

Cohen’s rejection of official bioethicists’ focus on the “primary” transaction of the patient-donor exchange attends to what bioethicists relegate to second-order phenomena: contexts of gender and the perpetuity of debt. Thus, Cohen listens to the women repeatedly speak of tubal ligation as an operation they have prior to the kidney donation, which, he argues, demonstrates “the prior operability of [their] bodies. The operation here is a central modality of citizenship, by which I mean the performance of agency in relation to the state. It is not just an example of agency; it is agency’s critical ground.”

Both Cohen and Scheper-Hughes argue that the truncated view, the disembedding of the sale of the organ from the larger debt conditions motivating the agreement, leads to bad ethics—an ethics that paves the way for organs to enjoy a fluidity and liquidity, an ease of movement across bodies, labs, and practices. To contravene this bad ethics, these ethnographers propose local and, indeed, anthropocentric stories as means of combating the aggressive recruitment of organ donors from the Third World/Global South. They would mitigate the crisis-level social disequilibriums that become intensely realized as both the “collateralization of poor populations” (Cohen) and, borrowing from Michel Foucault, the biopolitics or biosociality of race: the creation of a population whose demise and limited lives are required to promote the enhanced, limitless lives of others—a figuration I shorthand elsewhere as “Life (Un)Ltd.”

Though ineffective in putting an end to their conditions of indebtedness, the kidney donors’ actions—which include not only donation but also the visual flashings of the nephrectomy scar—seek another kind of public airing as to the value of their organs. The spectacular emphasis on this fleshly seam marking both the kidney’s transfer elsewhere
and its biovalue as a function of its alienation feeds into a highly circumscribed notion of agency seeming to lie more in the organ's than in the person's capacities. While most might balk at this implied wholesale revision of “agency” (as in, How can one call the condition of being anatomically dissected a form of “agency”?), my point is precisely that the difficulty of accounting for such events as either “gifts” or “coerced exchanges” may mean that agency, as such, is too purified a conceptual term, and yet one in which race, gender, sexuality studies, and other identitarian fields are highly invested.

In terms of subject matter, Cohen's work distinctly falls within the purview of a transnational Asian Americanist critique. Yet no one has construed his work in this way or linked him genealogically to the field of Asian Americanist Studies. My point, here, is to use the possibility of doing so to open up further questions (and dialogue across area studies) as to the continuing importance or not of Asian Americanist scholars’ emphasizing minor (and qualified) acts of agency and resistance, which in Cohen's scholarship valuably morph into attempts at publicity and the sacrificial gift of donating a kidney as an “avatar of agency.”56 In his 2002 publication Race and Resistance, Viet Thanh Nguyen argued that critics' examination of Asian American literature overemphasized these texts’ “resistance” to both capitalism and its normative racial values. Nguyen exposed the possible bad faith of the professional-managerial class of Asian Americanist intellectuals: their complicity with capital while stressing an overt fidelity to radical outsideness. What Nguyen diagnosed as a specific ideological homogeneity in Asian Americanist Studies, however, was only specifying to that particular field what is more endemic to left criticism more generally—the mining of the possibilities of alternatives: counter-Empire or posse (Hardt and Negri 2000), performative excess or camp (Butler 1989; Case), and (as suggested above) avatars of agency through scandalous publicity. Thus, even while various scholars have not directly taken Nguyen's findings to task by overtly reclaiming resistance as still key to understanding minority literature, much work in this vein continues. Rather than locating “resistance” in a humanist subject, this work emphasizes the necessity of a dialectical approach (Koshy 2001; Lowe) that stresses human history as an unfolding of, let’s say, a certain progress narrative (e.g., modernist rationality as emancipation, freedom, efficiency)
and the antagonism or counter to that narrative, so that this interplay of opposing forces is inevitable, the driving force of history. For Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, a dialectical analysis allows for a focus on alternative rationalities, “social formations in time with but in antagonism to modernity [with globalization as the latest phase of modernity],”\textsuperscript{57} rather than a relentless emphasis on the determining forces of capitalism and bureaucratic rationality.

Nguyen’s argument regarding an ideological homogeneity of the Asian Americanist literary field can be seen as part of a broader metacritical reflection within identity-based fields on the trap of figuring representations as both socially determined and in excess of that determination. Rather than “subversion” or “gender trouble,” “resistance” was the word Nguyen chose, but it has morphed into “supplement,” “haunting,” and “affect.” Thus, while “resistance” was the noble, heroic name given to a kind of purified antagonism that representations by Asian Americans might index, “melancholia,” “irritation,” “animateness,” “zaniness,” “anxiety,” and “envy” (the first deftly explored by Anne Cheng and David Eng, the latter five drawn from Sianne Ngai’s \textit{Ugly Feelings} and \textit{Our Aesthetic Categories}) all conceptually broaden the terrain of still antagonistic but limited agency with which we might think through the conditions of possibility for Asian American cultural productions. In short, if, in some earlier moment of Asian Americanist Studies, agency was mistaken for a sovereign-like power seized by the autonomous subject and bearer of rights (think the call to “empower” the people), the postmodern revamped placeholder for a now “suspended agency”\textsuperscript{58} takes the scattered forms of discoordinated antagonisms, which have a corporeal correlative in the discoordinated cognitions or affective sensations of body parts, with embodiment here imagined as a technical-organic hybrid. These discoordinated antagonisms, as defined by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, can strike directly at the highest levels of power, following their claim that “the new . . . social movements” are defined not by their horizontal capacity to link up into a singular movement or wave but “by the intensity that characterizes them one by one.”\textsuperscript{59} Citing Tiananmen, Intifada, and Chiapas, among others, these theorists of Empire and Multitude nonetheless still focus on collectivities (aggregates) as their vanguard icon of discoordinated antagonisms. Another emphasis on the distributed
intelligence and dynamic affects of body parts is provided by Elizabeth Wilson in her provocative theorization of “gut feminism.”

Wilson speaks of the false divide in trauma theory, psychoanalysis, and the like, of the separation and hierarchy of psychic (mental, cognitive) over somatic (aka exo-cerebral) phenomena. “After normal psychic structures have been violently destroyed by trauma,” Wilson states, the “primordial psychic power” in the organic substrata itself “begins to think,” as in the gag reflex. Wilson’s project is part of a larger argument with the ideational or discursive body supplanting the anatomical or biological body in both psychoanalytic and feminist scholarship (see chapter 3 on Margaret Cho for a fuller account of Wilson’s work). She suggestively draws out the primitive psyche of the stomach and neighboring viscera (enteric nervous system) as an example of a motive capacity existing in the so-called peripheral anatomy—the psyche of our biological parts distributed beyond the brain.60 Her excurses into the psychic capacities and distributed intelligence of the peripheral body parts (their registration of mood),61 in short, not simply to a waning of formerly robust—because centralized or coordinated—forms of “agency.” Rather, her dwelling on the gut’s digestive and ruminative (i.e., pondering) processes bespeaks a positive turn away from simplistic approaches marked by “an overriding concern with . . . causal primacy . . . as if determination is a singular, delimited event.”62 Recognizing the distributed agencies of body parts, in other words, represents a mode of inquiry attuned to a more complex, networked notion of bodily intelligences, proceeding from the amphimixed63 capacities (the phylogenetic and ontogenetic pasts) of our biological parts.

One of the concrete effects of the above claims is apparent in the very design of this book. The table of contents indicates in the left-hand margin the one or more body parts that act as the springboard for each of the chapters, translating into the two-dimensional limits of the page the distributed somatic structure of this book’s form and content. Throughout the chapters, I also adopt a horizontal or lateral method of reading and interpretation—one abjuring the vertical buildup toward a singular message or outcome and indebted to other cultural studies scholarship that models alternatives to a linear historicism. Particularly helpful has been Kathryn Bond Stockton’s notion of “sideways growth,” which she specifically names as a queer mode of accretion. More recently, Karen
Cardozo and Banu Subramaniam have outlined a method quite similar to my own in their emphasis on methods attuned to both vertical and “horizontal/lateral” processes (the latter modeled on gene exchanges among biological organisms) as key to understanding Asian/America as a multispecies assemblage. Additionally, I’ve drawn heavily from the expertise and methods of performance studies scholarship, itself a hybrid of anthropological and theatrical modes of inquiry (Schechner and Turner; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett; Roach; Foster 2002; Kondo 1997; Shimakawa; Phelan 1993; D. Taylor). My training as a literary scholar and performance studies critic also means that, in the stories unfolding in the following chapters, I remain especially attuned to the qualitative dimensions of affects, kinesthetics, tactilities, and distributed bodily agencies, through which events of particular import to Asian Americanist Studies, race studies, and postcolonial scholarship unfold.

In short, the contouring of Asian American works offered here is more phenomenological and topological than ideologically revealing or historically determinist. My work offers a methodological model of transversal crossings unfaithful to traditional genealogies of disciplined inquiry, as in the putting together of body parts (the cadavers in the Body Worlds exhibits), a literary text (Yamanaka’s poem), and critical scholarship (STS research on transplantation surgery and tissue culture) in ways that may, at first, appear jarring. The aim of this type of transversal\textsuperscript{64} thinking across platforms is not to expose a hidden truth but paradoxically to cultivate an openness to the wonders of the aleatory, the chance-event, and the insight of the accidental networked through unacknowledged amphimixis.\textsuperscript{65}

By citing in my book’s title a surrealist figure of contingency and chance (namely, the cadavre exquis), I am part of a group of thinkers who are not trying to predict the ends or foreclose the future of Asian Americanist critical inquiry and Asian American cultural production to a set of enactments most faithful to the original, revolutionary ideals. Instead, my contouring of a method of Asian Americanist cultural critique on the exquisite corpse is meant to cultivate an affective interest along a vibration of sufficient intensity linked to what feminism and queer theory have called a “politics of the open end” (Spivak). This politics finds wanting the teleological certainties offered in both the idea of
the past always repeating itself (e.g., capitalism and the law of the father as all-encompassing and forever) or the complete reversal of the past (glorious revolution ending in utopia, the withering away of the state and the emerging of the classless society; or jouissance through writing the body). While these assertions of open-endedness to which I have alluded aim at the unpredictability of the future (at temporal uncertainty), the openness of the exquisite corpse, to my mind, also contains a dispositional, affective charge—the practice of scholarly analysis and art in a spirit of intense, but also generous, engagement that is distinct from an “odious control [that] does not work all that well.” Edification, rather, occurs by way of something unsought, by acknowledging the limits of willed agency and direct pursuit, and through cultivating “a state of expectation and perfect receptivity” that paradoxically is a function of resigning oneself to learning “in snatches.” This receptivity to the aleatory and multiply contingent has affinities, too, to a “sideways” and lateral mode of analysis and exploration, one that is skeptical toward knowledge economies that prize only the straightest, most direct (instrumentally efficient) routes toward presupposed (rather than open) ends.

The current round of affect theory, in a more technoscientific vein, speaks of affect as a level of engagement that is distinct from the semantic component of an event, and that works almost inversely to the fixing of an event, spectacle, memory, or process in conventional semantic understanding (Clough; Massumi). Affective intensity is a function of something ineffable, the suspension of meaning, which we might also see as the potentiality of plural, indeterminate meanings. Andre Breton’s characterization of the surrealist jeux as playful exercises “in the definition of something not given,” in the bringing “out into the open a strange possibility of thought, which is that of its pooling,” and in its effects of establishing “striking relationships . . . remarkable analogies . . . [and] an inexplicable factor of irrefutability”—are intimations of the intensity and engagement (or, to use Breton’s phrase, the “entertaining” aspect) to be had through semantic suspense. The exquisite corpse, then, is a bid for a cross-wired attention to cultural productions in terms of that critical mode’s affective capacity, its capacity to bring “about something . . . unexpected.”
Introduction

Surrealist Scales and Transversal Accidents

In the above excurses, I have referred to biosociality. One meaning of biosociality is that we’re networked through biopower’s imperative to live (to generate and optimize life). As several critics writing after Foucault note, there is a crucial mystification—a disavowal of violence—at the heart of modern biopower (Mbembe; Agamben; Bull; Braidotti 2007). Describing biopower as the “ascendancy of life over death,” Rey Chow characterizes this “imperative to live [as] an ideological mandate that henceforth gives justification to even the most aggressive and oppressive mechanisms of interference and control in the name of helping the human species increase its chances of survival, of improving its conditions and quality of existence.”

Chow notes that civilizing procedures directed at colonial and minority populations, and, in the extreme, massacres of the same, are both part and parcel of the imperative to optimize the life of the species through “racist genocide”: “Killing off certain groups of people en masse is now transformed . . . into a productive, generative activity undertaken for the life of the entire human species.” As Achille Mbembe notes, an outright coercive “necropolitics” that unapologetically exercises power by dealing out death is merely the flip side of biopower. Dovetailing Chow’s and Mbembe’s observations with Lawrence Cohen’s, one might note that biopower works, yes, through the compressed intensity of massacre (killing fields) but also through an incorporative and slow—bit by bit, scar by scar—vivisection, and through the recruitment or simple taking of biopsied tissues and organs (as in the case of Henrietta Lacks). Race studies has typically understood biopower in terms of ethnics’, natives’, and subalterns’ occupying the position of zoe (or bare animal and cellular life) as opposed to bios (politically recognized life, narrated life lived by a historical organism). In chapter 1, using the examples of Ruth Ozeki’s My Year of Meats, Greg Bear’s Blood Music, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go, I outline these authors’ own puzzling out of whether the chromatic schema of the five races will become displaced by the nonisomeric categories of bios/zoe or whether a transliteration between the two is more likely.

I wish to extend in particular the Asian Americanist understanding of biosociality as also the living of oneself electively as fragments—as
cuttable and extractable bags of parts—and as highly attuned to operability as the critical ground of agency and citizenship. The ways in which artists take up their concern with being biological are manifold. Being biological becomes a dance in response to a dentist’s chance description of an immigrant’s teeth (as in the work of Taiwanese American dancer Cheng-Chieh Yu), a comic screed on the exploding vagina at the scene of birth (a consistent feature of Margaret Cho’s stand-up comedy), a tango with mental disability from a temporarily able-brained caretaker’s perspective (danced in Denise Uyehara’s performances), and a complicated character system and set of nested plots that together allegorize the parasitic and commensal entanglements humans have with microorganisms (that which I explore vis-à-vis Amitav Ghosh’s speculative fiction). Additionally, my project takes seriously the claims of Hardt and Negri (in *Empire*) on the topological folds of contemporary institutions of governmentality. If in the past power was effected through enferments (containments like the prison, the school, and the army), in our current moment—as Hardt and Negri, following Gilles Deleuze, argue—the prison is best conceived not as a locally bounded site (from which there could be an “outside” called freedom) but rather the prison is everywhere and experienced as “a play of degrees and intensities.”

Hardt and Negri’s spatial reconceptualizations of power (force flows) have repercussions for our notions of private space and public space, especially in the context of somatic sociality, where the supposed private sphere of the body, and the intimacies of grooming, hygiene, and nutrition, become sites of an intense wagering of the will to health (the will to optimize life). The flip side of this notion of the “private” soma already “public” is a kind of nonscandalous quality to nakedness or exposure—a kind of diffuseness of the pornographic so that the very qualities or limits of obscenity become themselves fluid. The emphasis on the limits of exposure (of the critical method of hidden-exposed, which Eve Sedgwick aligned with the paranoia of detection) also takes the form, throughout the following chapters, of a metacritical conversation regarding the stakes of an Asian Americanist emphasis on justice/equilibrium against a more tactile, affective intensity of interest to be had by more transversal, circuitous immersions.

One might very well ask the question, Why study biosociality in contexts specifically “Asian American” or racial? Why not study the literary
and cultural manifestations of distributed embodiment more generally? Wider cultural studies of biosociality are a main influence on this study, works such as Melinda Cooper’s Life as Surplus, Susan Squier’s Liminal Lives, Priscilla Wald’s Contagious, Ed Cohen’s Body Worth Defending, Donna Haraway’s When Species Meet, Judith Roof’s Poetics of DNA, Kim Tallbear’s Native DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science, Charis Thompson’s Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproduction, Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan’s Acquiring Genomes, and Hannah Landecker’s Culturing Life and her research on American metabolism, to name a few. My study in many ways places conventionally conceived works in the Asian Americanist canon—those either created by Asian Americans or depicting Asiatics and orientals to the American public—in conversation with that literature. However, the real force of placing Asian American cultural texts and Asian Americanist cultural study in relation to the question of the biological at this moment lies in the peculiarities of the Asian Americanist critical field’s current theoretical articulation of its weakness as an immanent discursive formation and its overreliance on the biological. In essence, I am not arguing with the adage that Asian Americans have no common language, history, and so forth, to call their own. I am saying that precisely because of these noncommonalities, the question of biology looms larger, making the anxiousness of biological embodiment in Asian Americanist contexts a ripe arena of study and opening up the question of what being biological (bioavailable, biosupplementable, clinically carved up, etc.) means for race, gender, queer, and disability studies more generally.

The aim here is not to rescue an anthropomorphic aperture or the organism’s integrity but to negotiate the tripartite scales of biosociality—the scale of the person, the scale of the microbe, and the scale of the population. And as stated earlier, the larger stakes of this project also lie in the question of whether humanistic inquiry can still remain humanist if it thinks about embodiment more in terms of distributed parts and patterns of circulation—of energy, affects, atoms, and liquidity in its accounting of the soma. Going the other way (in a cautionary note to the fetishizing of everything reconceived as information flows), my argument is also that we would be wise not to throw out personification and the anthropomorphic aperture as valuable critical
frameworks—frameworks through which the distributed, multiscalar biologies of a simultaneous human and posthuman moment are registered. Put another way, synchronic racial and postracial epistemologies become valuable heuristics to comprehend such plural embodied phenomenologies. The critical interest in personifications (as they occur in literature, performance, new media, and theoretical contexts) does not compute to an old-fashioned focus on persons rather than things, or assertions of pathetic fallacies on a reality of machinic flows, aka (ecological) systems. Indeed, my work in this book cleaves to a methodology that precisely attends to an order of thinking that “stands on a bridge,” a phrase borrowed from Monique Truong’s *Book of Salt* to describe one character’s as-yet-undecided cleaving to either a territorially nationalist or a deterritorialized exilic politics. The standing on a bridge undertaken in *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America* involves straddling the humanist, organismal structure of bodies and a proposed “future” but really contemporary moment of distributed and symbiogenetic materiality where the enzymatic, cytoplasmic, metabolic, and regulatory activities of cross-species biologies coassemble with other chemical, informatic, and toxic force flows. Race scholars need to entertain the possibility but also not rush to conclude that thinking biologies in this nonautonomous, nondiscrete way (one that sees organisms as multispecies collectives) may so transform what we think of as race that these biologies’ genealogies to past and current racial theory become unintelligible.

Femiqueer Embodiment and Ethics

Though up to this point I have highlighted the critical race studies, postcolonial, STS, and humanistic (affect/aesthetic) influences on the analyses that follow, I would be remiss not to underscore the terrain of feminist and queer embodiment studies as the gestational milieu of this project, and indeed, all of my scholarship to date. In thinking through Asian American body projects and embodied acts, I have drawn inspiration from works focused on body parts highly charged in the history of gendering: the vagina, the (bound) feet, and the breast (by way of Margaret Cho, Ruth Ozeki, Cheng-Chieh Yu, Londa Schiebinger, and Sarah Lochlann Jain). But even as such body parts have been
flashpoints for thinking about “women’s difference,” it has been the more recent turns in feminist theory toward questioning bodily matter as the very grounding of feminism’s project that have been more influential on my work. One way of understanding feminist theory’s importance to this project lies in the initial centering and then vexing of the stable category woman, who would be both the subject and the object of women’s studies. Feminist theory continues to grapple with “biological foundationalism,” the grounding of its political projects and interrogatory practices in a natural, pre-given bodily fact, a grounding that smuggles in the idea that women across cultures are a natural affinity group. This premise not only allows for Western feminists to overlook the distinct formations of gendering humanity in various locations but also allows feminism to mystify its political premises as a coalitional formation.

Feminists of color were crucial to the critique of woman as a natural category across times and spaces, and this project continues in that line of work, stressing, to quote Norma Alarcon, that “in cultures in which ‘asymmetric race and class relations are a central organizing principle of society,’ one may also ‘become a woman’ in opposition to other women”—and that a feminism that relies upon a too narrow focus on woman’s subordination risks understating or ignoring how men of color as a group may likewise be oppressed by (white) patriarchy or, if “patriarchy” is too outmoded a notion, then how men of color can be oppressed by masculinist neoliberal corporate logics. This project is also indebted to the historical preoccupation of women of color artists with the “body . . . as site [to contest] pornographic ethnography . . . the tradition of exhibiting ‘real’ human objects that goes back to Columbus’s importation of ‘New World’ natives to Europe for purposes of scientific study and courtly entertainment.” If as Ella Shohat asserts, “the only visibility allowed people of color was the hyperbolized pathological visibility of the auction block, the circus, and the popular scientific exposition,” the Asian American artists, writers, and performers examined here expressly negotiate with the pathological visibility of Asian Americans in the political sphere, the entertainment professions, the medical field, and domestic service, even as they also emphasize a kind of ubiquitous, civilian-enacted racial profiling at present that affects Americans of East Asian versus Southeast and South Asian descent, unevenly.
During the period of this book’s composition, object-oriented feminist scholarship informed by the “new materialisms” coalesced in signal publications such as Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* and Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s edited volume, *New Materialisms*, both appearing in 2010. Coole and Frost, for instance, offer a cogent review of how the false cleaving of “language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, soul . . . imagination, emotions, values, meaning, and so on” from “biological material [and] the inertia of physical stuff” led from the 1970s onward to the rise of “radical constructivism” and a decline (they use the word “demise”) of traditional materialist frameworks indebted to structural Marxism (2). Influenced by the work of Spinoza filtered through Gilles Deleuze, the new materialisms eschew the view that sees inorganic matter as without agency, instead regarding matter as “active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (9). While many of the following chapters harmonize with this new materialist perspective, it is also the case that ethnic studies, in contrast to feminist studies, did not see the demise of historical materialism as method (with Marx remaining *de rigueur* reading in the field). Moreover, it is unclear the extent to which the new materialists themselves take seriously the theoretical work of those working at the nexus of postcolonial, race, and queer studies as they have engaged in similar projects of emphasizing nonhuman actants (D. Nelson; Morton; Tallbear 2012; Chen 2012).

At the intersection of queer theory— and feminist-inflected inquiries into science, medicine, and technology (what I call the “femiqueer”), groundbreaking challenges to the (gendered) body’s naturalness emerged in the 1990s. This strand of querying gender stresses the historicity of the category “woman” and the relatively recent grounding of sex difference (in the eighteenth century) in the “truth of the body.” For instance, Thomas Laqueur famously called attention to the one-sex theory of the body, wherein what we now think of as women’s distinctive sex organs were merely less-developed versions of men’s, located inside their bodies. Contesting the naturalness of dimorphic gender, scholars of the intersexed and of transgender point to figures such as the hermaphrodite that give lie to the claim that there are only two (male and female) sexes, posing alternatives such as the “five sexes,” and highlighting the naturalness of anatomical sex as a backformation from the culturally constructed idea of binary gender. Informed by queer
theory’s rootedness in but also nonisometry with the fuller representation of gay, lesbian, and trans-bodies, this study introduces counter-intuitive notions of queer reproductive infrastructures when thinking, for instance, of the hyper-hetero (cross-species) seeding grounds of microbiological parasites requiring two or more host bodies (see chapter 4).

Inspiration for my expanded notion of queer sites of reproduction and kinship comes from both STS scholar Charis Thompson’s work on assisted reproductive technologies and in vitro fertilization (IVF) and biologists such as Joan Roughgarden and Lynn Margulis’ revisions to sexual selection theory and the origins of sex. According to Thompson, the plurality of potential parents enabled by egg donorship, sperm donorship, and gestational surrogacy allows, for instance, for the sister of a potential male parent (or, put more crudely, he who is trying to procure an infant) to act as gestational surrogate employed by her brother (for an embryo formed from her brother’s sperm and a donated egg). The incestuous connotations of this sister’s birthing her brother’s child, however, remain deeply troubling to the state and those engaged in such arrangements, with Thompson drawing out how both the legal language restricting the channeling of certain egg-sperm combinations and patients’ conversations on how they understand the new kinship formations of which they are a part struggle to keep intact a narrative of linear cognatic descent—that meaning of “heteronormativity.”

Kinship becomes a technological, biological, and discursive choreography that, at the present moment, is haunted as much by the prospect of too much “hetero” intimacy (xeno-assemblages) as by the prospect of too much “homo” intimacy (incest). That this queer troubling of narratives of kinship occurs as much within privileged domains of high-tech heteronormative reproduction as within gay, lesbian, and transgender spaces, I argue, has implications for what archives and methods we count as queer enough.

In Roughgarden’s Evolution’s Rainbow and The Genial Gene, this biologist draws upon observable physiology and behavior of nonhuman animals (the wider natural world) and offers evidence of the inadequacy of thinking binary gender (she points to species of birds that, for instance, have two phenotypal males and two phenotypal females), and in turn, the inadequacy of the theory of sexual selection along the lines
offered by neo-Spencerian thinkers such as Richard Dawkins (but continuing to be misnamed “Darwinian sexual selection theory”), which figures coy females selecting genetically superior males as the engine driving survival of the fittest. In *The Genial Gene*, she takes aim at the underlying competitive engine imputed to natural selection, arguing that survival involves as much resilience in gregariousness and cooperation as it does competitive interaction. For her part, Lynn Margulis, whether or not intentionally, queers notions of sex in defining it simply as transversal (or horizontal) gene transfers that can happen by way of cosmic radiation as much as intergamete exchange. Summarizing Margulis and Sagan’s *Origins of Sex*, Myrna Hird distinguishes sex (genetic recombination—crossing of genetic materials across nuclei, cell membranes, and organisms) and reproduction (the accumulation of more matter):

>[S]ex is “any process that recombines genes (DNA) in an individual cell or organism from more than a single source. . . . [It] may occur at the nucleic acid, nuclear, cytoplasmic, and other levels.” Sex may occur through cosmic irradiation, virus and symbiont acquisition, or exposure to ambient chemicals. Reproduction, by contrast, is the process that augments the number of cells or organisms. . . . Sexual reproduction [the augmenting of numbers of organisms via the recombination of genes rather than asexually—as in sporulation, budding, mitosis, fragmentation, etc.] is a minority practice among species on earth.81

These evolutionary and micro-biologists’ insights on the varieties of reproduction and the nonisometry of sex with strictly interorganismal gamete exchange leave expansive areas to be reckoned with in queer theory. Indeed, what Laura Hyun Yi Kang calls “trenchant interdisciplinariness,” whereby biology and women’s/gender/queer studies mutually unsettle each other’s founding presumptions and favored methods—precisely through serious cross-engagement—still remains largely unassayed.82 Admittedly, my study here remains more multidisciplinary than trenchantly interdisciplinary; however, in bringing an exquisite corporeal method, one informed by STS, race studies, femi-queer theory, and the aleatory, to the work of Asian American cultural production, my own gamble is that Asian Americanist critique will
emerge as a particularly hospitable site for further cross-disciplinary experiments, along the lines contoured in this book, yielding insights important to feminist, gender, and queer studies as much as race, post-colonial, and American studies.

* * *

Allow me now to return to my opening reading of Yamanaka’s “Parts” and to recapitulate that the rhetorical moves of the poem go increasingly inward, to the embodied experience of self-cutting, to the circulation of sensations and feelings (dizzy, grey, numb, icy) that end in the gratuitous expenditure of the apostrophed subject’s biomaterials, her spilled blood, as insufficient guarantor of a reciprocated feeling (love). Blood is the species of this exchange and it takes the semiotic form of the writing of “her name.” While the poem doesn’t take on the “tissue” point of view of platelets or inhabit the “molecular” scale of coagulative processes, it nonetheless taps into a twisting of the interior and exterior—of embodying this distortion, this condition of extremity juxtaposed to philia (love). The poem fails to deliver justice or equilibrium figured as the battering voice of the first three parts met by a counterpunch (e.g., “I accuse you, mother!” followed by a declaration of freedom and autonomy). Nor does it offer a more tender reconciliation, where the daughter’s self-cutting would elicit a maternal escort to the hospital. In this instance, rather than moving toward balance or homeostasis, poesis amplifies crisis and vitality qua continual disequilibrium. While we might think of this emphasis on extreme modes of survival in brutish conditions as flouting rather than satisfying the Asian Americanist emphasis on a desirable justice in the future, there is also another way to approach this emphasis on disequilibrium, but it involves a recursive loop in reading Yamanaka’s poem both nonracially and racially.

For purposes of heuristic clarity, we might think of this disequilibrium first as a universal (nonracial) portrait of the suffering brought on by late capitalist biopolitics where alienation occurs not simply at the site of labor (production) but across vitality itself (reproduction, health, nutrition, etc.). Recalling both Eric Hayot’s and Colleen Lye’s analysis of the coolie’s function as an ambivalent figure registering the shocks of
modernity (its equivalence with suffering, where the coolie also offers a possible way out of suffering vis-à-vis indifference), we might ask—in the context of Yamanaka’s poem—“Who or what becomes the ‘Asiatic’ figure that can bear the shocks of post-Fordist biopolitics—financialization of life itself?” In the apostrophed subject’s self-cutting, we find a sort of answer. Her recourse is to her own biomaterials: her blood—and her fluid openness—become the bioavailable vehicles that can bear suffering with a kind of nervelessness or through the deliberate solicitation of the body’s own organically produced anesthetics. In this latter reading, it both matters and doesn’t matter if we figure the poem’s apostrophed subject as Asian, for in a sense, the Asiatic racial form that in the past, by way of the population aggregate of “Chinese,” worked as a conduit for modernity’s disequilibriums has morphed in the biopolitical present into the generativity and plasticity of bodily fluids, organs, cells, molecules—these can “suffer” with indifference.

Attempted in the above reading, then, is an analysis of race in relation to a poem where there isn’t necessarily a warrantable Asian character. Reading late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American naturalist literature, Colleen Lye introduced this method of considering “examples of racial figuration even when it does not take the shape of a racially identified character.” My analysis here extends her method to turn-of-the-twenty-first-century poetry and human specimen exhibits, the latter of which represents the extension of the natural history diorama enabled by taxidermy to the preservation and scientific display of the human enabled by plastination.

My analysis of racial figuration with respect to Yamanaka’s poem occurs through an engagement with its thematic concerns with bioavailability and biological materials, rather than by equating its stylized use of local Hawaiian pidgin as the obvious racial marker (which might be called a linguistic essentialism). While at the outset I emphasized this poem’s defying the kind of Asian Americanist reading exhibited in Fiona Ma’s efforts vis-à-vis the Body Worlds exhibits—a reading referring to racialized physiognomy in order to pursue the project of justice—here I suggest that the poem’s lack of a similar Asiatic anatomical detail doesn’t necessarily mean that a racialized framework isn’t a tenable heuristic device. That is, only if we think race bespeaks a relation of two humanist wholes (one colored and one white) can we not
see race operative in this poem. But what if we were to revise race to include the realm of biopolitical social relations exacted not simply in the state's relation to the citizen but in the management of health mediated by the site of the family and peer “advice,” as well as lived in the alienated, instrumental use of one's biomaterials, as well as lived across the technosomatic interface of poesis and the body of the reader?

The point, then, is not simply to answer in binary (1, 0, match, no match) whether Yamanaka’s poem of bodily fragments is an Asian American one. My ambition is rather to intensify certain investments—in justice/equilibrium, in the anthropomorphic aperture, in humanist antagonistic agency—that become felt in the gut while probing these works’ own conflicted relation to the salience of race in understanding and theorizing contemporary biopolitics and biosociality. How (many ways) does race qua “species-being” come to matter in the more or less universal condition of living the self as fragments, or to put it another way, as several surreal scales of organization, morphogenesis, and temporality?

Will race or racial personifications still circulate as vehicles to sensually and cognitively grasp posthumaness as a condition of estranged and dispersed biologies? This question of race’s continuing salience cannot be determined in advance. Metacritically, I would frame my own endeavor here as an effort to enroll and ally studies of race, particularly those genealogically linked to the Asian Americanist field, as crucial platforms to understand that biosociality. My success or not in doing so will form part of the answer to that question as posed in some future discussion. But for now, it is certainly clear that critical cultural interventions into tissue economies and estranged biologies of the current moment might have fruitful sponsors within the postcolonial and racial studies fields. It is this sponsorship that I wish to encourage as a developing possibility.