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Article

Remapping Cultural Configurations of Imagined Community in Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, California* and Abraham Verghese's *My Own Country**

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Abstract

Negotiations of Asian American community identity formations are a significant problematic in Asian American literature. My study traces the ways in which Asian American community is shaped by Asian American cultural productions and is concerned with how literature about Asian Americans informs community constructions along ethnicities, regions, occupations, gender, and sexual orientation. As more Asian Americans participate and become visible in American culture, ethnic identifications and configurations of Asian American communities become more diverse and fluid. Asian American communal affiliations are not simply formed around regional marginalization as the first Chinatowns were, but are also formed along commonalities of age, religions, class, gender, sexuality, professional identities, and political ideologies. While noting the importance of historically and geographically mapping Asian American communities to trace experiences of immigration and acculturation of Asians in America, I argue that the cultural constructions of such communities are determined and shaped by how Asian American literary narratives imagine them. In Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, California*, I look at a literary representation of a mono-ethnic community. Mori recovers and fictionalizes a pre-WWII Japanese American community. His stories depict how the ethnic insularity of that community is complex, sheltering and stifling the independent creative and philosophical minds of writers. Abraham Verghese's memoir *My Own Country* depicts a diasporic immigrant Asian American who in his everyday world negotiates identifications with multiple communities. While America has exercised an influence on Asia, in the late twenty-first century we are also seeing how Asia is re-imagining American culture and a mythic "America."

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■ **Keywords** : Toshio Mori, *Yokohama, California*, Abraham Verghese, *My Own Country*, Asian American

Introduction

As we enter the next century, a compelling question facing Asian Americans is what constitutes their ethnic identities and what binds these ethnic communities together. This is a formidable question, since even a geographically distributed accounting of Asian Americans is only partially documented. Whereas communities are often thought of as visible geographic entities, ethnic communities are also significantly determined by an imagined sense of community. An Asian American community identity is not just marked in geographic locales of ethnic enclaves such as Koreatowns and Chinatowns, but by literary, artistic, and other verbal, visual, and audio sites that contribute to the cultural imaging of Asian America.

Narratives to which ethnic identity and community can be linked not only explain the conditions of their existence but actively shape the ways in which community identity evolves. Such narratives in Asian American literature challenge and reinvent American communal identity, enabling the inclusion of ethnic communities as part of America. My study traces these community identity in contemporary Asian American narratives. I argue that a central thrust of Asian American narratives is to delineate Asian American identity through and against group formations along these multiple identities.

In recent years, significant critical activity in the field of cultural place and space identity theory has expanded our understanding of community formation. Place and other ideographs in Asian American literature represent intra- as well as inter-ethnic negotiations in the rhetoric of Asian American ethnicity. The definition of “Asian American” is not strictly based on geographically localized communities, but also through forged common identities based on cultural and ideological alliances that

traverse and even eschew national boundaries. The literary text discussed in my study traces the ambivalences and problematics of mono-national identity in the shifting everyday places and communities of Asian Americans. Asian American identity has its own geography linking different communities, one that negotiates the cultural experience of being American by defining and accepting the intersections of diverse identifications that make up a multiply-informed identity.

“Asian American community” carries with it both positive and negative significations. On the one hand, Asian Americans are praised for having close-knit communities and kinships which are seen as the cause for many immigrants’ relatively quick ascent in academic, business, and professional careers, translating into Asian Americans’ solid foothold in the middle and upper socioeconomic strata of American society. On the other hand, Asian American communities have also been seen as prohibitively insular, creating tensions with non-Asians who fear that their familiar ways of living, landscapes, and opportunities to succeed are being encroached upon and taken over by foreign elements.

The term “Asian American” embodies dialectical tension in its encompassing of national and ethnic identity, and thus has been continuously reformulated since its inception in the 1970s. In the literature, contestations and expansion of community inform some of the earliest narratives about supposed insular ethnic enclaves such as Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea*. On a rhetorical level, “Asian American” refashions two distinct nationalities into a hybrid, one that is susceptible to continuous revisions over cultural and political boundaries. However, these contestations do not signal that ethnic identification is irrelevant or unnecessary, rather, they are an inevitable outcome of increased visibility and diversity. Since the publication of the seminal 1974 anthology *Aiiieeee!* (Frank Chic et al., 1974), Asian American writing has been defined mainly along lines of thematics, aesthetics, or identity politics. However, identity configured within place and space remains largely unexamined in literary studies of Asian American literature set outside Hawaii.

Asian American literature and cultural productions mark the diversity within Asian American community by showing how individuals negotiate multiple community formations. As Americans increasingly turn to viewing films and consuming cultural productions as a means of creating a sense of community, Asian American cultural productions raise complex questions. What difficulties and issues arise if community is formed not just around similarities but the disruptions of transnationalism and the conditions of being “other”? What aspects of the constructions of Asian American community occupy popular imaginings of America? What are the tensions of community in American experience, and how are boundaries of community challenged and reformulated?

In “Writing *Yokohama, California* as America: Dynamics of Insular Community,” I note that Asian American literature often explores a process of Americanization in the transition from defining a community as formed around kinship and familial relations to community formed around organizations whose links between members are not family-based. Ethnic enclaves formed in response to mainstream racism are an extension of the kinship-based communities. The enclaves are self-sufficient, insular and insulated from the American society at large. Toshio Mori’s fictional community of *Yokohama, California* is often read as a nostalgic recreation of the Japanese American community prior to the disruption of the World War II internment, but the nostalgia thinly masks a critique of the economical and cultural pressures to maintain Japanese Americans isolation.

In “Remapping Cultural Configurations of Imagined Community,” I argue that because Verghese’s autobiographical memoir bears the title “My Own Country,” it precludes the question: Where does this immigrant Indian doctor, raised in Ethiopia, educated in England, India, and Boston, and working in Tennessee, claim as his ‘own country?’ Verghese answers that question early on—he claims it to be Johnson City, Tennessee. Yet, as an infectious disease specialist who becomes the first local ‘AIDS doctor,’ Verghese must contend with marginalization on several levels: being a foreigner in a largely white town, working with the despised

gay population, treating a dreaded and incurable disease, and suffering from a lack of support from his family and Indian American community for his work. Likewise, Verghese's memoir portrays an Asian American subjectivity more strongly identified with the condition of being a marginalized American who is constantly negotiating different communities in his region of Tennessee. These communities include those he encounters through his work, such as gay/AIDS patients and activists, and medical staff and researchers. His memoir also constructs his social/cultural communities, which are middle/upper middle class Indian American immigrants whom he encounters at communal social gatherings, and working/middle class whites whom he encounters in public spaces when shopping, running errands, and in social activities apart from Indian Americans, such as line dancing. In Verghese's memoir, the fluidities of an Asian American identity encompass regional, class, racial, and sexual differences. The chapter looks at how he constructs the communities he interacts in as sites where his personal identities are negotiated. His narrative presents how community identity is individually enacted and claimed. Anxiety as well as a sense of liberation accompanies his negotiations as he claims/disclaims communal affinities.

Writing *Yokohama, California* as America: Dynamics of an Insular Community

In this chapter, I note that Asian American literature often explores a process of Americanization in the transition from defining community formed around kinship and familial relations to community formed around organizations whose links between members are not family-based. Ethnic enclaves formed in response to mainstream racism are an extension of the kinship-based communities. This chapter looks at depictions of Japanese American enclaves. The enclaves are self-sufficient, insular and insulated from American society at large. Toshio Mori's fictional community of *Yokohama, California* is often read as a nostalgic recreation of the Japanese American community, but that nostalgia thinly masks

a critique of the economic and cultural pressures to maintain Japanese Americans isolation.

The stories in Toshio Mori's the most well-known text *Yokohama, California* that imagine a Japanese American community in American literature, depict a fictional Japanese American community in California. Specifically, Mori's short stories, I contend, are not just literary snapshots of a Japanese American community that are meant to be viewed in a sepia-toned nostalgia. They begin to explore the ambiguities and negotiations and marginalizations within an ethnic community that participate in the imagination of its wholeness. This publication frames a socio-political undercurrent for these stories because the stories are Mori's depictions of Japanese American community shaped over a decade in which Japanese Americans experienced the greatest upheaval and intense scrutiny of their loyalty and national identity. Collectively, these stories seem to represent this locale and its people as complacently having little interaction with other ethnic groups, even though the narratives take place in an agricultural California setting where other people of color, especially Mexicans and other Asians, would be working in the fields and nurseries. Thus, the *Yokohama, California* in these stories might be defined as an insular community, like Sherwood Anderson's community in *Winesburg, Ohio*¹). In fact, Lawson Fusao Inada characterizes the uniqueness of this communal insularity as its fortitude: "There are no white people in all of *Yokohama, California*" (xvii).

I concur that this absence of non-Japanese names and characters subverts most readers' expectations of representations of America because such absence immerses them in a community in which they must imagine a reversed hegemony of whites and Asians, a reversal that is made subliminal by the fact that all dialogues and expressions are in 'standard' English, even though, as Inada notes, the characters are mainly first and second-generation Japanese Americans and more likely "are actually speaking Japanese" (xvii).

The depictions of individuals and the stories' quiet undertones of interrelational tensions also make this collection useful for addressing

who and what is ‘Japanese America.’ Inada himself positions this text as at least part of the answer to this inquiry; he claims forcefully in the outset of his introduction that “This is more than a book. This is legacy, tradition. This the community, the identity. This is *Yokohama, California*. This is Japanese America” (1). Inada raises one example of how the depictions represent Japanese America: the character of Motoji Tsunoda, ‘the Seventh Street philosopher,’ becomes a “pathetic, ridiculous figure when only eleven people show up to hear him speak. Yet, because the story also valorizes him as possessing ” something worthwhile for everyone to hear and see, not just for the eleven persons in the auditorium but for the people of the earth,“ Tsunoda is ultimately a man of ‘courage and bravery” (vii). Inada reads the story of Tsunoda as a “very expensive lesson” about Mori himself. Because Mori’s literary work was ignored and rejected even by members of the very community he wrote about, Tsunoda’s story may be read as an allegory of Mori’s unrecognized and unappreciated talent and contribution to defining Japanese America. Yet, there is an irony here that Inada does not mention in the introduction. That is, what defines Japanese American community is articulated in these stories by the ‘outsider within,’ by one who is somehow marginalized in that community; in Mori’s case, he was marginalized because he was a nurseryman who had a lifelong passion for becoming a ‘legitimate American writer.’

In Mori’s text, Japanese American communities are represented as ethnically insular, where individuals seem to have little interaction with places and people outside those communities. Because Mori’s text is generally recognized as the first sustained representations of Japanese American communities, their depictions of those communities as isolated and therefore marginalized from a ‘mainstream’ America have contributed to a cultural imagination of not just Japanese America, but also of Asian America. Mori’s stories depict *Yokohama, California* as an example of how Japanese Americans bonded, affirmed each other, and were visible in geographically localized and insular communities. At the same time, the stories suggested that the tensions and conflicts that inevitably

accompany these communities are also an indisputable and even necessary corollary of defining them. Furthermore, the concept of an American community and of national identity, articulated on every U.S. one dollar bill as “E pluribus unum,” or “out of many, one” is negotiated around these tensions.

Yokohama, California demonstrates a dialogic relationship of nation and community. In the stories, the American nation is constitutive of the local community, and the local community in turn participates in the construction of the American nation. Despite the insularity of the community and the prevalent tone of isolation and solitude in the characters and drama they enact, a dialogue with American national discourse is demonstrated in the stories’ conclusive desire for the social. By ‘desire for the social,’ I mean that Mori’s narratives imagine acceptance and inclusion of Japanese American communities within the literary discourse of the American nation. Homi Bhabha’s dual concepts of the narrative temporality of the nation and the pedagogical versus the performative help us understand how Mori’s stories strategically manipulate performative narratives to interpret and critique a pedagogical narrative of America, one which has historically shout out Japanese American experience. Bhabha calls the “performative” those narratives and responses of marginalized individuals and groups that aim to ultimately alter the “official” or dominant nationalist “pedagogical” narratives (114). However, the performative narrative is hailed into being by the pedagogical narrative, which is informed by an American ideology that Gunnar Myrdal defines as the “American Creed.” Although Myrdal’s Creed is not often invoked in late twentieth-century mainstream discourse about American identity, his articulation that such a creed is lived mostly as a national suggestions is still pertinent to the ways in which minorities negotiate and assert claims to America.

Mori depicts how feeling part of one’s immediate surroundings and local community also is significant to how an individual imagines his participation in that kind of national simultaneity. In the story “Akira Yano,” Akira Yano is a writer-artist who wishes to have his work read

by a national readership. He leaves the community in his attempts to have his work published in Harper's, Atlantic Monthly, and Scribner's. All these publications reject his stories, but he is not completely discouraged until he meets with rejection from the Japanese American community; that discouragement from his local community leads to his retreat into solitude. Even the narrator, one of the few Japanese American community members who indulges Yano in his talk about being a writer, is cynically doubtful about Akira's announcement that he has signed a contract with a publishing company. Similarly, in the story Mori titles after himself, "Toshio Mori," the protagonist Teruo faces irrepressible and unrelieved isolation within the Japanese American community, despite his search for solace and company to "crush and wipe out his ominous feeling of standing alone, walking alone, going alone, without a nod or a smile or caress or better, an understanding from someone" (39). Teruo feels disconnected from what Anderson calls the "unisonance" (34), or the sense of simultaneity which forms the individual's constructedness of participation in the modern nation.

The placement of "Tomorrow is Coming, Children" as the opening story to the collection exemplifies a willingness to forgive America for the injustice of the camps, and seems to imply that this injustice is a thing of the past, and further, that it is up to Japanese Americans themselves to "make peace" with this injustice. This story contains a moment where the Issei (first generation immigrant) grandmother notes, "war has its good points too. You become positive. You cannot sit on the fence, you must choose sides" (21). This grandmother tells the story of her passage, arrival, and initial adjustment as a Japanese "picture bride" in America. In other stories, the "I" becomes an unnamed narrator who relates entire conversations, even stories, in which he has little or no part, other than as a passive observer. What connects the stories is some form of a ubiquitous narrator—either this first person "I" who can enter the immediate, intimate sphere of a family or small group and incongruously blend into the background, or a third person narrator who not only observes the events but also is able to enter the characters' psyches.

The narrator of the aforementioned story titled “Toshio Mori” is a third person narrator by the name of Teruo; since this is a story, it must be read as fiction, but Mori’s titling the story after himself leaves questions about what this lonely protagonist, who wanders the town streets at night observing others, has to do with “Toshio Mori.”

However, the resigned optimism in the story “Tomorrow is Coming, Children,” which Lawson Inada reads as a “double-edged” reminiscence, contributes to a performative minority discourse which—for Bhabha—offers a perspective from which a pedagogy of America, particularly in the anti-Japanese sentiment of the period, can be challenged. Perhaps, as Inada’s interpretation notes, the aim of this story is to create a ‘third space’ of Japanese American identity, one which does not demand absolute loyalty to a white-codified homogeneity of nation, but rather accepts that “Pro-Japanese American, or pro-American, is not necessarily pro-white, or anti-Japanese” (xxii).

Arguably, the desire for the social can be read as a desire for inclusion in the nation, and the stories testify to the absence of the Japanese American experience from the America’s nation-time and nation-space. In his introduction, Inada notes that at least one of the stories, “Tomorrow is Coming, Children” was written in the camps for a camp audience and was in fact published twice, in both English and Japanese translation, in an 1943 issue of *Trek*, the Topaz Camp magazine. While the first story of the collection addresses the camp audience, Mori’s search for the reader who will at least attempt to understand his work ends with the audience he posits as the larger American community. And, reversing Anderson’s assertion that the act of reading the realist novel is a simultaneous activity that unites citizens of the modern nation, all readers who thereafter come to Mori’s text must imagine inhabiting a positionality within this community, and conversely, also must refigure their imaginations of America as encompassing Yokohama. Thus, Mori’s characters’ desire for the social beyond the insular community in *Yokohama, California* leads to its insertion into the narration of America (78). This insertion of Yokohama into the national consciousness is contradictory

to the notion of simultaneity because it does not reinforce an already agreed-upon concept of the nation.

The presence of the Japanese American as the “other within,” in Mori’s depiction of Yokohama both reinforces the Creed and exposes the lack of conformity to it. Mori’s narrative is most powerful in doing so when slippage occurs between the fictionality of Yokohama and the historical experiences of the Japanese Americans in this period. Even the community of *Yokohama, California* moves quickly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor to show loyalty to American ideals of liberty and freedom.

Mori’s depictions of an American community in the throes of WWII show how the fictional intersects with the real in the establishment of calendrical time. There are two stories situating clear historical moments: internment (“Tomorrow is Coming, Children”), and the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Pearl harbor (“Slant Eyed Americans”). In the latter story, the insularity of the community is disrupted by the announcement on the radio: “It was Sunday noon, December 7……. At 7:25 a.m. this morning a squadron of Japanese bombing planes attacked the Pearl Harbor. The battle is still in progress” (127). In (re)constructing an interpellation of Japanese Americans into/outside the American nation in the simultaneity of listening to the American radio announcement, the unmarked fictional time of the stories suddenly converges into historical time. The characters’ reactions illustrate the power of this simultaneous moment: farmers’ prospects for the Japanese American flower businesses are immediately reversed from imminent prosperity to imminent ruin. Ironically, President Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” which America embraces as the ideals for whose protection it fights the war, are exactly those freedoms that are threatened for Japanese Americans. The moment of that threat is encapsulated as a threat itself when the American-born narrator realizes he is forced to take a position as an American national against his Japanese and thus foreign parents. He also encounters a jarring moment of splitting himself, as he recognizes that all individuals with Japanese faces, including himself, will be seen as foreign: “Since Japan

declared war on the United States it'll mean that you parents of American citizens have become enemy aliens, I said" (128).

Ironically, the "enemy alien" Issei mother assumes the most fervent patriotism in response to the imminent war. It is she who urges, "This is not time for young folks to despair. Roll up your sleeves and get to work. America needs you" (131). It is also the mother who expresses an undying faith in the Creed: "And America is right. She can not fail. Her principles will stand the test of time and tyranny" (132). This moment also offers a significant contrast between the fictional time of the story and 'factual' Japanese American experience. During the war, many Isseis were still Japanese nationals because they were prohibited from becoming American citizens. Their Nisei children, however, were granted citizenship because they were born in the United States. This difference became a painful issue for many dual-generation families; the Nisseis, eager to prove their loyalty to America, clashed with their Issei parents over renouncing their own Japanese citizenship. The Isseis were reluctant to do so, because that act would have left them citizens of no country. For some historical accounts of this generational conflict, see Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore*.

Mori's depictions are consistent with Myrdal's observation that in the disparity between the promise of the Creed and the reality of social inequality in America, it is the weak and the most marginalized groups who intensely embrace the Creed, even as it fails to prevent their victimization. Myrdal noted that at the time of his writing, American Negroes, "like the whites, are under the spell of the great national suggestion. With one part of themselves, they actually believe, as do the whites, that the Creed is ruling America" (4). Besides, transcending racial boundaries, the Creed also is widely embraced across class: "it has developed that the rich and secure, out of pride and conservatism, and the poor and insecure, out of dire need, have come to profess the identical social ideals" (13). The Creed, then, functions as an equalizer of social differences.

Mori's depiction of complacent insularity in *Yokohama, California*

is contrasted to the historical documentation of the political struggles of actual Japanese American farming communities in California from the 1920s to 1940s, the time period in which Mori situates his stories. The 1910 U.S. Census records 72,157 Japanese in the United States; 41,356 of these Japanese were in California, and 4,502 of these were Niseis (American-born second generation). Despite the 1913 Alien Land Law which prevented non-citizens from owning land, the Isseis were able to purchase land in the names of their American-born children (Matsumoto, 19). This development of Japanese American farming communities was met with some resentment. White hostility against immigrant farmers and laborers was also expressed in violent attacks against them (Matsumoto, 25). Despite such hostility, Japanese American communities continued to grow and gradually formed tenuous amicable relations with the white communities around them. The Yamato Colony, Japanese American farm community near Livingston, California, was all-Methodist and engaged in church activities of the town. Nisei Children were often model students in the public schools, though prejudice took the form of denying recognition to these students (Matsumoto, 78).

What kind of construction of the “real” social forces shaping Yokohama and Japanese American community does Mori (re)present? Communities like the Japanese American farming communities, which continue to exist today in California, show how class oppression pushed the first Issei Japanese Americans to immigrate. According to Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, who wrote a program on California Japanese American strawberry growers for an 1989 display at the Japanese American History Museum, most of the early twentieth-century Issei farmers were extremely poor. Speaking little to no English, they were forced into farm labor (108). This racial economic marginalization led to the formation of ethnically insular Japanese American communities whose ties continue today. Furthermore, those Japanese American farming communities were part of a larger California agricultural minority community that has been virtually ignored by the mainstream—probably because they interacted mostly among themselves rather than with whites. As historian Thomas Almaguer has noted that

“the cross-cultural, cross-ethnic interactions, then, were determined by racial marginalization intersecting with class marginalization” (H3)².

Mori’s stories, however, exemplify how minorities are also fractured intraracially by these stratifications. Resisting that fracturing is difficult because minority mono- and multi-racial alliances would disrupt a national identity formation dependent upon majority racial homogenization. The ways in which race and class participate in nation formation are theorized by Etienne Balibar. Balibar sees race not as an expression of class struggles but as a form of political alienation inherent in class struggles within the field of nationalism (12). For Balibar, institutional racism is a common enemy for diverse racial and ethnic labor groups in the ‘proletarian nations’ of the Third World and Western Europe. While this struggle produces pan-ethnic, pan-racial alliances, class also functions to stratify intra-ethnic relations. Mori’s stories subversively critique class stratifications within racially marginalized communities as seen interpersonal relations within the community.

Regarding ethnicity, Wallerstein says that the culture of an ethnic group is precisely the set of rules into which parents belonging to that ethnic group are pressured to socialize their children (83). The home, then, is the place where the function of national ethnic socialization is carried out. For Balibar, the ultimate principle of closure rests on race. It must be emphasized here that when he speaks of “dissolving social inequalities” via race, what Balibar is formulating is the idea of a nation as a race, rather than in the sense of biological genetic/phylogenetic qualities. But America’s history of legal definitions of race, most notably in issues of miscegenation and discrimination, presents it as a slippery biological difference determined by ‘one drop’ or ‘fractional’ genetic makeup. Furthermore, many Americans read race as skin color, so that issues of “passing”--individuals’ moving between boundaries of color—have aroused much social and legal controversy. Balibar interprets the emergence of private life within the individual family home and the intimate family circle and family policies of the state as the moment when the nationalization of family took the place of lineal kinship as a means

of forming community. According to Balibar, this nationalization took on a familialist discourse of nationalism. Along this formulation, Mori's representations of the familial relations and generational interaction in *Yokohama, California* complicate the construction of a generational and familial nation-state.

In the language of home for Mori's Japanese American characters, generational counting functions to both unite the family unit and assert a claim to America. This move is discussed in Sollors' essay "Ethnicity" and is reinforced in the opening story in *Yokohama, California*. Sollors theorizes ethnicity as either a construction of genealogical descent or individual consent to ethnic identification. Sollors contends that generational rhetoric serves as a means of forming community; generational counting gives the atomized units of nuclear families a "semblance of cohesion" (223). Ultimately, Sollors asserts "it is when Americans speak of generations, numbered or unnumbered, that they easily leave history and enter 'the myth of America'" (234).

In Mori's story "The Nodas in America," successive generational naming symbolizes a desire to establish American roots. Papa Noda's eagerness to tell the story of his coming to America, and his children's willingness to hear the story repeatedly shows the closeness of the Issei-Nisei interaction that the barrack living style of the internment camps has often been blamed for disrupting. Mama Noda, for example, proudly displays her Sansei granddaughter and already looks forward to the next, "Pretty soon fourth generation," she said, smiling (114). Due to the community's insularity, the younger generation's inclination to leave the family is accompanied by anxiety. In "Lil Yokohama," Ray Taketomo's departure for college is fraught with ambivalence: "Everybody says he is taking a chance going so far away from home and his folks... The folks will not see him for four or six years. Perhaps never. Who can tell?" (75).

As mentioned earlier, the conclusions of Toshio Mori's stories in *Yokohama, California* frequently gesture toward the future or construct an ambiguous, ambivalent present. These two kinds of endings signal

a conflict between the promise of the “American Dream” manifest in upward individual social mobility, and the notion of home found in a geographically confined community. Margaret Mead notes that the typical third-generation narration of America concerns the leaving of ethnic community. However, in *Yokohama, California*, this leaving behind of community, and separation of generations is fraught with anxiety. Biculturality is maintained in the communal emphasis on family ties, ethnic kinship, and the solitude of the farming community, and by racism outside the community. The war provided a heightened reminder of that threat.

In fusing the fictionality of *Yokohama* with the real history of Japanese American wartime experience, Mori subsumes a communal subjectivity in the writing of narrative “selves” to examine how America’s nation formation and narration is negotiated along the borders of the local and the social. Although the stories can be read as representing “universal” conditions of isolation and community, it is only through examining how Japanese American experience and community are shaped by the social constructs of race, ethnicity and class that the subtext behind what is unsaid can be understood. This subtext suggests that the stories are not merely about isolation, inexpressible desires, and the failures of individuals. Rather, they form a palimpsest whose underlying discourses shape a critique of America’s racist history, an interrogation of the promise of the American Creed, and an indication of the failure of that promise for American racial and ethnic minorities.

Remapping the Cultural Configurations of the Imagined Community: Healing and Negotiating Diasporic Asian Americans

Since it is a memoir, Verghese’s text may initially appear incongruent and incomparable with Toshio Mori’s text because as narratives of individuals’ lived experiences, memoirs might be considered non-fiction. However, Verghese’s narrative first person “I” recognizes the impossibility of being unbiased and free of insecurities and cultural prejudices; this

is a realization that the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction are tenuous and represent hues of gray rather than stark contrasts.

Verghese's *My Own Country*, like Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, California*, depicts the interactions of an ethnically insular community. Although Mori's work is fiction and Verghese's memoir is non-fiction, a comparison can be made in terms of how the narrators construct Asian American communities and position themselves inside/outside those communities. Unlike the Japanese American community of Mori's *Yokohama*, the immigrant South Asian community in Verghese's Johnson City is not a community of individuals who create a geographically insular and isolated town. Rather, it is an aggregate community, a term I use to describe a community that does not have clearly visible geographical markers, but forms in group interactions and gatherings, whose members come together in solidarity, and desire to not be marginalized. One difference between the Mori's and Verghese's constructions of ethnic communities is the indication of class differences within ethnic community. Certainly, class struggles do exist in the Indian American community, but for the most part, the Indian American families Verghese interacts with are comfortably middle-class. While class differences arise as a point of communal fragmentation resulting from social barriers between lower- and middle-class Japanese Americans in Mori's *Yokohama, California*, Verghese's narrative stance outside the immigrant community arises from his discomfort with participating in the material desires of other middle and upper-middle class immigrants, despite his being of that class.

In the literature, mass media and popular culture, depictions of South Asian American community are still rare, even as South Asian American organizations are rapidly forming and growing with the rise of the South Asian population. Bahri Vasudeva acknowledges that attempting to pin down "a stable South Asian identity is a daunting venture" (91), and I do not attempt to do so here. Rather, I look at how Verghese's memoir illustrates the ways in which multiple identifications play out in his experience, such that he constructs a narrative that remaps cultural config-

urations of imagined communities of white Southerners, gay men, and South Asian immigrants. Furthermore, he also narrates the emotional and psychic dimensions of identifying with and yet still feeling inside/outside of these different communities as one who negotiates them in his personal and professional life. Verghese's *My Own Country* participates in the project of imagining South Asian American community in an individual's experience and narration. In that individual's experience, Asian American identity is formed by enacting slippages of identity in a predominantly Anglo-American culture. For Verghese, despite his professional middle-class privileges in the late twentieth-century, some kind of Asian American community identity remains cogent and sustained. The memoir illustrates how Asian American community forms from and as a response to marginalization. Furthermore, Verghese's experiences with gay men, who represent another marginalized community, place him in an insider/outsider position to perceive similarities in experiences of displacement and migration between these generally non-interactive groups.

Verghese's text is also a narrative account of a diasporic Asian American experience. He traces his ethnic roots in St. Thomas-converted Christian Indians from Kerala, on the Malabar coast of southern India. But more immediately, he is also the product of a double displacement/dislocation, a second-generation African born and raised by immigrant schoolteacher parents in Ethiopia, where he was a medical student until war and political unrest forced him to flee to the U.S. His life of migration begins even before he was born, when his parents left Kerala, India for Ethiopia to become high school teachers. Verghese explains they were among 400 other Kerala Indians who were hired to teach in Ethiopian schools after the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie visited Kerala and became impressed by its high literacy rate. This small stream of immigrants becomes larger once they settle and provide a network for others to follow.³⁾

The diasporic migrations follow established streams forged by opportunities and growing communities. Verghese's interest in the stories behind migrations leads to his discovery of a pattern of circuitous migration

which exists within America, involving the gay population around his region of the South, a region that includes Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky. Although AIDS leads to certain early death in this period of the mid 1980s, its impact on this region is temporarily to increase the gay population there. Verghese's discovery begins as an epidemiological mapping of AIDS transmission, and one which results in a publication of an article in a medical journal. But it also ends up being an alternate story of the American Dream. As Verghese explains, it is "the story of how a generation of young men, raised to self-hatred, had risen above the definitions that their society and upbringings had used to define them. It was the story of the hard and sometimes lonely journeys they took far from home into a world more complicated than they imagined and far more dangerous than anyone could have known" (403).

Verghese's memoir fills a void in American culture—the lack of South Asian American voice and subjectivity, despite the fact that South Asian Americans represent almost one million people in America, most of those numbers resulting from a large wave of South Asian immigrants who entered the U.S. during the 1970s to the present. Sidonie Smith situates memoirs like Verghese's as texts that map American identity on an individual's experience and redefine American geographical regions and communities upon that experience. According to Smith, telling a personal story is "one means by which national mythologies produced the conformity of individuals to new notions of identity and normative concepts of national subjectivity. Writing autobiography testified to arrival in America and the achievement of an American identity" (95). As an example of how life writing shapes such mythologies, one may think of how significant Benjamin Franklin's autobiography is in shaping cultural imaginations of New England identity, colonial city life, and the notion that Americans are individualistic, enterprising, and self-made.

Verghese's memoir tells of his experiences as a foreign doctor working in American hospitals, especially as an infectious disease specialist in eastern Tennessee. Moreover, because of his experience as a diasporic

migrant, he has been conditioned to feelings of aberrations inside these communities. He is a second-generation immigrant African of Asian Indian ethnicity who has experienced involuntary exile from Africa due to the black African nationalist agenda to drive out non-Black African immigrants and their descendants. Having spent formative years, including medical training, in Africa and England, and also as a first-generation American immigrant, Verghese also does not feel completely at ease in the Indian immigrant community as well. Amongst the other Indian immigrant doctors, Verghese is an anomaly, a doctor who is not pursuing the most lucrative specialties and practices, seemingly unconcerned with social approval from the Indian community. The depiction of Verghese's identification with multiple community is an imagined construct, but one that is manifest in individuals' enactment of community. This role of shaping and configuring American culture as he, an insider;/outsider, knows and experiences it, remains important throughout Verghese's memoir, as most of his anecdotes about his patients indicate that to feel part of a group of people is vital to an individual's well-being. That is, group identification, or having a community to claim inclusion in informs much of this text. The title of his book refers to his claiming of east Tennessee as "his own country" (41). It is a claiming that he does not exercise through property ownership or an emotional connection to the land but rather through individuals he meets.

Verghese's text depicts interactions of an ethnically insular community. Told in first-person voice, it reads like a novel, reconstructing socio-historical and personal narratives. The people delight him, but Verghese's sense of belonging to community is not passively gained. He does not encounter, in Tennessee, some idyllic community ready and willing to accept outsiders with open arms. Rather, his community affiliations, including those with the Indian American community, are actively negotiated. In his narrative, transplanted and socially marginalized communities grow from individuals seeking acceptance and others who share customs and habits, those communities are not just geographically marked, they are also interrelated networks that may not be visible. He

relates conversations with patients and their family members about how they deal with gay identity and AIDS in a homophobic environment. Because it constructs how his ethnic “otherness” is received and itself alters other American communities, particularly those of Southerners, medical professionals, gay men, and AIDS patients, Verghese’s memoir is a rich American cultural text.

Verghese’s text also claims and reshapes the American South, changing the ways in which it is traditionally constructed by narrating the presence of an Indian immigrant community, a gay community, and an activist AIDS support group. His narrative, the, spurns apocalyptic predictions that multiethnicity in the U.S. and other “first world” nations causes increasing fragmentation and loss of commonalities and communities. His observations and experiences of marginalization affirm what theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Etienne Balibar, and Immanuel Wallerstein have discussed as an insider/outsider paradox. that is, those on the margins are named and ostracized by those in the center to maintain the hegemonic position of the center. This notion of hegemony, as derived from Antonio Gramsci in *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, conceptualizes how a mode of dominance is sustained and challenged. One form of challenge is what Gramsci calls a “new historical bloc,” a kind of cultural, political and economical coalition that challenges a certain hegemony not by toppling it but by forming an alternative and potentially parallel balance of power. In Verghese’s narrative, his positions as an immigrant, doctor, and gay/AIDS community supporter enable him to link these communities through their shared struggles of alienation from the white, heterosexual, longtime resident community. His role as community negotiator then positions him to narratively create a “new historical bloc’ in this Southeast corner of Tennessee, interpellating immigrants, gays, AIDS patients and activists, and medical professionals into a text which, as a whole, legitimates all of them, claims America as their “own country,” and offers a challenge to those who would claim they have no place in it.

In his essay, “The Making of Ethnic Autobiography in the United

States,” William Boelhower identifies a crisis of American selfhood, brought on by rapid changes in immigration and urbanization in the twentieth century, as an anxiety over the perception that American identity is no longer monolithic but increasingly fractured and lost. He frames this crisis of the American self in medical terms: “Indeed,” he writes, “the alleged and distinctly American self had to be rushed in to the intensive care room of ideology, the last refuge for its immediate historical recovery” (127). Sustaining this medical metaphor further, Boelhower argues that “the self of American autobiography had at its bedside the best foreign practitioners of the genre available” (121). For Boelhower, these medical metaphors arise from the notions articulated by Panunzio and other early twentieth-century American ethnic autobiographers that their former immigrant selves ‘died’ in order to become reborn as ‘Americans.’ Boelhower’s use of ‘ethnic’ applies specifically to euro-American ethnics. The notion that becoming American is an irreversible process of assimilation is outmoded, but Boelhower’s metaphorical use of contemporary medical terms to posit American identity as something that needs urgent ‘treatment’ by ‘foreign practitioners’ suggests that an immigrant doctor’s memoir, like Verghese’s *My Own Country*, may be read as a text that performs claim on and thus some kind of recovery of ‘America.’

Verghese’s recovery, unlike Boelhower’s optimistic interpretation, does not simply rediscover, reinstate, or reaffirm a monolithic American self. Even as it extols the beautiful landscape of the Appalachian region as well as some “downhome” aspects of rural Southern community that make it more pleasant than the Northeast urban life Verghese also has experienced, the narrative asserts how two marginal communities, that is, the gay community and immigrant Indian communities are distinct and growing entities of this “new” South. Boelhower’s metaphor of the “American self” being saved by foreign practitioners becomes a literal condition in urban America. As middle-class Americans attract high-tech, sophisticated hospital facilities to the suburbs, the “once grand county city hospitals,” now understaffed and underfunded, come to depend on

foreign doctors to perform the grueling and thankless work of treating the large numbers of the infirm and destitute. Verghese's eventual "claiming" of Tennessee as 'his own country' in which he will work as a resident has as much to do with societal limitations in his profession as it does with his personal choice; but his and other foreign doctors' migration to the area leads to what Appadurai calls a cultural "deterritorialization." The local culture is pervaded by the influx of "people, machinery, money, images, and ideas that follow non-isomorphic paths" (Appadurai, 110). Such movement is especially accelerated at present, so that deterritorialization is "one of the central forces of the modern world, since it brings laboring populations into the lower-class sectors and spaces of relatively wealthy societies, while creating exaggerated and intensified senses of criticism or attachment to politics in the home state" (Appadurai, 11).

As a doctor's memoir set in the rural Appalachian region of Tennessee, Verghese's *My Own Country* might be expected to be a compendium of folksy anecdotal stories about his experiences and interactions with the local people as their 'country' doctor. To an extent, his narrative fits the bill. He describes, with all the wonder and delight of a non-Southerner being introduced to southern culture, enthusiastically sampling local delicacies, and going line dancing with his wife, using the words and terms he has absorbed as a "quick study" of the local vernacular, and establishing friendships with local longtime southerners. In short, he aspires, by his own prideful admission, to be a 'good ole boy' accepted as one of the locals. He does not remain a cultural outsider who merely serves a professional role as their medical consultant and counselor. But Verghese's various transgressions in his experiences make it clear that he is not a "native son" and does not claim inclusion into the role of a cultural historian who aims to preserve all aspects of that provincial white culture; rather, he is a first-generation immigrant, a "brown-skinned foreigner" whose experiences do not follow the paradigmatic "American immigrant" narrative of the early to mid-twentieth century but articulates the condition of post-1965 immigrant experiences.

Furthermore, in writing an “American” memoir mid-stream in his professional career and his life, he follows a recent trend of breaking the tradition of memoirs penned in the twilight of one’s life. His narrative aims to change dominant perceptions, not to affirm them as a vanguard text. One evidence of this is in the ending established by the memoir’s title. The final chapter depicts Verghese and his family’s leaving Tennessee, to take a clinical position at the University of Iowa outpatient AIDS clinic. As fond as he is of Tennessee, Verghese is not relinquishing the migrant life of an academic medical researcher, following opportunities to advance his work. The memoir is one phase in what most would consider a highly successful story of advancement into one of the most prestigious and lucrative professions in America. Yet, the book is not a story of untroubled assimilation; rather, it engages in how individuals are always struggling to reconcile forces and desires to make their way in the world. In a sense, it insists that the struggles of marginalized immigrants and gay men are representative not simply of the problems of those groups; rather, they reflect larger societal barriers and prejudices that constrain all individuals. By celebrating individuals who struggle to battle those prejudices, especially those who hold no institutional power or wealth, Verghese’s book takes its place among texts representing Asian American community. It articulates the conditions of Asian Americans’ absence and presence in representations of regional cultures and identities, black/white binaristic representations of race, and AIDS and minorities, in America.

In short, Verghese makes a clear parallel between the migrations of Southern gay men to find acceptance of their lifestyles by leaving home, to his own story of movement in his own long, uncertain journey to become a doctor. His narrative’s alternation between telling his own story, as a foreigner, and the story of these men, who are white and American-born, enacts connections between them. In my conclusion, I turn to the opening of Verghese’s memoir to look at how his narrative remaps America by the narrator’s negotiative perspective and identification with others. As a signal that his memoir may be read as re-map-

ping of American experience and identity, Verghese's memoir opens not with a first person "I" but with a documentary-style narrative about an anonymous young man who turns out to be a returning local. Verghese describes this man's drive from New York to Tennessee which ends in an emergency room in Johnson city Medical Center. When the medical staff determines that the man is dying of AIDS, they immediately ostracize and fear him: "The hometown boy was now regarded as an alien, the father an object of pity" (11).

An abrupt shift in voice during this narrative makes this young man a stand-in for Verghese himself. Interrupting the third person narration of this man's drive from New York to Tennessee, the narrator's first person "I" emerges to declare that "I know this stretch of highway that cuts through the Virginia mountains; I know how the rises, sheer rock on one side..... how, in the early afternoon, the sun glares directly into the windshield..... It would have all been familiar, this country. His own country" (5-6). In the same moment that the narrator, Verghese himself, imagines this young man's familiarity, this sense of 'coming home,' he also recalls his own homecoming to Tennessee, where he had served his residency training, and then decides, after a one-year fellowship in Boston, to return as a clinician and assistant professor of medicine at Eastern Tennessee State University. Verghese explains, "Johnson City was going to be my town. I felt at peace in this corner of the East Tennessee. Finally, this was my own country" (46).

In this narrative shift, Verghese declares a claiming of this "corner of east Tennessee" for two unlikely returnees and "hometown boys": a gay man with AIDS and a "brown-skinned foreigner," as he refers to himself. Like the anonymous young man who has brought an "urban disease" acquired during his life outside Tennessee, Verghese imports something suspiciously foreign: his transnational background and a relatively sophisticated worldly consciousness. But he also imparts upon the surroundings an immigrant's keenly observable curiosity, admiration, and hope for acceptance by his new colleagues, patients, and neighbors. It is the dual positionality he occupies despite, and because of, his global

traversals in his efforts to become a doctor.

Conclusion

I have looked at sustained narratives to analyze how these narratives create a cultural landscape of “Asian America” in which multiple community identities are imagined. My references to these identities as imagined or as enacted and performed are not meant to imply that Asian American identities are phantasmic or in crisis; rather, the enactments/performances affirm and sustain them. I have outlined different trajectories of Asian American community identity that I saw these texts construct: mono-ethnic, pan-ethnic, negotiative, and transnational. I must stress that the trajectories I identify are not meant to reduce the complexities of Asian American experience. That is, these texts do not completely define Asian American community identities—rather, the narratives imagine possibilities and enactments of communities in certain ways, which I have identified as trajectories. As the discussions unfold, the narratives also problematize and complicate the very term I set up.

As one who simply enjoyed reading this literature, I was aware that these texts were powerful because they reflected and affirmed American experience that I could personally relate to but of which I saw little representation. It was not until I was a graduate student who was studying and assembling Asian American texts into coherent university course syllabi that I realized that these narratives not only document Asian American community in different ways; they also offer possibilities for forging community as well as complexifying notions of Asian American community. I have approached and completed this project continually negotiating two considerations: the awareness that determining authorial intention of representing ‘real’ community in literary representations is a risky endeavor, but also that such representations are nonetheless deliberate constructions that arrest moments in words and filter perceptions through deliberate channels. Thus, I examine these texts as representing stories and images, including visions of communities, that function as

cultural commodities that participate in and respond to larger constructions of America.

I have one thing in common with many of my friends and students who read Asian American literature. We are drawn to these works because we are hungry for vivid representations of ethnic and familial experiences we have but rarely see depicted. Some of us are involved in Asian American organizations and churches, so our senses of ‘community’ are more politically, academically, and/or religiously defined. Others experience a less formal but still distinct comfort or difference when interacting with other Asian Americans, which leads us to seek and create these communities, and also to avoid them. But I conjecture that these are not either/or distinctions, that is, that many of us experience both impulses. Literary and filmic narratives draw out these competing impulses and enact the negotiations involved.

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- 1) Mori, T. (1985). *Yokohama, California*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press. All subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers will appear in parentheses.
 - 2) Interview in the Los Angeles Times, April 16, 1998.
 - 3) Verghese, A. (1994). *My Own Country*. New York, NY: Simon And Schuster. All subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers will appear in parentheses.

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