

■ The Asia-Pacific in Asian American Transmigration: Lydia Minatoya's *The Strangeness of Beauty**

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Abstract

This paper studies the intermingling of the imagination of Asia-Pacific and the formation of Asian America. Analyzing the Japanese American Sansei writer Lydia Minatoya's *The Strangeness of Beauty* (1999), which portrays the Japanese American experiences in the first three decades of the twentieth century, my reading first grounds the formation of Asian America in Asian Americans' Pacific routes, thereby extending our understanding of Asian America to an Asia-Pacific dimension. Thereafter, I explore how Asian Americans' trans-Pacific trajectories may help constitute an Asia-Pacific imagination embedded in the everyday materiality of this area. Specifically, my analysis hinges on a reading of the "I-story" created by the novel's protagonist-narrator Etsuko Sone. Through an investigation of the discontinuous and relational nature of this "I-story," I argue that *The Strangeness of Beauty* traces the meanderings and changes of Etsuko's self and life. Instead of reinforcing the monolithic "I" pursued by conventional Western autobiographies, Etsuko's "I-story," which is indebted to the form of modern Japanese autobiographical fiction *shi-shōsetsu*, presents Etsuko as a Japanese American woman ceaselessly re-defined by the spatiotemporal multiplicities of her transmigratory experi-

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ence across the Pacific. This portrayal of the Asian American “transmigratory” everyday, furthermore, retrieves “Asia-Pacific” from a EuroAmerican construction. *The Strangeness of Beauty* envisages Asia-Pacific as neither a mythic space of transnation nor a geo-political place constrained by the bipolarity of the East and the West, Asia and America, or Japan and the U.S. It replenishes Asia-Pacific with Asian Americans’ engagements with the connections and confrontations within and between Asia, America, and the Pacific.

Keywords: Asian America, Asia-Pacific, transmigration, the everyday, I-story, Lydia Y. Minatoya

There's a myth about immigrants: that we come on the wings of our dreams. For most the tale is too simple, turning convoluted personal motivations into a kind of cliché.

—Lydia Minatoya, *The Strangeness of Beauty* 29

Arising in alliance with the American civil rights and ethnic movements in the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American cultural movement was initiated to ensure Asian Americans' American identity. Adopting a linear model of immigration and settlement, Asian Americans were mostly concerned about how to claim the Americas as their home, with their ultimate goal to establish a "grounded" community in the Americas. The America-centered Asian American imagination, however, has been challenged due to the increasingly frequent traffic between Asia and America in the era of trans-Pacific flows of people, capital, and culture. The U.S. government's 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the rise of many Asian countries as global economic powers, the globalized world, and the massive demographic change in the Asian American population (now with the majority of Asian Americans being Asia-born), force into legibility Asian America's Asia-Pacific trajectories and transnational connections.¹ As more and more Asian Americans maintain connections on both sides of the Pacific and "flexible citizenship" (Ong)—usually deriving from one's dual, triple, or multiple national/ethnic/familial affiliations across the Pacific—gains privileges in transnational commerce and travel, it becomes inadequate to comprehend Asian America as an ethnic group inside the Americas.² Apparent now, in Arif Dirlik's words, is "the increasing ambiguity in the conceptualization of Asian America of Asian populations as members of grounded communities versus as diasporic 'Rimpeople'" ("Asians on the Rim" 31).

While attending to this transnational turn of Asian American studies, this paper does not intend to give a simple answer as to the positioning of Asian Americans either as people (expected to be) "grounded" in the Americas or as the Pacific "Rimpeople" of movement and diaspora. Being aware that any attempt to position (or name) a group runs the risk of rendering abstract the complexities of a community made of individuals of differences and mobility, I am more interested in exploring Asian American individuals' ambiguities vis-à-vis their "American homes," "Asian origins," and "Pacific routes." Indeed, as the traditional "pan-Asian American" identity has been faulted for converging people

¹ See, for example, Cheung; Wong; and Lowe, "On Contemporary Asian American Projects" for discussions of this trend.

² Attentions toward the Asia-Pacific constitution of Asian America can be found in Dirlik; Palumbo-Liu; and Hu-DeHart.

of Asian origin into one reified category of ethnic coalition that fails to attend to their diverse ethnic, national, language, class, and religious backgrounds, it is again not without danger to concede to an Asia-Pacific imagination of Asian America before carefully qualifying the idea (or ideal) of Asia-Pacific.

Rather than being a neutral geographical term with a clear physical reference, “Asia-Pacific” is from its inception informed by EuroAmerican conceptualizations. Dirlik insists that Asia-Pacific has been defined not as much by what happens within the boundaries of the Pacific Ocean as by the economic, political, military, and cultural agendas outside the Pacific. He argues that “The Pacific in the end would be a EuroAmerican invention . . . , that what we today regard as the Pacific region was formed by forces that originated outside of the region” (“Introducing the Pacific” 5). Indeed, the formation of the early image of the Pacific is due to the EuroAmerican cartographical and literary efforts that could be traced as early as Marco Polo’s voyage to the Orient in 1271. The idea of Asia-Pacific itself, moreover, was the product of the U.S. global geo-imaginary during the Cold War years (León W. 18; Connery 30-33). Even with the rise of Asian economic powers since the 1980s, Japan, according to Bruce Cummings, at best served as “Number Two,” under the lead of “U.S. hegemony” or “U.S.-British hegemony,” in the international power struggles over the resources of Asia-Pacific (38), not to mention that the rise of Japan in the form of a new capitalist empire, instead of bringing visibility or prosperity to the many long-neglected locales within Asia-Pacific, only deepened the intra-regional inequity. Here, in view of the fact that Asia-Pacific is “neither a self-contained region nor a community” but “a rim—peripheral and semiperipheral societies oriented toward Tokyo and the U.S. market” (Cummings 41), it becomes a question as to whose Asia-Pacific we are talking about when launching an Asia-Pacific imagination of Asian America. Instead of considering Asia-Pacific an abstract, and usually utopian geopolitical space of equality and capital accumulation, a space that promises Asian America not only a new name but also commercial profits, it is important to restore Asia-Pacific to history, to time, to the concrete, the local, and the everyday. Part of my purpose in writing this paper is to intervene into the EuroAmerican “spatial mythology” (Connery 40) of Asia-Pacific with the Asian American actualities that take place within this area.

Another point to bear in mind when attempting an Asia-Pacific imagination of Asian America is that one should not over-privilege the liberating power of transnation. Precisely, an Asia-Pacific imagination is useful not in that it substitutes “Asian America,” a term implying the ongoing tension of national duality, with a transnational category of imaginary unity and geographical coherence, or in that the idea of “transnation” dissolves once and for all Asian Americans’ diffi-

culties landing in the Americas; its value lies rather in that it does justice to the immigrant origins and trans-Pacific trajectories of Asian Americans. “Asian America” as a category exceeding Asia/America dichotomy has a longer history than the rise of the very idea of Asia-Pacific in the 1970s. Slowly developing out of the trans-Pacific cultural, military, economic, and population flows since the nineteenth century, Asian America has been deeply rooted in the concrete socio-political transactions taking place over the Pacific. Take the history of Japanese Americans as an example. The introduction of the large number of Japanese laborers into North America and Hawai’i in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was at least partly due to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The distinct age gaps between the Issei, Nisei, and Sansei are largely attributed to the U.S. government’s 1907 Gentleman’s Agreement and the 1924 National Origins Act, both working to reduce the number of new Japanese immigrants into the U.S. Besides, the collective frenzy propelling the post-World War II Japanese Americans to relinquish their Japanese connection and prove their “Americanness” was a product of the wartime logic that prescribed the U.S.-Japan incompatibility. The trend of “going back to Japan” arising since the 1980s among Japanese Americans, again, has to be understood along with the rise of Japan as an economic power in Asia.³ All these demonstrate that Japanese American experiences have from their beginnings been interwoven with the trans-Pacific power relations. To study Asian America in light of the Asia-Pacific formation is therefore not to deem unimportant (or out-of-date) the problems of Asian American identity politics and home-search in the Americas but to investigate the Asian American (both grounding and diasporic) experiences as bound up with the connections and conflicts between nations, capital, and labor in a broader context of the Asia-Pacific region.

Given the fact that Asia-Pacific formation is integral to Asian American formation, it is understandable that an Asia-Pacific context is “unavoidably implicit in much of the writing on Asian Americans” (Dirlik, “The Asia-Pacific in Asian-American Perspective” 305). Yet in addition to reading Asian America as the “product” of the Asia-Pacific regional transaction, one must also examine how Asian American individuals act as subjects that intervene into our conceptualizations of Asia, America, and Asia-Pacific. The intermingling of Asian American and Asia-Pacific histories should be studied for more than one purpose: in addition to extending the spatiotemporality of Asian America beyond any

³ The attention to *kikokushijo* (or “repatriate children”) further extends the topic of “going back to Japan” to the present day and to the area of education, which together with the study of *kaigaishijo* (“overseas children”), updates the trans-Pacific experiences of the Japanese people. See Pang.

strictly defined national territory or history, one may move a step further to (1) oblige America to reconsider its Asian (American) components, and (2) replenish Asia-Pacific with Asian (American) contents. David Palumbo-Liu reminds us of the “double movement” in the America-Asia transaction: “we must note that these crossings, both physical and mental, were not only undertaken in a westerly direction by America: as America crossed over to Asia, Asians came to the United States” (2). For him, to grant Asian Americans agency is to take seriously “the modern introjection of Asia into the American imaginary” (17) and the constitution of “a particular facet of Asian America” in “American bodies, psyches, and spaces” (18). Moreover, by revealing the uneven power relations between Asian American members of different Asian national origins, one could disrupt the mythic vision of Asia-Pacific as a space of transnational unity and communal integration. Here, contrary to conceiving Asian Americans as passive figures driven by the larger-than-life forces of capital and politics across the Asia-Pacific region, one may imagine an Asia-Pacific as constituted by the everyday vicissitudes and complicated power struggles of Asian Americans, which, as argued by Rob Wilson, will reveal “[u]neven and unjust, the memory of *immigration and war*” as “a traumatic Asian-Pacific ‘kernel’” (237; emphasis Wilson’s).

This paper takes *The Strangeness of Beauty* (1999), the second book-length work written by the Japanese American Sansei writer Lydia Minatoya (1950—), as an example to study the entangled constitution of Asian America and Asia-Pacific. One reason to choose *The Strangeness of Beauty* as a major text of analysis is that it brings to the fore a piece of Japanese American experience that took place in-between Japan, the U.S. and the Pacific before the Japan-U.S. Pacific War. While *Talking to High Monks in the Snow: An Asian American Odyssey* (1992), an earlier work written by Minatoya, also deals with Japanese American transnational travels and movement, it is mostly written in line with what Traise Yamamoto recognizes as the “going back to Japan” trend in Japanese American literature. Taking as its central concern Japanese Americans’ visit of Japan after the late 1980s, the “going back to Japan” trend embodies the post-cold war trans-Pacific cultural movement and tourism.⁴ *The Strangeness of Beauty*, however, brings readers to an earlier age, in a way restoring the construction of Japanese America to its trans-

⁴ Please refer to Yamamoto 81-92 for more details about the development of “going back to Japan” as a theme in recent Japanese American literature. Important works in this group include Dorinne K. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (1990); David Mura, *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (1991); and Lydia Minatoya, *Talking to High Monks in the Snow: An Asian American Odyssey* (1992).

Pacific origins.⁵ Providing a view to Japanese Americans' dual connections with Japan and the U.S. before the Second World War, it reveals that the Asia-Pacific trajectories have always already been essential to the constitution of Japanese America.

At this point I agree with Rachel Lee that many Asian American literary texts, "far from lagging behind, actually anticipate global frameworks, enunciating precisely the formation of hybrid Asian cultures in scattered sites across the Pacific due to labor migrations, colonial invasions, the flow of transnational capital, and the hyperlinks of satellite communications" (233). Lee took Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest: A Novel* (1990) as an example, explaining that Asian Americans' "grounding experience" has been implicated in the Asia-Pacific "multinoded cultural intermingling," inseparable from "the compilation of heterogeneous national, racial, and cultural components all in one site" (239). In a similar vein, the Japanese American experiences described in *The Strangeness of Beauty* antedate the Asia-Pacific turn of Asian American critical discourse in the 1990s. Portraying the Japanese American experiences in the first three decades of the twentieth century, *The Strangeness of Beauty* not only presents its protagonist-narrator Etsuko Sone's "I-story" as interwoven with her Asia-Pacific experience of transmigration, but also intervenes into our imagination of Asia-Pacific. The following discussion expands Georgina Dodge's reading of Etsu Inagaki Sugimoto's *A Daughter of the Samurai* (1925), which Dodge considers the literary precedent of *The Strangeness of the Beauty*. While also paying attention to "I-story" as an effective literary tool to inscribe one's transnational identity as Dodge does in her reading of *A Daughter of the Samurai*, my analysis foregrounds Etsuko's Asian American subjectivity and focuses on how Minatoya attempts an everyday microscopic constitution of Japanese America and Asia-Pacific. Indeed, though created under the influence of *A Daughter of the Samurai*, *The Strangeness of Beauty*, as my reading below would like to demonstrate, is solidly grounded in the socio-historical materiality of not simply transnation (body moving across nations) but "transmigration" (body as the located entity reincarnated through everyday movement). As *A Daughter of the Samurai* is often criticized as "'inauthentic' Asian American literature"

⁵ Minatoya's intention to retrieve from an earlier age the transnational itineraries of Japanese Americans becomes obvious in view of *The Strangeness of Beauty's* indebtedness to Etsu Inagaki Sugimoto's autobiography, *A Daughter of the Samurai* (1925). As Georgina Dodge has observed, not only does Minatoya include *A Daughter of the Samurai* in the bibliographical list at the end of *The Strangeness of Beauty*, but she draws "characters and events" from Sugimoto's work (71). Inspired by Sugimoto's autobiographical writing, Minatoya in her fictional creation imagines an "Etsuko Sone" writing an "I-story," which deliberates on and expands the trans-Pacific experiences Sugimoto describes in her autobiography.

(Dodge 61) for Sugimoto's "reputed loyalty to America, her alleged conversion to Christianity, and . . . her upper-class status" (60), *The Strangeness of Beauty* could be understood as recasting *A Daughter of the Samurai* into the trans-Pacific cultural and political specificities deriving from Etsuko's localized engagements with the sociopolitical contexts exceeding the bipolarity of Japan and the U.S.

Set between the 1910s and 1930s, *The Strangeness of Beauty* is primarily about the trans-Pacific experience of its protagonist-narrator Etsuko Sone. Born and growing up in Kobe, Etsuko and her husband Tadao move to Seattle in 1918 in pursuit of Tadao's career as an aircraft engineer with the Boeing Company. This career ambition, however, is not carried out as Boeing loses its aeroplane orders when the First World War ends. Tadao ends up becoming a cook on a fishing boat. After Tadao's accidental death, Etsuko remains in Seattle, working at a restaurant catering to Japanese immigrants. In 1928, under the arrangement of Akira, i.e., her brother-in-law and Hanae's father, she brings the six-year-old Hanae, the daughter of her late sister Naomi, back to Kobe. The obvious double movement of Etsuko across the Pacific makes hers not a simple immigrant story that moves linearly from departure (from one's Asian origin) to settlement (in America). Moreover, Akira sends Hanae back to Japan out of his desire to free Hanae from the racial discrimination prevalent after the passage of the National Origins Act that bars further Japanese immigration into the U.S. Being a dentist and a Japanese/Japanese American three-cushion champion, Akira means to make use of his connections on both sides of the Pacific to help Hanae grow up in "a few critical years" of her life not as a member of an inferior race in the U.S. (52). "My little girl," Akira declares, "will grow up with every advantage" (45). Hanae is anticipated to grow up a Kibei, a Japanese American born in America but growing up in Japan. In fact, the large number of Kibei and other Japanese American members staying in Japan either for Kibei or for personal educational or employment testify strongly to the transnational background of the pre-World War II Japanese American communities.⁶

This transnational background, however, does not free the characters in *The Strangeness of Beauty* from their desire to "land." Instead of solving an individual's identity problems, the experiences of trans-Pacific movement and dual national connections complicate the issues of "where to land," "how to land," or "what it

⁶ Statistics show that more than 18,000 Nisei lived in Japan as of 1933; on the eve of Pearl Harbor there were about 20,000 Nisei in Japan (Ichioka viii). For a historical portrayal of Japanese Americans who stayed in Japan between 1931 and 1934, see Ichioka.

means to land” as there is no singular and stable place to which the individual in question belongs. Etsuko declares that the goal of writing an “I-story” (*shi-shōsetsu*) is to “try and discern where you are” (319).⁷ Yet, if the discerning of “where one is” predicates the establishment of a territorially-based and temporally-bounded self-identity in most autobiographical writings, Etsuko’s efforts to discern “where she is” end up with the deferral of her self-image in different times and places. As one shall see, though written when Etsuko is in Seattle, the first 56 pages of her story in *The Strangeness of Beauty* contain passages that hark back to Etsuko’s life in Japan—the Taisho Industrial Show, the internationalism that dominates Kobe in the 1910s, and her love affair with Tadao. Likewise, after Etsuko moves back to Japan, the image of America is never wiped clean from her everyday life. While trying to persuade herself to be “grateful to have traveled back home [i.e., Japan],” deep in her mind she feels alienated from her mother Chie: Etsuko does not feel being “her [Chie’s] daughter” (77). At the same time, Etsuko keeps thinking that “the America” she has called home “seems to have brutally changed” during her absence (77). Receiving *The Seattle Times* regularly from Akira, she reads about and feels “concerned” for the American financial depression (77). Shifting back and forth in mind and emotions between her Kobe and Seattle affiliations, Etsuko suffers from the feeling of belonging “neither here nor there” (77).

In a sense, it is due to this lack of a singular place to identify with that Etsuko starts her “I-story” writing project. According to the Western autobiographical writing tradition, the act of writing usually presumes the existence of a unified subject that writes. Moreover, the narrative recounting of one’s life is expected to enact a process of self-maturation. At least one may expect to counteract the sense of self-uncertainty and spatial instability with some kind of textual mooring derived from the efforts of self-representation. Etsuko explains in the first entry of her “I-story” that the “frenzy” to write “I-stories” in modern Japan is attributable to the social upheavals and cultural conflicts Japan experienced through its process of modernization: “The theory is that in Japan, the self-consciousness of modernism has collided with the tradition of reticence—of not burdening others with one’s subjective experience—to create a people just *roiling* with confessional angst” (11; emphasis Minatoya’s). Torn between the urge to tell about one’s mind

⁷ *Shi-shōsetsu* or *watakushi shōsetsu* is translated into English as “I-novel” or “I-story.” It generally refers to an autobiographical narrative emerging in the late Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-1926) periods, in which the author reveals his/her mind and life under the guise of fiction. According to Noriko Mizuta Lippit, there are two distinct types of “I-novel” in modern Japanese literature: (1) the “poetry-like, essay-like I-novel, usually called the ‘state-of-mind novel’ (*shinkyō shōsetsu*)”; (2) the “confessional novel” depicting its author’s “sinfulness, perversity, shamefulness and irrational contradictions” (13-14).

and life and the traditional code of being self-effacing, Japanese people find in “I-story”—an autobiographical fiction—a genre to dissolve “confessional angst” without overtouting individualism.

Indeed, though emerging under the influence of Western autobiography, *shi-shōsetsu* develops its own unique assumptions about self and life. Descending from the tradition of confessional literature, Western autobiographies, as explained by Edward Fowler, are created “in the interest of atonement or self-analysis or even self-aggrandizement,” which gives them “a sense of forward movement and purpose” in form and contents (xx). Featuring a mixture of “private journal” and “fictional narrative,” *shi-shōsetsu* tends nevertheless to launch a self-exploration through the circuitous times and fictive creations of the everyday (Fowler xvi). While the “personal orientation” makes *shi-shōsetsu* a thoroughly modern form,” *shi-shōsetsu*, according to Fowler, is also “the product of an indigenous intellectual tradition quite disparate from western individualism” (xvi). In *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity* (1996), Tomi Suzuki further suggests that “I-novel” as “always formulated on a polar axis that contrasted the Western novel with its Japanese counterpart”: first, instead of featuring completely “fictional, imaginative construct,” “I-novel” is embedded in its author’s “lived experience”; second, instead of privileging self as an autonomous entity, I-novel presents self as inseparable from the collective, hence extending the fiction not only “to the author’s ‘self’ and ‘life’ but also to Japanese society” (3). Echoing this argument, Etsuko also utters at one point of her writing that she likes *shi-shōsetsu* in that it is written in and through life (rather than out of life). For her, the answer to the question, “why does everyone in Japan want to write one [*shi-shōsetsu*]” is that “[t]he I-story is life” (177). And the “life” she refers to is not an autonomous individual’s life structured in forward-moving temporality; it is rather an evolving everyday life that “provides its own punctuation: generates paragraph, chapter, beginning, and end” (350). Moreover, Etsuko understands “I-story” as a genre that blurs the line between self and others, and between reality and fictional visions. She argues that writing “I-stories” is a way to “[c]ogitate on inner meaning”; it is for “[r]evealing ourselves and perceiving others through carefully crafted scenes” (178).

Ostensibly, though bringing to the fore the idea of a singular “I,” Etsuko’s “I-story” does not present herself as a monolithic person with a continuous identity and unified personality; through writing she rather traces the meanderings and evolvments of her self and life that exceed the monologic form of a conventional autobiography. Generated from changing spatialities and sprawling into different times, Etsuko’s writing lapses into the discontinuities of her everyday experiences. The discontinuous dates placed at the beginning

of each of her narrative entries most obviously expose the gaps in her writing. Between her first and second entries, for example, is a “five-year lapse” (20); after her return from Seattle to Kobe, her “I-story” stalls “for four years” (75). Sometimes she is not able to write because of the lack of a unified plot. As she admits, the random flow of her life “has failed to provide any clear sense of pacing or premise” (41). During the time when she is involved in the “dissident ladies’ group” to work against Japanese imperialism, however, Etsuko ceases writing because she is so much “engaged in life’s essence,” feeling “too righteous and busy” to write (238).

In one significant segment, Etsuko draws an analogy between her “I-story” and the photographs of Viktor, an exiled Jewish photographer she encounters on her trans-Pacific passage from the U.S. to Japan. As Viktor records his life by capturing “a series of disparate moments” in his photographs, Etsuko records her experiences at discontinuous moments of her life in each entry of her “I-story.” Viktor’s photographs lack “a coherent story” yet hold “the threads of his life” (75); likewise, Etsuko writes her “I-story” not to create an illusion of the continuity of her life or self but to restore the abstract ideas of “self” and “life” to their evolving details and multiple “threads.” In effect, both Etsuko’s “I-story” and Viktor’s photographs render their selves contextual and relational. Viktor’s photographs consist mostly of the images of other people and other places that he sees and interacts with through his experience of exile. As Etsuko describes, present in these photos is everything but Viktor’s image: the “streets, gardens, a synagogue, slyly comical portraits of family occasions” in Munich; “[g]ypsies outside of Paris, a woman of indeterminate age and emotion . . . eating a piece of bread in the rain”; “[a] proud-looking porter at New York’s Grand Central Station”; and “a skinny American boy at his family’s farm auction—his shoulders bent like an old man” (74-75). In a similar manner, Etsuko’s writing keeps moving from her self to others. For example, starting her “I-story” not with her own birth but with Hanae’s birth, Etsuko narrates Hanae’s birth twice—first from Akira’s perspective and then from her own perspective—before she utters anything about herself: “When Hanae was born, I was a twenty-four-year-old widow” (22). And even at this moment of drawing attention to herself, Etsuko is actually paving her way, via the introduction of herself as a widow, to proceed with the story of her late husband Tadao. Etsuko realizes at one point of her writing that “there is less and less I in this I-story” (170). She adopts Hanae’s viewpoint to approach the character of Chie in the entry “How (I Imagine) Hanae Sees Things” (97); in another case she tries to let Chie speak for herself in an entry titled “How I Imagine Chie Would See It” (270). Most frequently, she feels herself “disappear” in the presence of Chie, “a woman who *acts*” (173; emphasis Minatoya’s).

As such Etsuko's "I-story" in *The Strangeness of Beauty* is written in a way that one knows Etsuko mostly through her relationship with other characters. This reading, however, does not imply that an authentic and unified image of Etsuko will eventually be excavated from under all these intricate inter-subjective relationships if we are careful enough to sort out each textual detail. Reading Etsuko's "I-story" is rather like doing a jigsaw puzzle to fit all the pieces of Etsuko together, only to find that some of these pieces are hard to fit together and some are even in contradiction with others. And the "contradiction" cannot be explained away simply with reference to the incompatibility between Etsuko's Japanese and American connections. While the national identificatory duality might contribute somewhat to her identity problem, it provides too simplistic a model to account for the complexities of her self and life. Hardly does Etsuko describe herself as either a Japanese or an American. Instead, she plays through her "I-story" complicated roles in shifting contexts and inter-subjective relationships, roles including—to mention the most obvious—a Westernized elevator girl at Kobe's Daimaru; a racial minority of Japanese origin in Seattle; the offspring of an ancient Japanese family of samurai; the surrogate mother for Hanae the Kibei; a Japanese American dwelling in Japan; a "buffoon" sticking to the codes of samurai next to the "tyrant"-like Chie (253); and a "dowdy, thirty-seven-year-old housewife" turned an indispensable member in the anti-war and anti-imperialist movement during the time of Sino-Japanese war (229). These roles are not reducible to the national division between Japan and the U.S.; nor do they come together to account for Etsuko's development into a monolithic self or to any specific goal. Even at the end of her "I-story" Etsuko remains in the (endless) process of redefining who she is and what she can become: she falls in love with a man who attends her anti-war meetings and realizes, all of a sudden, how much she is like Chie (358). Overall, life for Etsuko is still "random and heartless," providing no specific premise or promise (370). Etsuko stays entangled with the complicated, and many times accidental, bits and pieces that constitute her everyday existence.

Given the inadequacy of national duality as a model to understand Etsuko's self-evolvement, I resort here to the concept of "transmigration" as Akhil Gupta introduces in his essay, "Reincarnating Immigrant Biography: On Migration and Transmigration," to explain the significance of the temporal gaps, spatial changes, and self-irruption as shown in Etsuko's writing. Meaning both "to pass from one place to another" and "to pass from one state of existence to the other," the word "transmigration" correlates the idea of spatial movement and bodily reincarnation. It implies that movement from one place to another predicates the disruption of the moving self, as if the moving self has gone through a process of reincar-

nation. Certainly, underlying this idea of “transmigration” is a re-thinking of human body “not merely as a biological vessel but as a located entity”: since the body’s identity is not inborn but arises from “being situated in historical memory and constructed tradition,” immigration, migration, or exile brings about “out-of-body experiences” through the process of physical “displacement and detemporalization” (178). Arguing that immigrant bodies are “shaken” every time they are inserted into “new relations with land, family, community, and nation” (177), Gupta asserts that the continuity privileged in traditional (auto)biographies is cast into question and immigrant narratives are marked by endless “digression and fragmentation” (171). Moreover, calling attention to the specific cultural landscape and historical actualities inhabited and traversed by individual subjects, the idea of “transmigration” provides a model subtler than the framework of national duality to explore the movement of immigrants, migrants, refugees, travelers, etc. across time and place:

Many phenomena, such as immigration, which had been put into a straitjacket by dualistic and nationalist conceptual frameworks divided, for example, into “sending” nations and “receiving” nations or motivated by “push” factors or “pull” factors, can now be reconsidered from perspectives that themselves historicize the nation-state, position immigration within a field of global capitalist relations. . . . (170)

Gupta suggests a reading of immigrant experiences beyond the nationalist framework. An immigrant self’s identity is defined neither by “its place of origin” nor by “its place of settlement” (180). It is produced rather through the self’s trajectories driven by the social, economic and cultural flows through and beyond the confinement of nation-states.

In the case of Etsuko, “transmigration” not only accounts for the identity-discontinuity and self-irruption characteristic of her writing but also draws attention to the trans-Pacific context out of which Etsuko’s self and life emerge. Read as a story of transmigration, Etsuko’s “I-story” is not merely concerned about an “I” or an isolated individual. “What Etsuko is” has been inspired, cultivated, and propelled by the larger contexts she inhabits. For instance, Etsuko claims that she does not volunteer to play all the different, even contradictory, roles in her life. “[*M*y entire life,” she asserts, has been “somebody’s else’s idea”: “America was Tadao’s dream. Hanae is Naomi’s child. Coming back to Japan was Akira’s decision” (247; emphasis Minatoya’s). Moreover, it is under the request of Miss Langley, an American teacher who is forced to leave Japan in face of Japan’s growing imperialism, that Etsuko becomes a war resister. Etsuko argues that even her joining the dissident ladies’ group is “through a departing friend’s urging” (247). Certainly it is not fair to dismiss once and for all Etsuko’s subjective power vis-à-vis the external world. She is more than a passive figure driven forward by others’ desire. Still, it

is crucial to note that Etsuko's actions remain interwoven with the socio-political specificities that propel Tadao's dream of immigrating to the U.S., Hanae's decision to grow up in Japan as a Kibei, as well as the dissident ladies' project against the Japanese imperial wars.

Asian Americans' trans-Pacific routes such as Etsuko's offer glimpses to the sociopolitical power struggles across Asia-Pacific. As shall be seen, Etsuko's "I-story" both evokes the idealized image of the Pacific as a time-place unbounded by national constraints and exposes this image's inadequacy to encompass the complexities of Asian American actualities. Etsuko owns a photo, taken by Viktor during her passage from Seattle to Kobe. Though taken when Etsuko feels most disturbed by her dual national connections with the awareness that she is "no longer the Japanese woman who had sailed the opposite way across the Pacific" and "just as clear" that she would "never be viewed as American" (74), this photo presents an Etsuko absorbed in the sight of flying fish on the Pacific. There is no sign of self-splitting or incompleteness in the photo, featuring instead Etsuko's idealized mirror counterpart. Moreover, remembered after her "I-story" has "stalled" for four years since her return to Kobe, when Etsuko is most uncertain about who she is and where she belongs, this photo in a way introduces to Etsuko the Pacific as a new place of self-identification. Taken out of living contexts, the Pacific inside the photo seems to provide an identificatory category independent of national confrontations or spatial differences.

One may argue that the photo singles out from Etsuko's everyday life a "hope-filled" moment free from time, historicity, spatial constraints, and identificatory uncertainty. It is ironical, however, that only through a photo—more precisely only through the illusion created by a photo—could an idealized imagination of the Pacific as a liberating space of transnation become available. When taken out of time and situated within the frame of a picture, Asia-Pacific seems to be able to cohere the differences of Etsuko's everyday experience into a photographic "Gestalt" of unity and completeness. When placed back into time, however, this photo only captures one moment out of Etsuko's life. Etsuko admits that although "[t]hose rare times—when clocks stop, bodies blend, and boundaries all disappear—are meant to be conserved . . . , there are other moments, every day" (137). While projecting for Etsuko the seeming possibility of acquiring an idealized "Asia-Pacific identity" in replacement of her contradiction-filled Japanese American identity, the photo, as does the Lacanian mirror image to the infant in front of the mirror, calls Etsuko's attention to her disrupted self situated outside the photo(-mirror). The "Asia-Pacific identity" proves illusive in the case of Etsuko.

An interesting comparison and contrast can be attempted between Etsuko's totalized photographic image and the image of Etsuko's luggage carried on the

same trans-Pacific passage. Whereas the photo captures Etsuko in the utopian oneness and completion of a mirror image, the luggage provides something like a “heterotopia,” the Foucauldian sedimented “other” space, that incorporates incompatible spaces and disruptive temporalities.⁸ If Etsuko’s photo image is exclusive in nature, configuring itself as being historically amnesic and spatially autonomous, the luggage is so inclusive that it serves as the repository of Etsuko’s memories accumulated from her life on both sides of the Pacific. Etsuko forces all her belongings and mementos that reflect her transnational trajectories into her luggage: the pictures of her foster parents (who died in Japan); the pictures of her husband Tadao and her younger sister Naomi (who died in the U.S.); “the six wedding kimonos” she receives from her grandma in Japan after moving to Seattle; “an old sweater that Tadao used to wear”; the “odd underwear that Naomi had sewn” for her daughter Hanae; and even Naomi’s wedding mirror (121-22). Featuring a miniature version of global “time-space compression,” the luggage brings apparent spatial and temporal differences into one locality. It juxtaposes layers of Etsuko’s memories and experiences, embodying not a monolithic space but a space pointing to different people’s lives in various times and places.

Indeed, one way to understand Etsuko’s “I-story” is to read it as constituted by the bits and pieces of Etsuko’s life that sprawls out of her luggage into a narrative flow. *The Strangeness of Beauty* envisages an Asia-Pacific grounded on Etsuko’s transmigration. From time to time, it renders the images of the U.S. and Japan according to the deferral of Etsuko’s everyday existence, challenging the idea of Japan or America as a unified nation of homogeneous space and time. For example, contrary to most people’s belief that the U.S., viewed as the source of Asian modernity, must be more advanced than Asia on the temporal ladder of modernization, the Kobe Etsuko knows in the 1910s is more modernized than the part of Seattle to which she emigrates:

For, coming from a Kobe filled with Italian opera, French fashions, and British banks, we had envisioned America as not too distant from home. We weren’t thinking geographically, of course, but we’d expected Seattle to have a kind of international dynamism: brimming with libraries and museums, humming with immigrant energy, hopping with social mobility. As we left Seattle’s Immigration Building and then the store, located directly at the exit of Immigration, where we traded my kimono for American clothes, we were startled . . . to see the eroding hills stubbled with severed tree trunks, the fish offal in the harbor—the mud and guts that were much of Seattle. (31)

⁸ Please refer to Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” for elaborations of “heterotopia.” My reading of Etsuko’s luggage as providing a space of heterotopia is inspired by Lisa Lowe’s reading of the China town image in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* (1993); see Lowe, “Decolonization, Displacement, Disidentification” 120-26.

It may not be too surprising that the world in the early twentieth century is not evenly developed and that Etsuko's dream of a global village—that Seattle is not “too distant” from Kobe in terms of its “international dynamism”—is proven unrealistic. What is surprising is that Etsuko's cultural shock, instead of stemming from that Seattle is far more modernized than has been imagined, is due to the fact that the part of Seattle she inhabits seems more backward than Kobe. Here, one may argue that Etsuko has compared Kobe to the wrong side of Seattle. Seattle appears “Third World” only because Etsuko does not have the chance to explore beyond the Japantown in Seattle. This contention nevertheless brings about forcefully the fact that there are multiple times and histories within one single nation (or city). A. H. Richmond argues for the importance “to recognize the polyethnic and culturally diversified character of both sending and receiving countries” when studying an immigrant experience:

There is no single “American way of life” into which immigrants arriving in the United States must eventually be assimilated. The United States is ethnically stratified, culturally pluralistic and exhibits a diversity of life-styles. (qtd. in Fawcett and Cariño 7)

As if bearing echoes to Richmond's opinion, Etsuko's trans-Pacific experience testifies to the temporal disjunction and spatial differences inside the U.S. *The Strangeness of Beauty* presents a U.S. that does not simply descend from the Western civilization but is also defined by its ethnic slums and minoritized communities. If there is one side of the U.S. in which “a smart girl has many choices for college,” there is “another side of America: the racial slurs, the restrictive laws” (357). Etsuko vividly describes the existence of an “American frontier” that diverges from the norm of Western civilization:

Before we sailed for America, Tadao and I thought we should learn everything we could about the West: etiquette, architecture, language, literature. In order to prepare for our new lives, we spent many pleasurable hours in the reference room of Osaka University.

We made one mistake, however. As we scanned the library's card catalog, we paused at the topic *Civilization, Western* and became so engaged by it and its cross-references—*See also Europe: Art, History, and Society*—that we never realized the existence of an entirely different category. *West: American Frontier*. (226; emphasis Minatoya's)

Etsuko decomposes the Eurocentric imagination of America. From her trans-Pacific perspective, one cannot really know America without knowing its western frontier, a frontier marked on a large scale by Asian American presence.

When Etsuko moves from Kobe to Seattle, obviously she does not simply emigrate from her native country to a distinctly foreign one but journeys across differentiated historical temporalities that are not divided neatly along national

borders. Before her emigration, Etsuko lives in an internationalized Kobe noted for its “chaotic vitality” (59):

Internationalism carried the day. In girls’ upper level, I had studied democracy, Marxism, and existentialism. Universities all overflowed. Within the next three years, Albert Einstein and Margaret Sanger would have wildly successful speaking tours. (24)

Working at Daimaru, Etsuko is granted even more accesses to the global side of Kobe:

I could speak some English—indeed I had been hired to narrate the contents of various floors to affluent American and European female shoppers. I had browsed through German bakeries and peeked into galleries featuring the latest in modern French art. (24)

This internationalization of Kobe in the 1910s is due largely to the Japanese nationalist project to Westernize and modernize Japan since the late nineteenth century. Yet Kobe must not be considered a lesser version of a modern EuroAmerican city. A city usually develops into a more complicated shape than is designated by the governmental power, and so does Kobe. Under the banner of Westernization, Kobe in the 1910s is actually not as much an Asian simulacrum of Western cities as a cultural hybrid at the level of the everyday:

Into every orderly artery of Kobe’s commercial life spill a thousand undisciplined veins—a happy helter-skelter of alleyways crammed with tiny, irregularly shaped lots, each erupting with its own vision of promise. Thus a four-stool bar is crammed next to a wedding photography shop, which in turn is lodged between a temple, a typing school, and a brothel. (59)

The old intermingles with the new; the imported stand side by side with the traditional. Kobe does not develop into a simple mimicry of any modern Western city. Rather, “a foundation of tradition endures” (59), creating a cultural scene that, though unavoidably international, is also uniquely local.

If Kobe in the 1910s is more than a Westernized version of Japan, the Kobe in the 1930s, under Etsuko’s trans-Pacific vision, remains impacted by the foreign and the transitional despite an increasingly tightened-up Japanese national boundary. Etsuko’s involvement in the dissident women’s group during this period of time, moreover, furthers her role from an observer of cultural *mélange* to a peace worker, who actively engages with real historical events, here in particular the Japanese imperial war against China.

On one side, the rise of Japanese imperialism, the increasing antagonism between Japan and Western countries, the fall of world markets in the late 1920s and 1930s all contribute to Japan’s withdrawal from internationalism. As the Japanese nationalist spirit is advocated in opposition to the Western power, it is

predictable that Kobe grows parochial: the formerly European neighborhood is “becoming Japanese” (224); people with international background or connections are relegated to the status of an “outcast” (281); the translation of Tolstoy, “seized at the dock and impounded,” is not allowed to be imported into Japan (284); school curriculum diminishes to include little more than the propaganda of nationalism and jingoism; citizens begin “shouting ‘Banzai’” (287); “democracy disappear[s]” (287); “small business owners [start] selling miniature flags” (287); and the “standard-sized” flag of Japan in Hanae’s high school grows “enormous” overnight (237). Etsuko observes how the change of national policy transforms the appearance of Kobe within a short time:

[O]utside the [Kobe train] station the streets and sidewalks were jammed. Women selling horoscopes, children selling flowers, and old men selling snacks of sweet potatoes and chestnuts wheeled their pushcarts wherever the population looked most dense. Buddhist monks with black robes and brass begging bowls, uniformed university students, and street musicians playing ancient Japanese lutes wove their way through the crowds.

Though nowhere in observable proximity, the Special Higher Police—a recent manifestation of lifestyle-and-thought control—constituted a felt presence. Only a few months ago the street musicians would have been billing themselves by name such as Maru Shiba Rie or Beigu Kasubei—for Maurice Chevalier and Bing Crosby—and would have been performing zany comedy while singing popular Western songs. (258-59)

Under the supervision of the “Special Higher Police,” the Japanese frenzy for the EuroAmerican pop culture disappears within a few months’ time. The everyday here seems to reflect loyally the political change.

Yet what one sees during the daytime around the Kobe train station cannot speak for Kobe as a whole. If the everyday serves to some extent as a faithful mirror to the national politics, Etsuko brings to light another side of the everyday that persists in its own terms despite the rise of nationalism. For one thing, it is impossible to rid Japan “overnight” of all traces of the West. Aya Ito’s house, where members of the anti-war movement gather, for example, is introduced as with “[f]our fireplace chimneys jutting from the traditional Japanese tiled roof,” which announces that “at least part of the house was built Western style” (224). Moreover, as Etsuko cites from Chie, “[t]he Ministry of Defense can’t get rid of *all* Western influence,” especially those small things such as “[b]aseball, movies, fashion” (216; emphasis Minatoya’s). One of the best examples to illustrate Chie’s assertion is that the Japanese government is not successful in getting rid of the English words that have become part of the everyday Japanese expressions:

When ordered to replace, with Japanese phrases, baseball terms like “strike,” “ball,” “run,” and “out” . . . , games froze with self-conscious confusion as players stumbled to recall the new words. A demand to eliminate the practice of calling one’s parents Mama and Papa was similarly quickly abandoned. (288)

Another example to show the persistence of the everyday is the large movie audience at the local theater Le Cinéma Grand Oriental despite “a dozen members of the Women’s Patriotic League—dressed in worn brown farmer’s pants to signify willingness to forgo luxury in support of Japan’s higher need—[are] picketing against foreign diversions” near the ticket booth (220). The small things from which one’s everyday pleasure is derived continuously resist the national governing power. They keep connecting the everyday to transnational cultural influences.

These transnational contexts preserved in the everyday as shown in *The Strangeness of Beauty* are significant not only because they keep one from the constraining ideology of Japanese nationalism and jingoism but also because they constitute alternative spaces for the anti-war movement to gain momentum from within Japan. First, although the Japanese government censors all anti-war messages and reports in Japanese, it ignores the power of foreign languages that have infiltrated into the everyday of those who understand these languages. Etsuko joins the anti-war women’s group after Miss Langley passes her an anti-war ad—“*Women opposing military aggression. Come join in discussion*” (223; emphasis Minatoya’s). Slightly to Etsuko’s surprise, this ad keeps “appearing in the English-language edition of the *Kobe News*” for “almost two months” (223). The Japanese government ignores messages in foreign languages: “International newspapers can provide piercing analyses about Japanese governmental actions and it is assumed their audience will be too small . . . for its publication to matter” (223). In addition, and again in a scale larger than the national, the power of the everyday operates in the way that “the dissident ladies’ group” attempts its anti-imperialist project under the guise of everyday triviality. The “dissident ladies” obtain access to the international reports and information about Japanese imperialist expansion from international women’s magazines:

This was our plan. In these ladies’ magazines (still not banned because of their perceived triviality), buried beneath tips for curing colic and getting along with your mother-in-law, were facts about current events. Whenever we uncovered some piece of censored news—through seemingly impromptu gatherings and apparently accidental meetings, in our innocuous, babbling way—we distributed the information. (276)

Although these women are under the government’s surveillance, they evade suspicion because from the perspective of the authority they are “a gossipy group of harmless hotheaded women” (276). As long as the women act in the semblance of

passing around “recipes from *ladies’* magazines” (282; emphasis Minatoya’s), the government can hardly imagine that they are revolutionary. In a way illustrating Etsuko’s brilliant remark that the “little etiquette slips have led to breaches far greater” (198), the gossip and what Etsuko claims to be women’s “home economics” (274) are circulated in the insurgent space of the everyday to generate forces against the official dis-cursive regimes.⁹

In conclusion, when viewed from the perspective of the everyday, Asia-Pacific is not an empty signifier or an idealized geographical space that allows a utopian vision of transnation; nor should it be simplified into a space marked by the dual confrontation between the East and the West, Asia and America, or Japan and the U.S. The materiality of Asia-Pacific is embedded in the shifting roles and disparate temporalities one (such as Etsuko) experiences through the process of transmigration. “From the mundane flows an odd kind of music,” claims Etsuko toward the end of her “I-story” to reiterate the importance of “the mundane”—the everyday and the trivial—to produce the “odd”—the different and even unique—sensations to break away from the official, the authoritative, or whatever taken-for-granted (350). Precisely, The title of Minatoya’s novel, “The Strangeness of Beauty,” which derives from the Japanese word “*myo*,” (妙) points to the everyday meaning of “strangeness, queerness, mystery” or “skill” (De Mente 80). In Etsuko’s words, “*myo*” is an “art of creating ‘strange beauty,’” or “a gift for turning uncertainty into adventure” (74). By writing her “I-story,” Etsuko in a way has moved closer to “*myo*” as she transforms from a passive figure with splitting selves and uncertain identities into an active explorer of self, human relationships, and even (inter)national politics. *The Strangeness of Beauty* not only restores Asian American experiences to its Asia-Pacific trajectories but also characterizes Asian Americans as effective agents to interrogate the connections and confrontations within and between Asia, America, and the Pacific.

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⁹ For a detailed discussion of the female agency explored in *The Strangeness of Beauty*, see Lilienfeld.

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跨國亞美的亞太想像： 湊谷百合子的《美妙》

本文探討亞太(Asia-Pacific)區域與亞美(Asian America)社群在歷史發展與文化想像上之交相建構、交互影響。論文從亞美「遷徙/轉生」(transmigration)的跨國視角出發，重啟「亞太」在亞美地區政經與文化流變中的意義。論文以日美三世(Sansei)作家湊谷百合子(Lydia Yuriko Minatoya)的小說《美妙》(*The Strangeness of Beauty*, 1999)為主要文本，分析小說中的人物在二十世紀最初三十年往返美國與日本兩地的太平洋路徑。除了彰顯日美社群發展的亞太格局，更企圖在日美日常生活的微觀形構 (the microscopic everyday) 中找到重新想像亞太的基礎。論文聚焦小說主角兼敘事者曾根悦子(Etsuko Sone)創作之「私小說」(shi-shōsetsu)，指出悦子的寫作不只呈現時空混接、駁雜跨界的日美主體經驗，還發揮了「私小說」融接自我與他人、個人與群體生活的文類特色，讓《美妙》除了有對個人的關懷，還投射出對亞美與亞太宏觀的想像。透過悦子穿越國界、「遷徙/轉生」的人生經歷，《美妙》勾繪一個以亞美跨國經驗為核心的具體亞太時空，讓亞太不再只是一個由歐美強權定義的抽象空間，也跳出傳統東、西對立，亞、美對峙，日、美身份互不相容的文化二元認知結構。

關鍵字：亞美，亞太，遷徙/轉生，日常生活，私小說，湊谷百合子